

## The Effects of Social Media on Family Communication in the UAE

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Social Media has seen significant growth in variety and number of participants throughout the years; to the extent that it became *part* of the household itself. The heavy and unhealthy reliance on Social Media and the Internet in its entirety amongst UAE families, however, has created a noticeable void in the lack of communication between its members. Noticeably during family gatherings; members of the family appear focused intently on their devices rather than communicating with their siblings/parents, for example. An argument(s) can be made towards, preconceived reliance of the younger generation on the internet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, family and siblings lack appropriate communication motivation, a family's busy lifestyle, or diverse personalities within the family; could explain the apparent usage of social media to evade conversations. Nevertheless, it is a serious issue plaguing the households of UAE specifically, as we will be demonstrating the reasons and causes that instigate this lack of communication amid families of the UAE, and addressing it with empirical and primary forms of research to find solutions; in the hopes that we raise awareness towards these types of issues within UAE

Keywords: Family communication, social media, effects, UAE

The prominent feature of social media is how inclusive it is to one's time and mentality. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the phone has become the source-feed for individuals to connect with their friends and the outside world with ease.

Consequently, so much connectivity has distanced the ones closest to us further from one another even in our households. The amounts of cravings and interests that social media provides to individuals overlap the sense of connectivity that is diminishing on a peer-to-peer communication; for the expense of relativism and social status. Even though social media's main aim is to bring people together, what is being noticed in family houses of UAE especially, determines otherwise.

UAE has an immersive and inclusive culture that the country has embraced technological advancement positively, and globalization is also credited for the sustainability of the Internet and Social Media amongst its citizens. Subsequently, this issue affects a significant number of individuals of UAE to the extent that it's approaching a critical level that will affect not only the culture but the environment and substance that UAE is built upon, i.e., its youth. So, addressing this issue with solutions and the properly conducted research will benefit the youth as well as the country as a whole, for UAE, is leading a path towards the future in-toe with the youth it represents.

One of the key concerns presented in this paper is the connection (negative or

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positive) between the Internet and social media use, about family communication, and to recognize the impact media can have on communicating or engaging with families and peers. Specifically, a question must be raised towards the correlation between both, “What effect does media displacement have on communication with families’ of UAE, in terms of sociability and family relation?” will compute the problem this research paper addresses.

This study focuses on the lack of communication that is occurring in UAE households, due to the apparent excessive Internet and social media usage by young people. Some key analysis and deduction are applied within this research; to establish relativism or connection between media consumption, and fragmented family relation from lack of communication at home. Researching similar established and credited sources of literature; to validate any arguments presented in this study, and to explore research conducted on this particular issue. Implementing a survey to understand the sentiment and the drive young people of UAE have towards Internet and social media, and how it relates to their daily lives, as well as, their level of communication towards their family, all coherently would give insight into how both of these attitudes can affect family communication. Finally providing a summarizing discussion on the issue, as well as give feedback and approachable recommendations for taking positive action towards this issue, and for any implemented research that will be done in the future. Here we present the objectives that in succession will add value to this research paper:

- (i) To identify the causes of which the younger generations are drawn towards the Internet and Social Media so particularly.
- (ii) To recognize the behaviors that are associated with media consumption (excessive or otherwise).
- (iii) To comprehend the constraints media can have on daily social communication.
- (iv) To distinguish the continued use of the Internet and social media whether negatively and positively along the future.
- (v) To evaluate the security and privacy measures parents apply to or against media consumption while at home.

## Media Displacement Theory

Displacement theory, happens when an individual’s time and attention within the length of his/her day or routine is limited. Therefore, it only offers a limited capacity for any activity to be done. Subsequently, such limited capacity compromises on participating in other activities (important or otherwise), so when a person is introduced into a new medium such as media, it occupies their time to an extent they will involuntarily compromise on other activities (Newell, Pilotta, & Thomas, 2008). Specifically, in this research, we will be addressing how media displacement theory affects communication, within UAE households primarily.

