# Social Anxiety in the Age of Social Networks

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The advent of the Internet has changed the way individuals and groups of individuals interact with one another and the world. In fact, an entire generation has been brought up with the idea that "socializing" includes an online component. Yet despite the recent technological advances in social communication, and the fact that social bonding is a crucial psychological aspect of being human, there are certain individuals for whom social interactions are difficult, leading to real-life anxiety (Stein & Stein, 2008). Although they crave the company of others, socially anxious individuals shun social situations for fear of being found out as unlikable or worse. Current research in social and media psychology is beginning to explore how individuals' use of social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter mimics offline social behavior, albeit not much is known about how SNS might affect individuals who are socially anxious.

## Identifying Users and Uses

Curiously, more than two decades ago it was believed that the Internet would be especially useful to those who struggle with social anxiety. The lack of audiovisual cues, coupled with the ability to create fictional identities or remain anonymous in online forums, led many experts to conclude that the Internet was particularly suitable for those seeking to overcome the inhibitions typically experienced in real-life social interactions (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Myers, 1987). The situation, however, has largely changed since then. Most SNS are known for their emphasis on self-identification and authenticity: Facebook users, for instance, *expect* that most who see their profiles are people they already know, rather than strangers (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Zarghooni, 2007). This observation is remarkable considering that the number of people on social networks has increased in recent years, and so does the probability for accidental friendships.

According to one study, half the adults and three-quarters of teenagers in the United States are active SNS users (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012). It is not uncommon for a single Facebook member to have "friends" in the order of hundreds, many of whom might not even reside within the member's country of origin. How much these virtual relationships resemble real-life ones, however, is a question that remains very much open, challenging standard definitions of the word "friendship" when it comes to SNS. This last remark is important because a successful online strategy for socially anxious individuals will depend, in large part, on how well the skills to succeed in online social interactions (e.g. the ability to make friends online) translate into real-life situations.

## The Benefits of Social Networks

One of the most important functions of social networks is connecting users with other users. There is the possibility, therefore, that SNS might work as social lubricants that help people who struggle with real-life relationships initiate and establish social interactions with others (Forest & Wood, 2012). A number of studies have explored how social media stimulate sharing and relationship-building among their

users. Researchers have also found that the perceived usefulness of a platform positively influences the adoption and spread of said technology by users (Hsieh, Hsieh, & Feng, 2011). In the case of social networks, such as Facebook, the *perception* of building and maintaining relationships with people is fundamental as is a justification for their existence, even if their actual effectiveness is uncertain.

Additionally, the costs associated with communicating with others (e.g. time, distance), the number and type of people with whom one keeps in touch (e.g. family, friends, coworkers), and the nature of the communication one has with them (e.g. personal messages, comments) have all been the subjects of change, thanks to social networks. Although it is true that not all time spent on SNS is equally social, there is some evidence that participation in social networking influences social relations. There are also downstream psychological effects that could include improved health, access to valuable information, and other prized resources (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011).

**Understanding Social Anxiety**

Individuals who suffer from social anxiety and low self-esteem have a lot to gain from using SNS. Yet, paradoxically, these individuals are less likely to do so. One study in particular found that online social communication skills and self-esteem are correlated, indicating a link between the strength of offline relationships and time spent online; this might not work to the advantage of socially anxious individuals for whom offline relationships are difficult to forge in the first place (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011).

One explanation is that websites like Facebook may unintentionally favor individuals with pre-existing close relationships rather than those who do not have close relationships to begin with (Ellison et al., 2007). Another explanation is that people with low self-esteem express themselves in ways that are not particularly likeable — such as posting negative remarks more often — making them less likely to make new friends (Forest & Wood, 2012).

Furthermore, even if it is possible for SNS to aid people suffering from social anxiety and low self-esteem by providing them with an opportunity to establish new relationships at a diminished cost of entry, the formation of weak ties does not necessarily translate into the kind of relationships that psychologists associate with social bonding.

These findings exemplify the difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of SNS in relationship-building among the socially anxious. Most social and media psychologists remain positive with regards to SNS and their potential outcomes. Nonetheless, the bulk of the literature seems largely confined to well-adapted, active users (of which college students are the vast majority). Much more work needs to be done to identify individuals for whom establishing social relationships is difficult, particularly on how their SNS usage differ from the rest of the population. Doing so will help us understand how people interact online, and it can also help us design and implement better strategies for individuals who do not easily fit in with the popular description of a social media user.