

Helping Young People Overcome the Shadow Side of Social Media:

Rediscovering the Value of Authentic Relationship

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I. Introduction

The Paulist Fathers have been active in campus ministry at major secular universities since 1908. Every generation has had specific challenges, from the devastating loss of young lives during two world wars, to the social upheavals of the 1960s. Last summer the Paulists held a gathering of campus ministers to examine the unique environment of the twenty-first century. Professor Theresa O’Keefe proposed at the gathering that the purpose of college is to help young people transition into adulthood, defined not as self-sufficiency through employment, but rather as learning how to live in right relationship. Campus ministers must supplement university courses that prepare students for future relationships with employers by helping students learn how to live as adults in proper relationship with God and one another. Priests with decades of experience in campus ministry noted that freshmen today are starting at a huge relational deficit compared to years past. These priests suspect the rise of the internet has diminished the ability of young people to have healthy, mature, and deep relationships with one another. In this paper I seek to explore empirical data and psychological theories regarding the connections between digital communication via smartphones, relationships, and mental health. I begin by showing how smartphones and the internet may be causing negative effects on the relational health and well-being of many young adults. Then I offer some possible theories as to why, and I conclude with some suggestions for how campus ministers can respond to this crisis.

II. Review of Empirical Data

It is helpful begin by examining high-level attitudes and behavioral trends among emerging adults to understand how they are different from previous generations. Jean Twenge proposes to bracket the Millennial generation as those born between 1979 and 1994 and the subsequent generational cohort as those born after 1994. She calls this generation iGen because

they are the first generation to come of age with the internet and cellphones widely available.

Twenge bases the following observations on her review of four datasets from longitudinal surveys of high school teens and college freshmen.¹

Behaviorally, iGen teens are spending on average less time doing homework, extracurricular activities, volunteering, and working paid jobs. iGen teens are also getting their drivers licenses at later ages, going to fewer parties, drinking less, spending less time with their friends in person, dating less, and having less sexual contact than previous generations. iGen teens report fewer fights with their parents and attempts to run away. Instead, they express anxiety about the responsibilities of adulthood and are mostly content to have their parents actively managing their lives well into college. In place of the school, work, and social activities that occupied previous generations, iGen adolescents spend their leisure time on the internet.²

Emotionally, Twenge believes the data show “iGen is on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades.”³ After trending up since the survey began in 1976 to an all-time high in 2010, the percentage of 12th graders who reported satisfaction with themselves plummeted, falling to an all-time low 2015. The percentage of teens who reported they “often feel left out” or “often feel lonely” also rose to an all-time high in 2015. The responses to depressive symptoms, such as “I can’t do anything right,” “my life is not useful,” and “I do not enjoy life,” likewise rose to all-time highs around 2014-15. The situation is much more acute for females, with depressive symptoms rising from around 22% to 32% of respondents since 2010 while only rising from 17% to 21% for males in the same period. A screening test for Major Depressive Disorder among 12 to 17-year-old teens showed that

¹ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen : Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 4-9.

² *Ibid.*, 31-3, 44-7.

³ *Ibid.*, 93.

between 2010 and 2015 the percentage of females experiencing a major depressive episode rose from 12% to over 19% while the percentage of males rose from around 4% to around 6%. The teen suicide rate rose by 250% for 12 to 14-year-olds between 2007-2015 and 46% for 15 to 17-year-olds over the same period. Twenge strongly suspects that the correlative rise in teenage smartphone use after 2010 played a causative role in their deteriorating emotional well-being, but she cautions that causation cannot be proved without eliminating other possible causes.⁴

Smartphones and the internet can be used in a wide variety of contexts and for vastly different purposes. Much of the research over the past decade has focused on the general use of social networking platforms and more specifically Facebook. Yet Facebook itself is multidimensional and can be used for a variety of reasons. A 2008 study found that Facebook use had a positive correlation with life-satisfaction and with higher social capital of those reporting low self-esteem.⁵ This reflects my own anecdotal experience as an undergraduate, when I used Facebook to network with people I met around campus and stay informed of upcoming parties. Yet this study preceded the advent of smartphones and the expanded contexts in which Facebook can now be used. Other studies found no link between the overall frequency of Facebook use and depression, so in 2015 the researchers designed a survey that would instead focus more specifically how people used Facebook. The study confirmed that there is no link between the overall frequency of Facebook use and depression, but there is a strong link when Facebook is used for surveillance, that is, for passively viewing other profiles, which has the effect of triggering feelings of envy.⁶ Another study sought to study the effect of Facebook with

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97 – 113.

⁵ Charles Steinfield, Nicole B. Ellison, and Cliff Lampe, "Social Capital, Self-Esteem, and Use of Online Social Network Sites: A Longitudinal Analysis." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 29, no. 6 (2008): 436, 442.