## Literature Review

### Media Displacement and Mental Health

Media Displacement Effect theory can be summarized as the extensive amount of time spent on media (social or otherwise) creates a limitation on a person’s mental space and energy; that it prohibits him/her from providing attention towards other matters. For

example, a pedestrian would be walking down the street with their phone in their hand(s) and not paying attention to traffic, such acts prohibit the attention span of the person from noticing when a person, should cross the street, stop for a light sign, or avoid interrupting other people's walks by slamming into them by accident. Media has created an atmosphere where a person can be immersed in the virtual world that relieves them from paying attention to the outside world, past the dimensions of their phone screen. Specifically, when communicating with each other, media has facilitated an interconnectedness between one world to the next virtually through Instant Messaging (IM) and through social media, but in reality; it has compromised on the face-to-face value of communication. Online communication became the outlet young people use to maintain and preserve their online relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with time being increased in devotion for that purpose; whereas offline peers subject to abandonment. Likewise, the negative or positive quality of these relationships could be attributed to the use of social media and IM; where the quality of the conversation could differ and change from how it may be online, and how it may be through IM and messaging; creating a sort of dissonance of communication between young people and their friends/peers (Patti M. Valkenburg, 2007).

Also, displacement theory describes how limited time will become more frequent, and consistently individuals consume media daily. As indicated in a study done on children's use of the Internet and Video Games; to assess the level of social interaction amongst their peers, a decline was observed in social interaction and psychological well-being which coincided as observed in the study with low grade levels, and low self-esteem amongst those children; an attribute towards media displacement theory (Endestad, Heim, Kaare, Torgersen, & Brandtzæg, 2011). On the other hand, research (Oberst, Wegmann, Stodt, Brand, & Chamarro, 2017) relate high social media engagement to mental health, specifically issues like depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Mentioning how Facebook structurally seems very attractive to lonely individuals, and college students with depressive symptoms are more active on Facebook, with the addition to be content to share their problems publicly. Presenting an individual's life and daily experiences is part of the appeal that social media provides for its users. Social media is easy to use and accessible, where individuals can post and share experiences, whether to express positive or negative occurrences. Social media has created a virtual world where all these emotions and interactions are occurring at the same time. But that cannot always be presented positively within these sites, as it's shown from the mental health issues associated with and interlocked inside these sites. Also, connecting these behaviors are, the amount of support and positive encouragement these individuals would receive from their friends online; which could be associated to the psychological effect social media has on an individual's mentality, and the frequent use of these site by young people especially.

Moreover, to describe social interaction that social media generally provides would refer to, the mutual participation (social acts, actions, and practices) in which two or more mutually exclusive individuals are attaching significance towards an interaction, taking into account of their subjective experiences and intentions towards one another (Rummel, 1975). So, when that value becomes disjointed through daily conversations with peers and friend from excessive media consumption, it diminishes the quality of communication an individual can have whether currently, or in a progressive matter in the future. Opposing, "social isolation is, being ignored or excluded with or without declaration". Otherwise, social isolation can cause potentially damaging effect on an individual; due to sensitivity and need to participate in a social surrounding. So, normally feeling pain through isolation whether it be physically or mentally which could be evident when social interaction becomes nonexistent in social media and other forms of communication

(Ahn & Shin, 2013). The internet is created, so everyone participating in it feels connected and intertwined with one another, but that may not be evident in terms of connectedness in all cases. A way to approach this is through assessing the amount of time consumed on the Internet with factors as proximity and frequency.

### Proximity and Relationships

As mentioned in a study by BALDASSAR, NEDELCO, MERLA and WILDING (2016), the concept of 'bounded sociality' highlights the connection between geographic proximity and social relation; for these aspects are used to sustain relationships in the age of technology nowadays. Aided by social media proximity became an after-thought nowadays, connecting with people from across the world has become accessible, and because of globalization; aspects such as language barriers and interests became correspondingly obsolete. Adding "such concepts help to articulate how social life is no longer conducted wholly in place, within neat physical and territorial boundaries," with crossing these barriers such as distance. Social Media and the Internet has proven to be an essential aspect of peoples' daily lives and routine. Social media and the Internet have helped in exploring outside environments/cultures and finding commonality/like-mindedness with individuals living across the world.

