

# THE NEW CONVERSATION

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Growing up in the digital age, I have been exposed to different forms of social media for as long as I can remember. Different social media platforms have aided as a tool for communicating with people I may not have otherwise have had the opportunity to. For my research, I focused on how social media has changed the way we interact and connect with others, and also ourselves. My research covered many different topics, such as: the privacy paradox, an illusion of privacy where it really does not exist; the importance of solitude, especially in a generation defined by extroversion; and communicating through digital time, choosing what to post and when. One aspect of my research that stuck with me is how online interactions often lead to weaker connections between people. I immediately thought about my own online connections and if this was true for me. My final art piece is based on this idea.

I took 195 people who follow me on Instagram (and I should have a connection with) and evaluated each and every one of their connections with me. I rated them on a scale from 1 to 9 - 1 being the strongest connection (as in, we talk all the time and they play a big role in my life) and 9 being the weakest (those whom I basically never talk to). I assigned a color to each rating, starting at red, and working down the rainbow to end with pink.

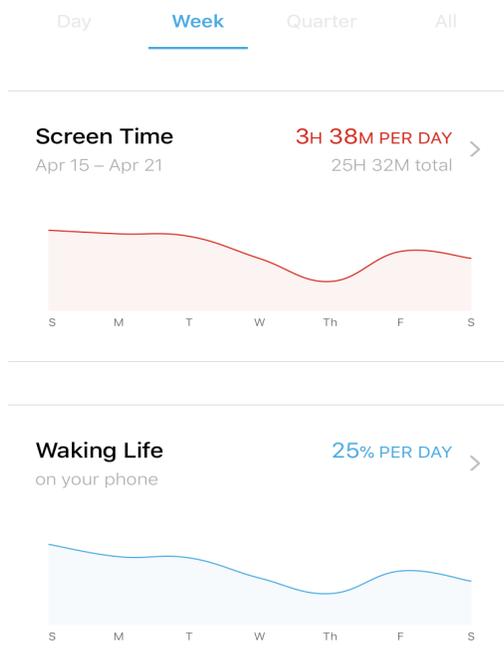
Each peg you see here is assigned to one person who is ultimately connected to me. I was inspired by artists such as Sabine Reckewell and Gabriel Dawe and their work with string and space. From one side of the sculpture, the viewer can only see the design of the string, similar to how on social media you can see the number of followers someone has, but not how strong or weak those connections are. On the other side, one sees the things that are easily hidden from social media, such as the strength of connections and which people are connected to whom. When viewed from the front, the first color is red, to represent the people I have the strongest connections with. This work allowed me visualize my online connections in an analog way.

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*Generation Z has the ability to communicate and interact with others in a way that generations before never had: social media. This paper addresses how social media affects the way we interact and communicate with one another as well as how these interactions affect us on a personal level. Through research and interviews conducted with Oxbow students, I set out to learn more about the topic of social media and interactions. The findings of this paper include: a privacy paradox, an illusion of privacy where it really does not exist, importance of solitude, especially in a generation full of outrospection, communicating through digital time, choosing what to post and when, and more.*

In the age we are all living in, teenagers lives are consumed by social media. Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, the list goes on and on. We, *Generation Z*, are the “digital natives”, first generation to grow up truly immersed in social media. I have been surrounded by social media for as long as I can remember and cannot picture life any other way. My generation lives and breathes social media. When I go to gatherings with my friends, I look around and everyone is on their phones. Or, I go back home after the event to see that everyone has documented and posted about it on social media. This has always confused me. We are surrounded by people that we can talk to, yet we choose to interact with our phones. What makes our phones so special that we pause everything around us and focus our attention to these machines?

I oftentimes find myself guilty of the exact same actions when it comes to social media. I can complain as much as I want about how much time teenagers spend on social media, but at the end of the day I am also guilty of spending countless hours on social media. I have an app on my phone, Moment, that tracks how much time I spend on my phone each day. For the past week, I have been on my phone for an average of four hours and twenty seven minutes each day. Part of the reason this number is so high is because I was in charge of using my phone for directions over spring break, but still. This number is not *that* much higher than a normal week. Thirty percent of my waking life was spent on my phone last week. Thirty percent! In all honesty, most of that time is spent on social media, and I assume that this is the same for many other people. I still confuse myself as to how I can spend that much time on social media. I will



sometimes go as far as to think that the app has messed up, and is giving me incorrect statistics, even though I know deep down it is probably very accurate. This is not just the case for me, some of my friends also have the app, Moment, and have numbers that are very similar to my own. Generation Z has the ability to communicate and interact with others in a way that generations before never had: social media.

