Is Online Social Networking Good or Bad?

Analysis by Cristen Conger
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Try abstaining from Facebook, Twitter and other social networking tools for a day, and you might experience withdrawal. At least that’s what happened to 200 University of Maryland students who gave up online media as part of a new study.

When asked how they felt during the brief disconnection, students’ descriptions of frantic cravings, anxiety and jitters mirrored those typical of people going through withdrawal from drugs or alcohol.

If people have become so addicted to social media, as the Maryland study suggests, it makes you wonder: Is social networking good or bad for us?

In 2009, a slew of news reports warned that social networking sites would ruin our bodies and brains by shortening our attention spans, weakening our immune systems and possibly fostering autism.

Those headlines were largely generated by statements from Susan Greenfield, neuroscientist and former director of the Royal Institution of Great Britain, and British psychologist Aric Sigman.

Greenfield voiced concern that fast-paced social networking habits could change the shape of young people’s developing brains, while Sigman speculated that online social networking, in lieu of face-to-face contact, could lead to poor health.

But genuine, published scientific studies haven’t yet validated those claims.

In fact, current research indicates that tweeting, status updating and other social networking activities might actually be good for our psychological well-being, physical health and in-person relationships.

“We’ve found that the more people are engaged with Facebook by any measure, including number of friends, hours on the site or volume of sharing, the better they feel,” said Moira Burke, a researcher at the Human-Computer Institute at Carnegie Mellon University.

Those positive feelings are direct products of social capital, or the informational and emotional support family, friends and acquaintances provide. Extensive research has established that the more social capital people believe they have, the greater sense of well-being they enjoy.

Facebook users mostly accrue that social capital through interactions, such as “liking” wall posts and sending event invitations to friends and contacts they’ve already met in the real world.

“Are you meeting new, close friends on social networking sites? Probably not,” said Nicole Ellison, an assistant professor in telecommunications at Michigan State University who studies social networking sites. “But does it lower the barriers to tap into the friend networks you do have.”
In other words, these online platforms allow people to build social capital -- and reap the psychological rewards.

This social capital we earn online also promotes better physical health, as evidenced by a recent finding from Cornell that Facebook profiles help mollify stress.

“Looking at your own profile is self-affirming, so when you’re under stress, you’re better able to manage that stress,” Burke said in reference to the Cornell study. “This artifact of your social life makes you feel better.”

Though early critics warned that social networking in front of computer screens would drive us into isolation, we reap comparable benefits from keeping in touch online as we do from catching up face-to-face because online social networks aren’t all that different from real-world ones.

James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis from Harvard University have published numerous studies and co-authored the book “Connected” on how health behaviors, attitudes and even happiness spread among social networks. Their analysis shows that the people we encounter every day can influence our behaviors, and those patterns are similar on social networking sites.

“On Facebook profiles, if you post your favorites movies, authors, favorite bands, there’s a good chance that a year from now, your friends will have posted them on their profiles as well,” Fowler said.

Since social networking sites allow us to see those commonalities and initiate more frequent contact, Fowler says these online interactions can enrich in-person relationships.

Of course, not all communication circulating through social networking sites is nice and uplifting.

But Fowler’s research indicates that in these types of communities, positive interaction ultimately wins out over the negative.

“Positive and negative things can spread through these networks, but on balance if there’s too much negative stuff flowing through a network, the network will dissolve,” Fowler said.

Maybe this range of bright outcomes speaks to why those Maryland students couldn’t stand to be away from their online social networks for long.

Perhaps instead of being addicted to the online tools themselves, they’ve merely become more attached to their friends, which is a far cry from the lonely dystopia some have predicted.

“Our brains haven’t changed, our real world social networks haven’t changed for the most part,” Fowler said. “So the question is how we’ll fit these new technologies in to our real world social networks.”