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Unplugged

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Unplugged

Cover Page Footnote

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Unplugged

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This article serves as an explorative piece attempting to investigate social networking norms and their contribution towards increased levels of disengagement and disconnection. After recognizing superficial online trends of interaction within her own social network, the author discloses experiencing feelings of hopelessness. In attempt to explore these feelings and unmask the factors underlying these trends, elements of motivation, privacy, and an individual's relationship with control are discussed. Themes of expectant accessibility and communication within the realm of technology are explored and compared to real life interactions and experiences, with emphasis on an observed dissonance occurring between them. Notions of social networking's contribution to unrealistic expectations of self-image and worth are addressed to caution the reader against over-embellishment and the risks associated with distorted representations of self. Concluding remarks credit the positive influence of social networking's impact on society while warranting further investigation from the reader. Readers are encouraged to reflect on the topics in attempt to establish their own healthy, balanced relationship with technology and social media.

KEYWORDS social media, connected, online, Facebook

What would it be like to live in a world where our communication and interaction with one another did not exist primarily through the lens of technology? What would it be like to live in a society where our motives and actions were not dictated by superficial ideations of acceptance and reinforced by social media? As I ponder over these questions my heart weighs heavy and I am burdened with feelings of hopelessness. I have to disconnect in order to become connected; that sentence seems redundant don't you think? It appears to be until you delve deeper into what it means to be "connected" in the digital age.

It is ironic really, to have social media serve as a platform to bring people together only to create such adverse effects. Take Facebook for example, by creating an online profile you are making yourself accessible to close friends, family members - both near and far, long distance friends, high school classmates, college roommates, etc. I remember recognizing the disconnect when Facebook first emerged and family members began getting "connected;" there was a bit of a push back from younger generations. For young adults Facebook served as their own private refuge, as well as a way to stay connected to the rest of the world. Here lies the paradox: "I want to show myself to the world, just not my immediate world." What is the motive here? Now I can understand being a teenager and not wanting to share your inner thoughts and feelings with your family; that would diminish the angst that we all know and love, but, who are you showing your world to? Thank god for privacy settings. Thanks to your Facebook settings tab you now have control over who can be invited into your world. This appears to be a good thing, until social network norms come into play.

I am no different than the average Joe who goes on Facebook, scrolls through their news feed, or logs onto Instagram and starts "hearting" photos with a proper filter applied to accentuate the image. Even now, after deleting all social media applications off of my phone, my phone is

sitting next to me and I cannot help but to glance over expecting some type of notification. This is our norm. We are expected to be available at the drop of a hat. If we do not respond in the time frame most suited for the other party then we become prime suspect in a digital investigation. It is far too easy and accessible to seek someone out when we do not hear back from them at our convenience. We can log onto Facebook and see the green light with the disclosure, “online now”, or look at the date and time of their last Instagram post, Snapchat photo, or Tweet. Many people deny succumbing to what feels like desperate behaviors, but whether intentional or not, it does not alleviate the anxiety provoked when feelings of being ignored emerge when you become aware of a person’s digital presence and real life absence happening simultaneously.

These behaviors, which appear invasive and desperate from any outside perspective, are not without a source. Social media has granted us, for the most part, complete control over our online presence. We choose who we become friends with, whether or not to “follow” their activity, and are able to control who sees what postings we share. Instinctively, these seem like positive attributes as we get to decide who we want in our online world; this, however, is a double edged sword, and a breeding source for artificiality. People become subjected to the essence of being a convenience. We pick and choose when we interact with them and for what purpose. If someone tries to engage in conversation with us, whom we do not wish to talk to, we can avoid their presence, unfollow them, or block them; which begs the question, if a person is engaging with us online, we have deemed them acceptable to join our online world, so why disengage?

Technology has become a scapegoat for avoidance, detachment, and disengagement. In real life if you run into an old classmate from college whom you’ve never truly bonded with, and they engage you in conversation, do you turn your back on them and walk the other direction? Some might, but more commonly it is polite to engage in conversation, keep it short, and carry on. In the technological world, however, you do not have to take accountability. You get to choose to avoid uncomfortable conversations, confrontation, or conflict, and not have to deal with repercussions. This is artificial in comparison to real life interactions. It promotes treating people as merely disposable items which devalues human experience and connection.

If we could separate our online presence from real life we would be less at risk, right? This is where it gets muddy. We spend so much of our time on our devices that we derive much of our gratification from our online experience. There is a fine line between wanting to document important memories and milestones, and wanting to document daily routine aspects of your life. I have crossed that line as I’m sure many of you have. It quickly goes from sharing pictures and videos of my niece and nephews birthday parties, to sharing a picture of a meal I cooked, or a new item bought. I have always told myself that my motive is to share important, and positive moments in my life with the people I care about, and that this is not a bad motive to have. I’m sure many of you can relate, however, the danger arrives when the moment you share this experience online becomes more satisfying than experiencing the moment in itself. If you can find the balance in between, I applaud you. We as humans want to connect, we long for acceptance and approval, and if by sharing an image online those needs are met, then we experience happiness and fulfillment, which is a positive experience.

This positive experience I fear is short lived, however. When we create our online persona we highlight the positive attributes of our lives. If we document our hardships, we face the possibility of public scrutiny and judgement, which risks our mental state when we are already in a vulnerable place. The danger in showcasing only the positive parts of our lives is best illustrated by the myth that the grass is always greener on the other side. We are quick to compare our looks, our achievements, and strengths to other people. In doing so we diminish pride and recognizance

of our own strengths and positive attributes, thus, lowering our self-esteem and distorting thoughts of self-worth. When this happens we seek out approval and we can do so very easily through digital means. We can use lighting features to accentuate parts of ourselves in photos, we can share statuses about an experience where we excelled out work, or discuss the time that we gave money to the homeless person on the street corner. Anything to elevate our status. This behavior becomes particularly risky for those with already low self-esteem, especially adolescents who fall victim to online bullying.

This is when the control one has over their online universe, aforementioned earlier, starts to have control over them. People begin switching their online profiles from private to public in effort to create a larger audience and increase the likelihood of receiving acceptance and approval online. It is commonly perceived that this happens primarily to teenagers and younger generations, however, adults are just as quick to fall victim to these behaviors. It is impossible not to compare yourself to other people, and it becomes more accessible to do so when being surrounded by other translucent digitally created personas.

So, where do we go from here? It feels intimidating and damn near impossible to exist in a world not dictated by technology. Our methods of interaction are diminishing in authenticity because they are either happening entirely online, or are being documented to appear live at a later time, which takes away from the lived moment of human experience and connection. We live in an age where we post a quote about living in the moment rather than actually living in the moment. While I am currently struggling with my own relationship with social media, I do not want to discredit the positive impacts it has entirely. I have seen up and coming businesses thrive through their online presence, and have re-connected with long lost family members and old friends. Laughs have been shared, stories of strength and struggle have been shared, but above all, people can partake in positive experiences together when physically this may not be possible. My hope is that people take the time to reflect on what connection means to them outside of their digital world, and can take steps towards achieving this balance. I want to invite others to challenge themselves, just as I am challenging myself, to unplug, even if just temporary; and to get in touch with the people in your life that love and support you for who you are. Take the time to live in a world that is not under a digital lens.