Commitment In A World of Social Media

Daniela is a pleasant, light-hearted, 17-year-old. A member of the National Honor Society, her grades stand as impeccable and, even before her senior year had begun, she had started receiving what would amount to many scholarship letters from various colleges. Living in suburban, central New Jersey, she is most often safely tucked away in a community of enormous, white-picket fenced in homes, surrounded by her perfectly nuclear family and treated well by her caring boyfriend of three years.

An ordinary day for any suburban teen begins not with a primping routine, but with a quick scan of social media sites. Daniela is no different. She happily bounds toward her laptop, pulling up her Twitter page. Twitter, providing Daniela with no new information, leads to her leap into a new tab, revealing her e-mail account. No updates presented themselves here either, sending her over to the favorite of all her social networking accounts: Facebook. A quick sweep of the homepage results in a few scattered comments and quick instant messages exchanged, the final step being a glance at the presentation of Daniela’s own profile.

Daniela’s profile picture features her wide-eyed and beaming, her boyfriend by her side. Her biography section is cheerful and well written, her banner proudly displaying her anniversary, her page full of comments from her hundreds of friends. Glancing at her general information, as final affirmation that everything is in place on her page, reveals a startling blast of information: her relationship status is listed as single.

Commitment is the foundation for a vast majority of important life decisions. Without a strong, unwavering dedication to tasks, events and individuals, humanity as it exists currently, would not be possible. The root of today’s society lies in ancestral commitments: to create a united nation, to end segregation, even the potentially minimal commitment involved in everyday tasks such as showing affection to another individual; each of these tasks requires commitment at various levels of strength.

Since the advent and incorporation of social media into the homes and personal lives of a vast majority of individuals, various tolls have been taken on human interaction. Commitment is, arguably, one of the factors that has suffered most incredibly. With the fleeting and often casual nature of interactions via social media, a growing number of people feel as though the desire and ability of individuals to commit is waning dangerously close to non-existent. However, the level of connectivity present currently suggests a move toward increased commitment, perhaps a different style of commitment, but one more prevalent than ever before.

Various opinions and studies exist dealing with social media and the assortment of effects it has on an individual’s life. Each book utilized in this research assignment has made an interesting point about commitment in society. These points are based in the knowledge that an ability to socially interact successfully with another individual is a skill that the vast majority of people possess. “Human beings are social creatures,” Shirky (2008) asserts, “Sociability is one of our core capabilities” (p.14). Shirky (2008) goes further to say that “this skill allows groups to tackle tasks that are bigger, more complex, more dispersed, and of longer duration than any person could tackle alone” (p.16). This can be extrapolated to claim that the creation of certain events and groups of social networking sites serve to strengthen connections and aid in the process toward making stronger commitments. Following a Twitter user or accepting a friend request on Facebook is a shallow form of commitment, but still a method of priming one for more serious commitments in the future. The main website cited is Meetup, a site dedicated to connecting fans of various peripheral groups in a common geographical location (“witches,” “bloggers” and “Tori Amos” fans being a few of the groups served), and allowing them to orchestrate just that: large, group meet-ups (pp.196-197). Using the site to meet other fans face-to-face enforces bonds and makes them, arguably, stronger than most connections (Shirky, 2008).

Social media helps to facilitate “friendship-driven practices” or “hanging out” in a new way, but a way that is potentially beneficial to interpersonal communication as a whole (Ito et al., 2010, p.75). According to C. J. Pascoe (2010), lead author of the chapter on intimacy, “teens now do much of their relationship work by using new media—reciprocating in comments, differentiating their romantic attachments from less intimate friends, and giving priority to phone calls from significant others” and goes further to refer to this as the “work that cements contemporary teen relationships” (Ito et al., p.129). Teens are “expected to affirm their relationships online, both for their significant others and for their networked publics” (Ito et al., p.130). This signals to others that the individual is in a pleasant relationship and serves as a “hands-off signal to other teens” (Ito et al., 2010, pp.130-131).

In reality, these sites exist for a variety of reasons. In a teen’s mind, however, these sites exist not for networking or to accomplish work-related tasks but primarily to maintain and aid the growth of their social commitments, be it to friends or in terms of more intimate relationships, making social media’s largest audience (“Digital Natives”) also its most obvious evidence of the commitment-oriented possibilities.

