Editorial

Relationships in a Digital Era

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Everyone today is wired to each other in some or the other way, but without the real wires. Digital technology keeps us in a world of our own insulated and isolated from the real world. Text messages and virtual greeting cards have replaced the older handmade cards and letters. E-mails have effectively shrunk the world and eliminated borders and distances. Media technology and the internet have developed at a faster pace than our ability to understand the social, emotional and psychological impact of digital technology on human beings and human relationships. There are hazardous risks to human relationships due to digital technology and these cannot be trivialized. Digital technology is here to stay and we must be mindful of its rich yet unwieldy potential while impacting human relationships. Technology in some form has always been a part of human life. From electricity at one point to telephones to television and now to the more complex world of computers and cell phones, technology has always moved hand in hand with human development. More and more people use the internet to communicate while spoken communication and human relationships and dialogue continue to suffer. The present article looks at the effects of digital technology on relationships.

Online Communication in Virtual Reality
Virtual reality was originally conceived as a digitally created space that humans could access by donning sophisticated computer equipment and through this space, they could be transported to a different world, a substitute reality in which one could interact with objects, people, and environments. On one hand virtual reality allows an expression of what the ideal or real self would like to be or do in humans, but it also allows expression of a dark and ugly self that sometimes may be unacceptable to the real world. Chat rooms for instance allow individuals in virtual space to open up completely to strangers without the fear of being known and sometimes the advice sought may be helpful or even detrimental. Weak and timid individuals seek solace online in trying to express themselves as strong and robust personalities when in reality it is a façade they are letting themselves fall for. They withdraw even more from the real world and are happy in their false virtual world where they feel no threat from others.

Children are hooked on to the internet at a young age which may hinder their ability to socialize, form friends and communicate freely. Children are happy in this dream world and continue to live in this fantasy with their so called cyber friends who are victims of the virtual space themselves. Today husbands and wives, children and parents often chat online and talk online though they may be living in the same house and prefer it that way. Open face to face communication has dwindled and this may have had an impact on the quality of human relationships and the generation and evolution of emotions that are needed to fuel various relationships.

This may be because the real world sees the real human with real emotions and flaws that hurt us, compared to the online world that sees either a real self with no inhibitions, no fears, or rather sees a projected perfect self. This has been termed as the online disinhibition effect and refers to the way people behave on the Internet with less restraint than in real-world situations. This concept is related to the concept of online identity. The core concept of the online disinhibition effect refers to a loosening (or complete abandonment) of social restrictions and inhibitions that would otherwise be present in normal face-to-face interaction. Because of this loss of inhibition, some users may exhibit benign tendencies; people may become more affectionate, more willing to open up to others, less guarded about their emotions and may speak to others about what they are feeling in an attempt to achieve emotional catharsis.

Disinhibition behavior in online relationships

With respect to bad behavior, users on the Internet can frequently do or say as they wish without fear of any kind of meaningful reprisal in most Internet forums, the worst kind of punishment one can receive for bad behavior is usually being banned from a particular site or being removed from someone's chat list. In practice, however, this serves little use. The person involved can usually circumvent the ban by simply registering another username and continuing the same behavior as before. This has been termed as toxic disinhibition. There are three primary factors that explain why people sometimes act radically different on the internet than in normal face-to-face situations, the first being dissociative anonymity as no one on the internet would really know who they are speaking to unless revealed by the users themselves. The second being invisibility where no one on the internet can see who they are speaking to. The third factor is minimizing authority online where all are equals and no one is bigger or superior to another online native except in some cases a site administrator who can remove someone from a chat room.

Smartphones and Digitalization – effects on Relationships

Technology today ensures that we are all mentally and emotionally connected to each other all the time. The strange phenomenon is that as technology keeps bringing us closer together to those who are far away from us; simultaneously it is also taking us farther from those who are physically close to us. As we enjoy connecting to the world at large via our smartphones, those who are closer to us are irritated and frustrated at our lack of attentiveness to them. A wife could be busy reconnecting to college friends on various socializing sites, while the husband could be busy messaging on his cell phone at the same time. Thus the distance between them may be increasing beyond what any virtual space could reconnect. The dynamics of relationships are thus changing with the internet giving another dimension to our life, the virtual one. One can find love, romance and sex online with just the smartphone. Various dating or friend-finder websites abound on the internet.