I am curious how social media has changed the way we interact and communicate with people. Also, how does that change how we interact with ourselves. I have been told over and over again by my parents that we, teenagers, are losing basic skills that are necessary to interact with others. We are interacting, just in a different way. Social media has allowed me to keep in touch and meet so many people I would have never been able to before. That being said, I see the bad side of

social media, yet I still use it. I follow people that I have never met before, and envy their Hawaii vacation or the concert they went to last week. I am curious to learn more about how interactions online are different than the ones we have in real life. I want to know if I am benefiting or

harming myself and my connections with other by having them through a digital space. Through my research, I intend to find the answers to these questions and discover how the results play a role in my personal life.

Before I share my research, I would like to share a disclaimer. I am aware that not every teenager uses social media, or some use it in methods that I am not discussing. Social media has many uses but I am specifically talking about it through the lense of interactions and connections in everyday life, not work, not academics, or even political reasons. I am looking at the way an “average teenager” would use social media: to post photos of themselves, like their friends posts, communicate with people they could not otherwise, etc. Social media was barely used twenty years ago, especially in the ways it is being used now. With social media becoming exponentially more and more popular, I thought it would be important to research this topic through the generation that has grown up with it, Generation Z.

### **How Do We Communicate?**

One huge change that came with the digital age is how we communicate with others. A lot of the communication that occurs now is online, and that brings with it the risk of permanence. Anything we say or do online will remain online long after we are gone. In his Ted Talk, Juan Enriquez, helps listeners understand what we risk by communicating online (“Your Life Online”). Everything we say or do online will stay online forever, similar to how a tattoo is on one’s body forever. Anything and everything done online will stay with your online image forever, and all these pieces can be compiled to create your online profile. With social media, literally everything you say can be seen by anyone, which was not the case fifty years ago. Furthermore, with social media we have the ability to communicate with people we are very close to, but also people we may have never known otherwise. When you interact with people you have a weaker connection with, you tend to assume that they have a better life than you. When you interact with people you have a stronger connection with, it actually boosts your self-esteem (Fitzgerald). Why is this? When you interact with someone you don't really know, all you can learn about them is through their online presence. People portray themselves in the best light and therefore you only see the best, most perfect parts of them. For more intimate connections, you know the ins and outs of the person, and by knowing more about them than what they are presenting online, it increases your self-esteem. By interacting and communicating with others online, we create images of who they are in our head which then can affect how we feel about ourselves. On top of all of this, the apps we choose to communicate through are making us feel less happy (“Why Our Screens”). Part of this has to do with the fact that social media allows us to communicate with people we don’t really know personally. As a result, this makes you assume they have a better life and therefore lowers your self-esteem. It doesn’t end there with one interaction, these apps go on and on forever. There are thousands and thousands of people to compare yourself to online. Most social media sites do not have stopping cues. Think about it. Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook all have endless feeds, so you can scroll and scroll forever. No stopping cues means that you are putting yourself in the same situation over and over again, not

knowing when to stop. Interactions through social media allow more room to compare ourselves to one another.

### **The Digital Age**

We are living in a digital age, and that is indisputable. Living in this digital age has changed the way we go about everyday tasks in our lives. A big change from the last generation to this one is multitasking. Multitasking has become an increasingly crucial skill for us to have in the digital age. We switch between apps, and even between doing homework and texting a friend. We even multitask between real lives and our digital ones. Turkle describes social media as a “relatively consequence free space for experimentation” (Turkle). Social media has become a space to try things out before doing them in real life. We pause our real life, and go to a “relatively consequence free space” to test things out before actually doing them in real life, multitasking between the two. The more we multitask, the more we become addicted to it. When we multitask, “feel good” chemicals are produced by our bodies (Turkle). New stimuli, or switching our attention to a new task, causes endogenous opioids to go to the reward part of our brains (Bonnie). We are addicted to these “feel good” chemicals, because of the feeling of reward it gives us, so we will keep multitasking to continue the result we want, the chemicals. Likes also trigger the reward system in our brains (Ramasubbu). When something triggers the reward system, it starts the process of addiction. Once the reward system is triggered a certain amount of times, we become addicted. Now that the reward system has been triggered by likes, we are addicted to the likes (because we are addicted to the reward system in our bodies). The vibration we get on our phone, the notification that pops up, the number raising next to the post, all of it. On top of the reward system being triggered, dopamine is also being released. Dopamine is stimulated by “unpredictability, small bits of info, and reward cues”, so essentially all parts of social media (Ramasubbu). All the feedback we get from social media makes it so we want to come back, because we are addicted. We addicted to the likes, comments, rewards, dopamine, we are addicted to everything.