The public nature of social networking can often lead to messages and features of one’s profile to be misconstrued. Alice, a participant in C. J. Pascoe’s (2010) “Living Digital” study, had her “feelings hurt by [her boyfriend’s] refusal to place her above his other Friends on his [friend] list” (p.132).

Strict guidelines exist for operating a social networking site while in a romantic relationship. Derrick, another participant in Pascoe’s (2010) study, lists the guidelines: “write something [on her page], have her in your Top Friends, don’t put other girls [in your ‘Top Friends’], don’t have girls write messages to you saying anything crazy” (p.131). These stringent rules leave much room for unintentional disrespect, in the event that one member of the relationship does not follow them.

In various other quotes from C. J. Pascoe’s study, the overall tenor of the participants’ responses was not that of happily committed individuals, but forcibly committed individuals. The use of words and phrases such as “endure,” “expected to” and “just to make her feel better” lead one to believe that while commitments are being made stronger at the hands of social media, the commitments are less honest than those prior to the digital age (Ito et al., 2010, pp.130-131). However, this serves to establish that commitment, regardless of purported strength or the reasoning behind the strength, exists and is more common and strived for because of social media being incorporated into the lives of teens in intimate relationships.

It is universally known that the connections throughout one’s life vary in strength and context. The bonds established through a networking site such as Facebook are concrete and visible and, therefore, even harder to deny. In addition, online relations leave room for individuals to become acquainted not only with a person’s offline-self, but with their online-self as well: their “personal and social identities,” respectively (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p.22). As opposed to interpersonal connections, “these [online] connections can be initiated through searches for other users with similar interests,” making the realm of possible connections broader, but also leaves room for them to be more fleeting than conventional relationships (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p.23). In addition, when analyzing the “tenor” of these relationships, it is clear that they are often ephemeral at best: “easy to enter and easy to leave without so much as a goodbye” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, pp.32-33).

These relationships, while proclaimed as being transient at best and characterized by their brief periods of interaction, are visually represented and, therefore, even more difficult to ignore. The advent of social media provides an increasingly large amount of areas for individuals to showcase their commitments. Regardless whether the commitments are to friends, family or intimate relations, the visual nature of these social outlets make the commitments and connections fostered incredibly difficult to denounce.

Arguably, the idea behind most “social-networking platforms” is to facilitate more interpersonal connections: “to send out invitations and announcements about events that bring friends together, face-to-face” (Watkins, 2009, p.62). Through reflecting on the traditional way of planning events, and discussing such with a college student named Katy, Watkins (2009) makes the former process seem laughable. Watkins (2009) later points out, through a participant in his research study, that Facebook also aids in making “passive conversations” possible, creating a world in which distance does not end social interaction with an individual (p.66). These “passive conversations” can be grouped in the category of “phatic interactions”: those that serve as the temporary outline of an interaction with more serious implications (Watkins, 2009, p.66).

It is this very type of relationship that becomes the focus of the majority of S. Craig Watkins’ arguments. Watkins (2009) repeatedly asserts throughout his research that these “phatic interactions,” are actually incredibly beneficial (p.71). Fleeting, less-than-informative aspects characterize these interactions. What counteracts this, however, is the true function of these interactions: “they sustain sociability between people” (Watkins, 2009, p.71). This is their sole purpose. The perhaps hundreds of seemingly apathetic relationships individuals establish via social media retain one purpose: to stand as placeholders for more developed, committed relationships.

Watkins (2009) attempts to give a complete picture of the ties represented in the online world, citing Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) as an example that encompasses all types of ties: “strong, weak and temporary” (p.124). These ties differ only in strength, but are identical in that they all deal with “notable degrees of trust, reciprocity, and interaction” (Watkins, 2009, p.124).

