Synopsis: A Taste of the Social Media Kool-Aid: the Ultimate Drink of the Twenty-first Century

Question: Does social media cause social isolation?

Thesis: Social media does not cause social isolation but rather enriches offline social networks. This is evident through its ability to strengthen weak offline relationships, maintain close existing relationships, and it acts as a median for individuals who are uncomfortable with offline interactions.

Major Counter Arguments:
- Online social relationships are replacing genuine face-to-face interactions.
- The consumption of the broadcasted content in social media causes loneliness.
- Online relationships are characterized with minimal communication and thus, weaker than offline relationships.

Argument #1: Social media strengthens weak offline relationships
- Some users may be using Facebook to track where social events are occurring on campus.
- This “surveillance” function allows an individual to track the actions, beliefs and interests of the larger groups to which they belong.
- Facebook allows users to join groups organized around specific topics and interests.
- Encourages users to activate latent ties, transforming them into the weak and bridging ties associated with positive bridging social capital outcomes.
- The identity information typically included in Facebook profiles may be used to trigger offline interactions.
- Researchers have emphasized the importance of Internet-based linkages for the formation of weak ties, which serve as the foundation of bridging social capital.
- Direct messaging allows communication partners to learn more about one another.

Argument #2: Social media maintains close existing relationships
- Directed communication may be especially important because it tends to be exchanged with those with whom one already has strong relationships.

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Cross-sectional research shows that compared to light users, people who use the Internet heavily have better social integration. For example, heavier users participate more in organizations and are in more frequent contact with friends and relatives. Found that intensity of Facebook use predicted bonding social capital, which is often associated with strong ties such as close friends.

‘Maintaining’ behaviors include engaging in all the behaviors we examined – browsing, communicating, Friending, and meeting – with one’s close friends, and was by far the most common.

Users rely on email to maintain long distance relationships, rather than using it as a substitute for offline interactions with those living nearby.

Social media transcends interaction barriers (time and place), invaluable for people who are geographically isolated.

Argument #3: Social media acts as a median for individuals who are uncomfortable with face-to-face interactions

- Individuals with anxiety over self-presentation prefer interacting online—feel “safer, more efficacious, more confident, and more comfortable”
- Feel that they can better express themselves online and are thus more likely to form relationships that move offline.
- found that socially anxious adolescents perceived the Internet to be more valuable for intimate self-disclosure than non-socially anxious respondents, leading to more online communication.
- Confidence can be built online and transferred offline once the user gains a sense of comfort.

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