The reason I brought up multitasking is because it is not only making us juggle multiple things at once, but it is also making our lives more “pause-ible”. The digital age is forcing us to juggle our real life, and our online life. Our lives are constantly being interrupted by the notifications on our phone. These constant interruptions create the idea of a “pause-ible” life (Turkle). We pause our real life, to check in with whatever may be happening in the digital realm. Obviously, one cannot simply pause their life, but humans act like their live-conversations, work, events, etc.-can all be paused when they get a phone call. Sherry Turkle, who has a Ph.D. in sociology and personality psychology, calls technology a *moratorium*. Merriam-Webster defines moratorium as “a suspension of activity” (“Moratorium”). Technology, especially social media, has become our “time out” from real life. This again goes back to the idea of a “pause-ible” life.

The other result of multitasking is that we are losing our ability to concentrate (“Quit Social Media”). The more we break up our attention, the worse we become at concentrating in

general. In a study conducted by Joshua Rubenstein, PhD, he found as young adults switched between tasks, it took longer and longer to switch task as time went on. It took the brain longer and longer to remember what it was doing, where it left off, and where to go from there. Even after the switch was made, you are still thinking about the previous task therefore harming your concentration. (“Multitasking: Switching Costs”). As stated before, social media forces us to multitask which, in other words, is simply forcing us to break up our attention. Maybe concentration will become an idea of the past, and will not be a necessary skill in the future. Either way, it is important to be aware of the change in necessary skills that the digital age requires.

On top of all of this, the digital age also gives users asynchronicity. Asynchronicity gives us the ability to “communicate when it suits [us], in real time or delayed” (Valkenburg). Digital time does not run parallel with real time. If you get in a fight with someone, you do not have to talk about it in that moment, you can wait until the next day to call them. Or, if you go to Hawaii, you do not have to post a photo about it until you are back at home, or even a year later. The digital age is changing how we communicate with others, and specifically *when*.

### **Self Concept and self-esteem**

Social media plays a huge role in how one views themselves; especially in terms of self concept and self-esteem. Self concept is how we see ourselves, and self-esteem is the extent to which we value our self concept (Valkenburg). self-esteem can essentially be broken up into two parts, a feeling of control over an environment, and possibilities for control and possible feedback. Social media offers both of these. We can control who sees what we post, who likes and comments on it, etc. We also can choose what we post, and therefore can, for the most part, control what sorts of feedback we are going to receive. As teenagers, we are constantly experimenting and trying to find our true identity. Teenagers are constantly looking for approval of others, or the pack. With approval of others comes approval of yourself. Social media is a place where you can post anything, and find out what others like and dislike about you, and adjust accordingly. In the current generation, self-concept and self-esteem are influenced immensely by others’ opinions of us. That being said, you must be careful that you do not harm your self-esteem and self-concept through the usage of social media. It is much easier to lower self-esteem through social media than to raise it, but if it is used to connect with close friends then one can see their self-esteem raising (Fitzgerald). Social media now plays a huge role in helping teenagers find their true identity through self-concept and self-esteem.

### **You’re In Control**

When one uses any form of social media, they are forced to create a simplified version of themselves. It is impossible to put everything about yourself online, so you are forced to choose what you put up for everyone to see. For the most part, people choose to put their best self forward for everyone to see. People want to show the best parts of themselves, and online it is much easier to hide the parts of your life that you want to (“Connected but Alone”). Social media

