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Narrative Exam

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1 Million Likes

The Grass Isn't Always Greener On The Social Side

SOCIAL MEDIA

FORT GEORGE G MEADE, Md. -- According to Hootsuite, a popular social media scheduling tool, there are 3.48 billion social media users in the world. That equates to 45% of the global population. Social media has forever changed the way people connect and communicate with one another.

“If not for social media, I wouldn't be able to stay in touch with friends or relatives I rarely get to see,” said Elisabet Lalisan, an academic director at the Defense Information School here. “It's also a great way to get the news out in a quick way.”

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Through the click of a mouse or an icon on a phone screen, people can reach out and reconnect with relatives, old friends, and even meet new people across the globe.

“Social media changed the very landscape in which we communicate,” said Kuande Hall, the social media manager of the Defense Information School. “We’re able to send messages to friends and family we don’t see that often, see what they’re up to, how their lives are going.”

Social media began to take off in the early 2000s. While similar sites and chat rooms predated the big social media sites, they were still something the world had never seen before.

“It was this new, crazy thing,” said Lalison. “I was able to show my pictures, make my profile with cool artwork, pick my favorite music, it was just a cool way to express myself and show the world what I’m about.”

Websites like MySpace and Facebook in their earliest phases allowed users to customize their pages with unique artwork, have music play as others clicked on their page.

“The initial response was that this is a good thing,” said Hall. “While there’s plenty of good out there, there’s also plenty of bad that could happen.”

Multiple studies are emerging that discuss the effects of social media on mental health, especially in teenagers and young adults. One article in particular from U.S. News cites a survey claiming that excessive social media use could lead to anxiety, loneliness, and a fear of missing out, among other mental health issues.

“People need to realize that not everything on social media is real, and rather they’re glimpses of the best parts of peoples’ lives,” said Lalison. “Cyberbullying is also a big issue now.”

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While the research is still coming out, there's no question that social media has had an effect on all age groups since the rise and widespread use.

"Younger people are more susceptible to cyberbullying and base their worth on the number of likes they receive," said Hall. "As time goes on we'll surely see a backlash for this mindset."

According to data gathered from Hootsuite, nine out of ten teens between the ages of 13-17 use social media, with 70% of that age group using more than one platform. In addition to mental health concerns and harassment, social media related smartphone addiction can also be a concern among young people according to a study published in Psychology Today.

"Age sixteen should be the minimum before children use social media," Lalison said. "That's an age where they should be mature enough to handle the content thrown at them."

In that Psychology Today study, the number of teens reporting mental health concerns after using social media increased to 39% in 2018, up from 24% in 2013.

"Between 12 to 13 would be a good minimum," Hall said. "Even then, parents need to be aware of their child's internet presence and educate them on proper internet safety and usage."

The rise of smartphones in the late 2000s also offered quicker, convenient social media access. No longer were people tethered to only desktops or laptops to check their messages or profiles. The ubiquity of smartphones granted the ease of access right in the palm of their hands.

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“Social media would still have a place, but wouldn’t be as prevalent,” Lalison said. “If we had to go back to the old way of sitting at the computer to manually do everything, people wouldn’t use it as often as they do in a day.”

Data gathered from Hootsuite indicates teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 to 24 check their phones on average of 80 times in a single day.

“The reason social media sites have been so successful is because we have smart devices,” Hall said. “It was just a matter of the right thing happening at the exact right time.”

With the rise of easy access to the internet, social media sites, and countless bits of information, people revert to their smartphones to stay up to date on current events regarding their country of residence, as well as their local communities. A report from the Pew Research Center states that 55% of adults get their news from social media sites rather than actual news networks and websites.

“News agencies can often post breaking stories and updates to their social media pages quicker than they could update their website,” Lalisan said. “The downside is that this can easily lead to the spread of false information.”

During the 2016 presidential election, many social media sites took extra efforts to stop the spread of satirical news as well as articles that were either inaccurate in their facts, or wrong altogether.

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“Social media sites are geared to driving news and getting the cycle moving quickly,” Hall said. “People tend to use social media more to stay up to date.”

Social media has evolved quite a bit over the years. What started as a platform to show pictures and send chain letters to your friends has grown to major outlets where people connect, and brands can interact directly with consumers. There’s no telling what the future holds for social media.

“I can’t even speculate,” Lalisan said. “I’m sure there are some incredible things being developed behind the scenes that will blow our minds.”

Whatever the next big update or platform will be, the end result will always be the same: to communicate with the users and consumers on a personal level.

“At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what the next big platform will be,” Hall said. “It’s going to be how that platform works and how it can be used to further its key messages further.”