Each tie also serves a special purpose in this online world. Strong ties help create long-lasting bonds to accomplish certain tasks, namely jobs that need to be carried out throughout the game and weak ties involve “infrequent interaction and alliance,” being saved and utilized only when necessary for gain (Watkins, 2009, p.124). Finally, “temporary ties” are interactions which require no maintenance; they manifest themselves only when convenient and are generally accidental (Watkins, 2009). Watkins (2009) stresses the overall importance of these ties, citing that activities are still being engaged in, allowing the youth utilizing the site to “develop a bond” (p.124). This example involving MMORPGs can be applied to more obviously social sites, such as Facebook easily. On Facebook and other networking sites like it, users generally have listed “friends” who fall into one of the “tie” categories: there are some which the user knows well and converses with often (strong ties), some acquaintances who perhaps have no other relevance to the individual’s life than having attended the same high school or church group (weak ties) and, finally, there are some fellow users met through applications and other peripheral Facebook activities (temporary ties).

Simply put, avoiding unwanted consultations from one’s peers becomes far simpler the farther one travels from interpersonal communication into the realm of social media (Watkins, 2009). Therefore, individuals who sustain contact via social media are able to get a full view of whom they are interacting with. Using online behavior as a gauge, one can create a rough sketch of how reliable an individual is in his or her daily, “real” life.

These benefits of social media extend themselves to apply especially to long-distance relationships. The casual nature of Facebook interactions help to facilitate relationships when the dynamics of one’s life changes. Therefore, commitments can be maintained from farther distances, enhancing one’s ability to be committed to multiple relationships simultaneously, preparing them for potentially complicated series of commitments (Watkins, 2009).

In 2010, the Pew Research Center conducted an extensive study of the potential effects of social media, by gathering quotes from a wide variety of experts in the field, the results highlighting a concern for the fate of society at the hands of social media but also a new hope for good things to come. Gervase Markham (2010), a programmer for the Mozilla Foundation, vehemently claims that “social networking encourages people to have a greater number of much shallower friendships” (Pew Research Center, 2010, p.15). He goes further to give a personal example of knowing what 15 of his friends had for breakfast, but not if they are “struggling with major life issues,” continuing with a prediction that “if this continues, people in 2020 will have hundreds of acquaintances and very few friends” (Pew Research Center, 2010, p.15). This is counteracted by the theory put forth by Watkins and supported by Palfrey and Gasser that these acquaintanceships will serve as placeholders, that this is their only purpose and that that purpose is enough.

Other individuals in the study reiterated that their feeling was that social media has “allowed for the growth of human connection” (Pew Research Center, 2010, p.10). In addition, Mary McFarlane (2010), claims that while “there’s no reason why social networks can’t replace offices, a Twitter feed will never replace family, a neighbor [and/or] a real community,” emphasizing the need for a physical presence, but also acknowledging the beneficial side of social-media-established connections (Pew Research Center, p.15).

In this assortment of information, Watkins asserts and supports an opinion that is easily understood and plausible. His views preach the positive force that social media has provided, pushing individuals together, facilitating the possibility for more commitments to form. He also illustrates the benefits of both strong, potentially long-term commitments and the underrated nature of what he refers to as “weak ties,” the wavering, less dedicated form of commitment. Watkins stresses overall that commitment is commitment; it is and has been a necessary, omnipresent force that has proved itself beneficial for centuries in accordance with human development. In this respect, it can be said that all commitment is beneficial, regardless of its strength. Humans come equipped to handle tasks, relying heavily on commitment to accomplish their roles in life. Overall, even the smallest, perhaps most shallow, forms of commitment are valuable in their own right.

At the start of this research assignment, I had a far different take on the world of social media and its potential effects, especially in regards to commitment. At a first glance, commitment appeared to be one of the aspects of an individual’s life that suffered most adamantly at the hands of social media. The key being the promotion of a lack of physicality, a necessary portion of all healthy relationships, the downfall of strong, important commitments seemed imminent.

However, after reading each of the sources provided carefully and critically, I have arrived at a much different opinion. Social media has made communication easier, which can be inferred to result in more commitments being created and maintained. Commitment is truly the backbone of all tasks one engages in. As a result, humans are attracted to it; society craves this form of attachment in order to successfully complete their assigned roles. Social media as a whole has beneficially affected the channel by which commitments can be fostered, enabling a more efficient facilitation of potential commitments and, therefore, a stronger society.

References

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