puts you in the driver seat, you get to choose how you present yourself. On the flip side, you don't get to see what others are hiding from you, so all you have to work with is what they happened to post about themselves. This relates back to the idea of weaker connections leading to thinking someone has a better life discussed in "How Do We Communicate?". You don't see the hard, bad, or even just boring parts of someone's life, so you are led to think it is better than it actually is. A term we can use to define this idea is "cue manageability". Cue manageability on social media means that we have the ability to "show or hide visual or auditory cues about the self while communicating" (Valkenburg). We can hide the parts of our life that we don't like, and simply choose not to post about them. Easy as that. There can be down sides to this. It is much easier to create an unrealistic image of who you are with social media, which can be very deceiving. A junior from The Oxbow School said "I don't like the aspect of social media where it's like you can create a false image of yourself really easily, whereas I feel like it's a lot harder to do in real life". Along with having control over what people see about you, you can also in some ways control what others say about you. By having control over what you post, you have control over the reactions you are going to get (Gould). Anyone can select, edit, crop, and manipulate any photo until it is not even recognizable as the original image. By this point you have to have an idea over what people are going to say, and have fixed all the things people could point out. On top of all of this, users can delete comments they don't like and can block users who are being rude or disrespectful. This gives one control over who can give you feedback, which, in turn, can control what people say about your posts. This control a user has, can fit under the umbrella of "online privacy".

### **Online Privacy**

Online privacy is the "ability to control when, what, to whom, and how we share something about ourselves" (Valkenburg). Technically speaking, we have control over so many aspects of social media that we should be able to create the privacy we desire, but we are still talking about the internet. Everything said or done on the internet stays on the internet for eternity, which creates an interesting paradox. The internet creates no privacy, while also creating lots of privacy, creating a privacy paradox. A common example of this is data mining through social media. Social media data mining collects information on things such as posts, comments, likes, images, etc. This information can be used in many different ways. It can identify trends, create social profiles, capture consumer insights, and many other things ("Social Media Data Mining"). Targeted advertisements is technique used by social media platforms all the time. If you like a post from a clothing brand, that data is then collected and later the data will be used to push advertisements of that clothing brand to you in the hopes that you will be drawn back to purchase something from them (Cameron). Many people are not aware that their data is being used and believe that they never gave consent for them to use it, but they most likely did. When you first sign up for any social media platform, you must agree to the terms of use: You know, the page everyone skips over and just clicks "I agree". Well, hidden in the terms of use it spells out everything I just stated. For example, in the terms of use in Instagram, it says

that by agreeing to the terms and conditions, “you hereby agree that Instagram may place such advertising and promotions on the Instagram Services or on, about, or in conjunction with your Content” (“Instagram”). Instagram tells you that they are going to do targeted advertising, but they hide it in a place where no one cares to look. With knowing this, is there such thing as online privacy? Even if you choose who can see your posts, the platform is still capable of taking your private information and using it to their advantage. Social media has created the illusion of private interactions, and with that a misunderstanding of what online privacy really gives you the ability to do.

### **How is Social Media making us do all of this?**

When someone chooses to post on social media, they are inviting people to give them feedback (Squier). This feedback can come in many forms such as likes, comments, reposts, screenshots etc. One would never post on social media if they didn't want some kind of feedback, normally positive, as a result of it. In fact, sometimes feedback is so wanted that people get obsessed with the feedback. A Junior from The Oxbow School said, “I was a lot more stressed whenever I was a lot more consumed with the number of followers and like I was getting”. If we specifically focus on likes, we can see that users want more than just feedback. When someone “likes” a post, they are saying they enjoy your content, and maybe even agree with it. The likes we receive on our posts makes us feel like we are part of a pack. As a society, we like to feel like part of a pack, everyone wants to fit in (Squier). The likes on one's post are just one way of making someone feel like they are part of a pack. The pack idea also goes along with the idea of having some sort of connection with others, and may end in creating relations with those people. The way to get likes is to post something worthy of their likes, which may only be possible by getting the perfect photo, edits and all. We communicate so much with social media because we are addicted to it. Sure, we can call someone or meet them in person, but we do not get the same kind of reward from when we are using social media.

### **We Can't Think Inwardly**

Social media has given us the ability to communicate essentially whenever we want, but this has stopped us from being able to think inwardly. With social media, we go through a process called mentalizing (Ramasubbu). When the human brain is not actively engaged in something, in other words, bored, it tends to start focusing on other people to “see the world through a social lens”. When we are bored, which commonly happens when we are alone, we turn to our phone to see what others are doing, and with that, put on the social lens. This time alone should be spent reflecting inwardly but rather we spend it seeking out information about others (and ourselves). We need introspection to better understand ourselves and to better empathize with others. If we don't know how we are feeling, how can we understand how someone else it? We also turn to social media to remove ourselves from grief (“Connected but alone”). When grieving, one needs to think inwardly but instead they turn to a distraction, social media. This only pauses the feelings of grief, and will continue building up and get worse in