The article also infers family relations could be assisted emotionally with the possibility of long distances, referring to the asymmetrical reciprocal exchange of support that illustrates all intimate relationships such as family ties; though it also raises an inquiry as to how effective these same transitional forms of exchange could be substituted by physical presence within the family. In a survey done on participants over the age of 10 years in UK, Australia and US to measure overall satisfaction with life, and satisfaction with 4 different kinds of relationships (close/extended family, and close/distant friends); with the general results being in favor of richer communication methods verbally and non-verbally such as, face-to-face communication and phone/text chats. Remarkably, this study also states that, the majority of the participants indicated that social media alone would not have a serious effect on their relationships and their happiness. This result shows that relying on technological communication as the sole method of conversing whether close or long distance has not been able to substitute unaffected means of communication. It is only an aiding mechanism to make communication more accessible, and easy (Goodman-Deane, Mieczkowski, Johnson, Goldhaber & Clarkson, 2016).

### Internet Safety and Parental Guidance

Being online nowadays has had many benefits for the younger generation; so long as parental guidance was subjected none-forcibly in the hopes to avoid any potential risks that may occur while their children are active online. Giving parents the full authority to monitor the activities of their children online, as well as monitoring the media that's being consumed by the children; could possibly be an action some people may disagree with if enabled excessively by the parents; however, Brain Simpson (2006) through the 'Family First' act explains that, the family is the sole authority to monitor and provide supervision on what their children consume as they go online; though a counter-argument can be made that parents cannot always be trusted to make the right decision in the face of heavily induced media consumption as the one occurring currently in societies all over the world; that will entail governmental supervision as Simpson elaborates on the establishment

between the government being the gatekeeper of all that is filtered into the Internet, and governing and/or advising parents on how they can prevent online risks from occurring in their households. Moreover, incidences children falling for predators through various means of online communications is evident presently in many societies; for the online community has many loopholes that predators tend to bypass to attract unaware children and young people.

Protecting children is generally the top concern for a parent when they go online; for dangers do exist online whether it be through hidden mature entities thriving on child exploitation, or endangerment of personal information and belongings being threatened. Internet for young people should be seen as a fun and creative outlet for them to prosper in/through; however, keeping vigilant to risks that are lurking in the cyberspace is not only the job of the government and parents but should also be a primary responsibility of young individuals, who are active online in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In research done to investigate online behaviors of Gulf adolescents from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE who were attending an international school in the UK, 115 respondents were questioned with a survey to assess the benefits of them being online. Focusing on online security during questioning adolescents about their online habits deduced that; most students felt unsafe when using the phone (theirs or someone else's) while in public areas such as internet cafes, and surprisingly some results shown were fear towards connecting to the internet wholly. Subsequently, the study indicated that 75% of adolescent received some sort of education on how to stay vigilant online, done by their schools whereas 25% admitted to never receiving any guidance (Alqahtani, 2016). This demonstrates that guidance from a higher authority whether it be at home or in educational institutes such as school, can enable young people as well as their parents to stay vigilant of the risks that being active online entails.

## Methodology

The research presented here coincides with media studies; as it relates to social media as a whole, as it is consumed moderately or otherwise by individuals connected through it globally. As well, discusses the theories and doctrines that offer insight on how media and communication approached within an empirically conducted research; not to mention the effects these studies and principal have or will create within the society. Specifically, we would be approaching the "media displacement theory" in this study.

## Theoretical Framework

The perception of the Internet and social media is that it is an inclusive and fun-filled outlet, that many can participate in no matter what age, gender, education or otherwise. Whether it be to connect with friend(s) and/or families, or just to keep one's self-entertained through games and YouTube, for instance, it all leads to the conclusion that the Internet is mainly for enjoyment unless used otherwise. But where enjoyment ends and uncontrolled and full immersion by the Internet starts is where complications could be foreseen; for communication between families start to diminish in substitute of "better" communication through social media, or even reaching a minimalistic level to a concerning level as shown in this paper. As more and more people become preoccupied with social media, "YouTube, is now used by nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults and 94% of 18- to 24-year-olds." (Smith & Anderson, 2018). The report also shows that users who were asked about whether or not they will be able to disassociate or give up with social media has agreed that it will be

difficult to do such as presented by an increase of 12 percentage points from a survey done in early 2014. Also more notably, “Instagram: 35% of U.S. adults now say they use this platform, an increase of seven percentage points from the 28% who said they did in 2016.” Indicates that there is an evident increase in social media use among American adults and young adults as well, an increase that is aligned with the level of how power and immersive social media can be for the globe. However, when addressing young adults specifically, the report examines,

“Americans ages 18 to 24 are substantially more likely to use platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter even when compared with those in their mid- to late-20s. These differences are especially notable when it comes to Snapchat: 78% of 18- to 24-year-olds are Snapchat users, but that share falls to 54% among those ages 25 to 29.”