Individuals now consider their time online as an extension of their offline identity rather than as an anonymous person pretending or experimenting with identity. Technology allows us to build a little world of our own, a world where one chooses the friends he/she keeps and the activities he/she indulges in. Studies suggest that young people liked to use the smartphone as a communication mode because these afforded them control over their interactions. They allow them one time to stop and think before giving a response if this is desired, or it allowed one to retain the conversational nature of interactions if this is preferred. Thus, individuals get greater control over interactions that they would have in communicating via voice calls using the phone or face-to-face. The phone downloads and plays the movie one wants, and the music player plays music for the ears of a person in solitary splendor. Games like playing cards, carom and chess which were once played with the family have been now replaced by solitaire to be played solo with all the more enhanced user friendly graphics and controls.

Social Media and Relationships

People don't anymore discuss an issue with a single friend; they either tweet them, or put them on the Facebook wall. Some of these are social-networking sites while those like twitter have been called as microblogging sites or even as "SMS of the Internet". This evokes a wider response and gives us many more points of view than discussing it with just one friend would give us. There are cases, where people have found time to update their facebook and twitter pages but haven't yet found time to spend with their family members or significant others. Contrary to the assumption that internet use encourages social contact across vast distances, studies found that many internet technologies are used as much for local contact as they are for distant communication. Email, social networking services, and instant messaging promote globalization – that is, they are used as frequently to maintain nearby core social ties as they are used to maintain ties at a distance.

An Indian perspective

In India the internet boom has made the World Wide Web accessible to all. The Facebook effect, twitter, chatting, blogging, online groups for various activities are now fast becoming a part of Indian lives. Virtual avatars (avatars – a Hindu concept of incarnation but referred to as the "other self" in the virtual – a

manifestation of oneself on the internet) are very common, it gives a sense of anonymity. The internet also works as an ice-breaker for many in India when it comes to interacting with future spouses, in an arranged marriage setting. Dating and having consensual relationships though widely prevalent are still not very well accepted by the Indian society. Internet then becomes a very important tool to explore these aspects of life apart from reconnecting with old mates.

More and more youth are getting addicted to porn and watch it regularly. It may roughly be put in three stages, starts with soft porn, going to hardcore porn and then violent porn. In recent years, a number of psychologists and sociologists have joined the chorus of religious and political opponents in warning about the impact of pervasive pornography. They argue that porn is transforming sexuality and relationships for the worse. Experts say men who frequently view porn may develop unrealistic expectations of women's appearance and behavior, have difficulty forming and sustaining relationships and feeling sexually satisfied.

Flaming i.e. enticing online arguments in a manner of speaking on latest software, politics, religion and philosophy is often seen. Identity thefts, harassment, hacking, cyber bullying, trickery, frauds, stalking are some of the many problems faced by internet users. This fast paced world of the net is taking over the family time, holistic upbringing and family time and healthy discussions is now becoming a chore. It is important not to allow a tool of culture and language to become a center of our lives. Facebook though meant for social networking has been widely abused to bring down people and organizations when needed and various causes find ardent supporters by putting up a page on these sites.

Conclusions

We have never been as simultaneously connected or disconnected as we are right now with the internet and digital technology boom. In fact most of us have become so attuned to our online personas that our offline (erstwhile) real personas haven't been able to figure out the right way to manage the two, or even the amount of time to allot to each before being labeled a social outcast. Digital technology is thus connecting the ones far away and disconnecting the ones who are close by. One reason is clear; those in physical proximity can make demands and have greater expectations from us, while those who connect to us through the virtual dimension can be dismissed from our lives with just the click of a button. It's all about empowerment again with the power of switching a relationship on or off. But though one wishes one can never undo things in life and log out is always the hardest button to click.

RECOMMENDED READING

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