⁶ Edson Tandoc, Patrick Ferrucci, and Margaret Duffy, "Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression Among College Students: Is Facebooking Depressing?" *Computers in Human Behavior* 43, no. C (February 2015): 143-144.

a variable similar to envy known as “fear of missing out,” which encompasses a sense of loneliness, anxiety, and lack of belonging. The study found a strong correlation between experiencing fear of missing out, depressive symptoms, and distressing somatic symptoms as well.⁷

Facebook and other forms of electronic communication play a major role how young people form relationships with one another and construct their identities. One study examined the relationship between the depth of self-presentation through social media and overall self-esteem and identity clarity. Those who revealed more about themselves online generally had lower self-esteem and identity clarity. The study also evaluated the mindfulness of participants, finding that less self-attentive students showed a stronger correlation between lower self-esteem and deeper self-presentation on social media.⁸ This correlative relationship does not establish causality, so it could be that those with low self-esteem and lacking identity clarity sought to compensate via social media or that over-exposing their inner feelings on social media caused lower self-esteem.

Another study found that more frequent social media use is associated with poorer sleep quantity and quality among teens in Scotland. Those who reported being highly emotionally invested in social media reported even poorer sleep quality. A variety of causal factors could be at play, from the effect of blue light on serotonin levels to the anxiety that teens feel awaiting responses from others. Poor sleep quality is associated with depressive symptoms, but as with the other studies, it was unclear if pre-existing depression drove social media use, or if social media use caused the poor sleep and other depressive symptoms. In America between 2010 and 2015

⁷ Zachary G. Baker, Heather Krieger, Angie S. Leroy, Mary Beth Kenkel, and Rosanna Guadagno, “Fear of Missing Out: Relationships With Depression, Mindfulness, and Physical Symptoms” *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 2, no. 3 (September 2016): 275–282.

⁸ Chia-Chen, Yang, Sean M. Holden, and Mollie D.K. Carter, “Emerging Adults’ Social Media Self-Presentation and Identity Development at College Transition: Mindfulness as a Moderator.” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 52, no. C (September 2017): 216-218.

there was a nearly 20% rise in the number of teens who get less than seven hours of sleep. Using electronic devices more than 3 hours per day was the greatest predictor of getting less than seven hours of sleep.⁹

An experiment was recently conducted to study the effects of limiting college students' use of the three major social media applications (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) to no more than ten minutes per day. Their emotional wellbeing was evaluated alongside a control group that was encouraged to use social media as normal. The study found that limiting social media over four weeks resulted in lower depressive symptoms and feelings of loneliness. Both the control and the experimental group reported declining anxiety and fear of missing out, which the investigators attribute to the self-monitoring required by all subjects in the study. The authors conclude, "The results from our experiment strongly suggest that limiting social media usage does have a direct and positive impact on subjective well-being over time," and they claim this is the first study to demonstrate a causative relationship between social media use and symptoms of loneliness and depression.¹⁰

III. Possible Theories

Several theories have been proposed to explain how smartphones and social media use could be causing depressive symptoms and other indicators of poor mental health among iGen adolescents. Some theories look at psycho-social mechanisms while others look at the neurological and biochemical effects of internet use.

Twenge proposes that *life history theory* examining differences in family size between generations may influence why iGen teens are more susceptible to relational challenges. When

⁹ Twenge, *iGen*, 115.

¹⁰ Melissa Hunt, Jordyn Young, Rachel Marx, & Courtney Lipson, "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37 (2018): 766-7.

families were larger in previous generations, parents devoted less time to supervising each child and expected them to become independent at an earlier age. More GenX adolescents worked part-time jobs and interacted more freely with each other through in-person social events. As families became smaller and the economy became more competitive, parents invested more time in the education and development of each of their children, exerting more oversight. Teens have been content to cede their autonomy to their parents in exchange for avoiding difficult decisions and responsibilities. iGen teens are growing up more slowly, so they have not had to face the normal complex challenges of adulthood that students their age in previous generations faced. Smartphones provide teens an opportunity to further escape the anxiety of mature responsibilities through endless streams of entertainment.¹¹

Another theory is that humans have a fundamental need for belonging, but the use of smartphones and social media radically alters the way adolescents experience how they belong to each other. According to Baumeister, Leary, and Steinberg, “people need frequent personal contacts or interactions,” and “people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future.”¹² Digital communication lacks the multi-sensory dimensions of frequent face-to-face interactions, so there are likely grave risks to human development when relationships differ drastically from the conditions through which humans have evolved.¹³

Every human action in some way shapes the development and structure of the mind because the mind is remarkably plastic. Nicholas Carr examines the broad ways that using the

¹¹ Twenge, *iGen*, 25, 47.

¹² Roy F Baumeister, Mark Leary, and Robert Steinberg, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation.” *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (May 1995), 500.