That exemplifies the focus and attitude on social media that young people have towards. (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

Furthermore, parents are part of the communication process in the lives of their children, but when this aspect is presented with an obstacle such as media displacement; that affects their communication within the household. Maintaining family-ties and spending time with them is a fundamental belief for functioning relationships. Also, a part of maintaining a relationship is communication; however, the Internet, social media and traditional media could have a role in hindering conversations, as it is evident in UAE homes, young people tend to replace face-to-face conversing for depending on responses (whether it be from family members or friends) through social media means instead. With the amount of distractions that the Internet provides in terms of “entertainment”, it is becoming increasingly harder and harder to separate from the virtual world; even for a small interaction within members of the family, keeping in mind that an increased distractions could lead to a damaging level, socially outside of an individuals’ household. Parents can enlist precautionary measures, guardianship and appropriate time in providing an atmosphere where young people can still enjoy their virtual world; without it being hinder some towards their sociality and communication levels. Moreover, for this concern which is being addressed in this research paper, for credibility purposes a series of measures has been conducted in the process. Measures that expectantly will add value in proceeding empirical research that will be formulated for this specific issue.

## Survey

In formulating this research, a survey was deemed the most appropriate method to exhibit and emphasize the essence of this issue; for it provides a concise pattern of responses that can be converted into authentic data and measurement to either approve or disapprove the research question with its results. As surveys tend to require time and concentration by the respondents, we decided to limit the questionnaire into only ten to-the-point inquires, six close-ended questions and four reflective and open-ended questions. The formulated questionnaire was to address three aspects, firstly would be dependence on Social Media/ Phones, secondly shared connectedness towards an individual’s family and finally amount of time consumed by social media/Internet.

There was no objectively reached demographic for this survey as it was posted using social media, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter; it was only meant to reach any individual who had access to social media accounts whether young or old; for the sole purpose of reach and unbiased opinions. The distribution tool for the questionnaire was SurveyMonkey, where it recorded, stored and articulated the data into comprehensible form; for it to be added later for analysis and research.

## Findings

Shown below are the results of this survey. As mentioned previously, no specific subgroup or demographic was approached to answer this survey, with it being posted on several social media sites to gain as many responses as possible within the time-frame. An estimated 200 respondents provided their input on how Social Media and the Internet affect family communications, all 200 respondents were residents of the UAE where our research region is presented from, and are currently one member of their own families, not to mention being familiar with social communication sites which were one of the key elements in distributing this survey.

## Results

- (i) The first question addresses the possibility of having one or more family member, friend(s), etc. linked to their social media sites, the reason for asking such is to distinguish two reasons. The acceptance of having their significant other on the respondents' social media entails a willingness to share and observe respondents' daily life experiences. Secondly, examining the aspect of companionship within respondents' social media sites, allows us to understand the values and emotions associated with having their significant other on these sites. As a result, 76.19% of the respondents answered Yes for whether or not they are linked to their significant other on social media sites, whereas 21.80% answered with No. This result tells us that acceptance to have significant others in these sites; enables a sense of community and togetherness in social media sites. Specifically, not only mentioning friends but also family because their families are an integral part of our research topic; as it provides an insight into UAE households regarding connectedness between their members at home.
- (ii) The 2<sup>nd</sup> question addresses the amount of time spent on or using social media, daily; answering this on different intervals such as 1-3 hours, 4-7 hours and 8 or more hours spent. We chose these intervals on the least to most possibilities of time being spent on a certain activity, whether passively or actively. By a small margin, (42.86%) most of the respondents confessed to spending 8 or more hours on social media, while only 23.81% stated that they spent between 4-7 hours online. Using social media can relate to many explanations, one of which is average and above-average use of these sites, which in this case majority of the respondents spend a major amount of hours on their social media accounts. Having said that, whether the outcome of such usage is positive or negative is the respondent's personal choice, but such heavily consuming time-wise usage could have negative outcomes; for example, procrastination.
- (iii) The 3<sup>rd</sup> inquiry refers to how often respondents communicate with their family members, in particular when using social media accounts. We chose this question on the basis that, provided with a concise answer, this will entail how often or if ever respondents converse with their families no matter the length of the period; because establishing causality would give us insight into whether the time spent on social media can be directed towards maintaining conversations with family members. Shown here is a ratio of from least to most starting with Daily, and ending with Never. The major results (57.14%) suggested a daily form of communication is used when addressing one or more family member, whereas only 4.76% mentioned

Never to communicating with their family members while on social media. This acknowledges that communication between family members is functional and desired within the respondents, with the use of social media sites.