worse. As said before, social media makes our real lives pause-ible, and creates a distraction from our feelings that we need to address. One junior, from The Oxbow School, when interviewed directly said when asked about social media that “it distracts me”. Without being able to think inwardly, we become less and less self-aware (Fitzgerald). When we use social media to read and look at photos of others’ lives, we forget to think about ourselves and push our own feelings to the back burner. Again, this is not healthy. Whether the feelings be good or bad, we need to learn how to deal with our feelings. Pushing them away for another day just means we will have to deal with them another day. When that day comes, we will not know how to deal with them because we have never had to before. Now we are put in a position where we do not know how to deal with our own feelings, so we turn to others. Social media has made it okay to not know how to self-reflect, because you can ask others to do it for you. Instead of doing it yourself, you can simply push a few buttons and then put all of the hard work on someone else. Because it is so easy to get in touch with others, we put our problems on others to fix (Turkle). Instead of thinking through the situation and possible solutions in our head, we just take the easy way out and ask others to do the hard work for us. This idea is also known as “outrospection”, or discovering who you are by stepping outside of yourself. Seeing what others would do, how they feel, what they think you should do, etc. (“RSA”). We also simply don’t have the time to self-reflect. We are never in solitude anymore because we are always on social media. Even if one wanted to self-reflect and not turn to others, we must learn how accept being alone and in solitude, is something we do not know how to deal with. People constantly confuse loneliness with being alone. One can be alone and not lonely, but people think these two are one in the same. They will turn to social media to try and fix this “loneliness” and therefore removing the solitude they once were in, and probably could have benefited from. Everyone I interviewed said the first thing they do when they are alone is turn to their phone. Interacting and communicating through social media has made us worse at being able to communicate with ourselves, and be self-aware.

### **We Can’t Be Alone Anymore**

Discussed earlier is the idea of social media addiction, but it is not as simple as that. People are not obsessed with social media, but rather what social media does for us: allowing us to connect with people (Ramasubbu). People are addicted to people. Social media makes it easy to interact with people, with very little effort. We are addicted to feeling connected, like part of a pack, and that includes people. Now, we don’t even have to leave the house, or even our bed, to interact with people. We have the whole world literally at our fingertips with social media. We have the ability to be social without needing to be social. This was a common point brought up by the people I interviewed, how they can meet people without needing to fly across the world. One can be quoted saying “social media has brought me into contact with a lot of people I wouldn’t have known prior”. We are obsessed with people. We want others to understand and help us with what we are going through. Again, we are left without solitude because we are addicted to people. It is so easy to turn on an electronic device and ignore your feelings, or just

scroll through for hours. One high schooler said, “I’ll check a notification from Instagram or something and then I’ll end up getting lost in Instagram for like thirty minutes... an hour... hours”. Being in solitude, without others, is not something that needs to be fixed. In fact, going on social media to try to hide from or fix problems you are having, can just end up creating more. One, for example, being that it can lower your self-esteem (Fitzgerald). The interactions we have on social media have made it so we cannot be alone. Even when we are physically alone, we always have social media to keep us company.

After all of this research, I ask myself: so what? Am I going to tell everyone to delete their social media immediately? No, not at all. I am not convinced that social media is necessarily a good thing or a bad thing, merely a tool that we do not know enough about. That being said, I think it is very important to be aware of the effect of social media on our generation. What I would suggest: more time in solitude. Our generation is losing the ability to think inwardly and really do anything on our own. I believe that everyone needs to spend more time on their own to self-reflect, and try to be less reliant on others. We are all living in this generation, so we owe it to each other to at least try and understand the digital age. I would propose to people that when they are alone, try to not go on your phone (or at least for as long as possible). This may be hard at the beginning, but the more and more you work on it the easier it will become. I would also encourage everyone to use social media in moderation, but that is hard. Moderation is different for everyone and it means different things for everyone. I encourage everyone to find out what that means for them, and how to get to a point where their moderation is realistic. Who will you allow to follow you? How do you decide what is okay to post? How long is too long to spend on social media? When should you be having face to face conversations and when is social media a good tool for communication? These answers will be different for everyone, and they should be. We are all different, no two similar. So we should not have the same answers to these questions. The answer should suit you, and that is all that matters.

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