¹³ Jean M Twenge, Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers, and Gabrielle N. Martin. “Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time.” *Clinical Psychological Science* 6, no. 1 (01, 2018), 4.

internet can fundamentally reshape neural pathways in the brain. The rapid flow of information online has the effect of over-stimulating the brain and inhibiting slower neural pathways. Carr writes, "The more distracted we become, the less we are able to experience the subtlest, most distinctively human forms of empathy, compassion, and other emotions.... It would not be rash to suggest that as the Net reroutes our vital paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation, it is altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts."¹⁴ Teens can be bombarded with alerts and images from a variety of applications while using their smartphones. This research suggests that such overstimulation likely stunts their ability for deep emotional interactions with each other, which leaves a void in their innate need for deep relationships with others.

Biochemical differences between adolescent females and males may be a factor in explaining why female suicide rates have climbed much faster as smartphones have proliferated. Adolescent females have a much more primal desire for connection and relationship during puberty as rising estrogen production elevates dopamine and oxytocin levels. Adolescent girls find great pleasure in sharing their feelings and emotions with others. Males do not experience the same desire for emotional sharing.¹⁵ As social media reshapes the way adolescents communicate with each other, toxic interactions via cyberbullying, which is itself may be a consequence of stunted empathetic abilities influenced by overstimulation from the internet, may be a factor in the rising rates of depression and suicide among females.

The role of social media in triggering feelings of envy may also be causative of depression according to the *social rank theory* of depression. *Social rank theory* posits that depression can be caused by feeling subordinated to others who have more success in the

¹⁴ Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 220-1.

¹⁵ Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006), 36-37.

competitive pursuit of finite resources.¹⁶ When social media feeds flood the user with images of others' successes, feelings of envy and inadequacy can ensue, fueling depression. Social media can drastically change people's perceptions of reality as they see others only putting forth their idealized versions of themselves without sharing their flaws and vulnerabilities.

Sherry Turkle believes that a desire for control, which technology facilitates, is the fundamental dynamic behind the deteriorating nature of relationships. She writes, "We expect more from technology and less from each other. This puts us at the center of a perfect storm. Overwhelmed, we have been drawn to connections that seem low risk and always at hand."¹⁷ Turkle observes that smartphones "offer us three gratifying fantasies. One, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; two, that we will always be heard; and three, that we will never have to be alone."¹⁸ Digital interactions can be carefully crafted, paused, or put aside, unlike in-person conversations that require our full attention. The result is that many people are now afraid of real conversations in person, which are complex and unpredictable. People seek to avoid the complexities of friendships, believing they can substitute digital relationships as a convenient escape from their inner solitude. In line at the grocery store or at home before going to sleep, smartphones offer the endless distractions of social media such that people can avoid their own thoughts. In light of this, Turkle encourages people to embrace solitude and recover the capacity for deeper reflection.

IV. Pastoral Responses

¹⁶ Tandoc et. al., "Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression...," 142.

¹⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 295.

¹⁸ Turkle, Sherry. "Connected, but Alone?" filmed February 2012, TED video, 19:41, https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together/transcript?language=en.

As more and more students come to college shaped by relationships mediated through social media, it is important for campus ministries to recognize students' need to grow in their ability to relate more deeply and maturely with one another and with God. The first step is improving awareness through education on the negative effects of smartphones. Student groups using the Newman center should insist on smartphone-free meetings and events so that participants can learn to direct their attention more fully to their peers in their midst and recognize the distracting effects of smartphones. As students come to a greater awareness of this, they will hopefully develop good habits to use technology wisely in their daily lives.

Secondly, campus ministries are well positioned to help students rediscover and promote the beauty solitude through quiet and contemplative experiences of prayer. Eucharistic Adoration affords students a chance to disconnect from their overly-stimulating social lives and reconnect with God in the stillness of their lives. Furthermore, students must learn to become comfortable in their own solitude and inner loneliness so that they can be ready to minister to others as they embrace the complex mix of pain and beauty that pervades their inner lives.¹⁹ Comfort in solitude and gratitude cultivated through prayer can be antidotes to the feelings of envy and fear of missing out that arise from viewing images on social media.

Thirdly, ministers should focus more homilies on encouraging authentic relationships. Pope Francis laments how digital communication has impoverished our understanding of relationships, challenging Catholics to recommit to the message of the Gospel,

The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service.²⁰

¹⁹ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. (NY, NY: Image Books, 1990) 84-91.

²⁰ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, 88.

Students from campus ministries should be moved to respond to the Gospel by cultivating deeper in-person encounters with others, especially those who are lonely and hurting and struggle to express it. As such, students can become leaven for the broader community on campus (*cf.* Mt 13:33), risking encounters with others so that they can discover that the true meaning of life is found in relationship with God and one another.

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