- (iv) The 4<sup>th</sup> question revolves around the opinion of whether or not people should limit their time on their phones while at home. This will give us an understanding of how respondents feel about not just only have an opinion on restrains one or the other person should apply to himself/their selves while using phone while at home; it also observes how respondents' perceive the phone as a barrier that occupies an individual from interacting with their surroundings, once used excessively. These results (28.75%) confirmed our understanding of the respondents' opinion on placing limitations on phone usage while at home. Interestingly, people felt more strongly on Neither Agree Nor Disagree (an impartial position) than Disagree when presented with this argument; this can be explained by the assumption that placing limitation is also a personal decision that can be made passively or actively, during the day or some other planned arrangement.
- (v) The 5<sup>th</sup> question addresses the level of dependency people would rely on their phone(s) in terms of maintenance and/or upholding a 'social life.' What we mean by that term is that, sociability could be subjected to dependency on one's phone; to instigate events and social occurrences with ease. We used a slider rating for this particular question, to fully understand and represent the appropriate data that is resulted by it. On average 195 respondents mentioned a fair level of dependency on the phone (s) which is realistic when exploring rationally the principle of 'closeness and interconnectedness' that explains the dependency on phones to have a social life with one's peers/colleagues/close friends/etc.
- (vi) In the 6<sup>th</sup> question, we asked respondents on which they most frequently spend their time on, while at home. Investigating this question would provide intake on which forms of media people consume the most while at home, and which they consume the least. Concurringly, the majority of the respondents confessed to using mobile phones the most while at home, which is a practical explanation for two presumed reasons. First, mobiles phone can nowadays be as similar to computers with more accessible enhancements, with phones one can multitask several entertainment means while at the comfort of their home(s). Secondly, with the large and consistent amount of noise media can present towards the user, it would make perfect sense as to why most people spend their time on their phones while at home.
- (vii) The 7<sup>th</sup> question of our survey we asked if their parents had ever punished or restricted their internet at home. We chose this topic on the assumption that as an individual, restricting internet usage can have benefits and negative effects on him/her; keeping in mind that parents are the authority that implements such restriction, and they foresee them as means of precaution towards their children. Majority to an almost 70% confessed to a No regarding any restriction being implemented on them, whereas the rest confessed that there was some restriction while they were young but was later disregarded.
- (viii) In question 8, we asked the respondents whether or not they connected well with their families, more through social media or through face-to-face communication. The reason we are asking this is to examine which means of communication(s) people prefer the most when addressing their parents. Respondents displayed a higher appreciation of face-to-face communication than using social media to address their parents by 81.82%. This displays an appeal towards face-to-face



value over the online form of communication; presumably, because social conducts are better translated in person than ambiguously translated through social media sites, as well as it relates to familiar bonds that surpass online form of communicating that's mostly passive.

- (ix) On the 9<sup>th</sup> question, we wanted to observe the possibility of internet bringing people closer to their families, whether as a means of communication or as an assisting tool to maintain a relationship(s) with one's family. Again, we decided to implement the Slider satisfaction measurement for this question; to deduce the result appropriately we will be receiving from this question. People average on 69 points in favor of the possibility of the Internet connecting their families. Whether this question was positively answered by the respondents, so the internet is not discredited as a social bonding tool, or if this question was answered objectively and in an unbiased attitude; the evidence shows clearly that the possibility of the Internet bringing family members together is quite evident.
- (x) Finally, for the 10<sup>th</sup> and last question, we wanted to address the conflict that can be presented within a family function in this day and age. It is evident that some people prefer to be occupied by their phones in social instances such as family events due to numerous reasons, personal or otherwise. Doing so, prevent the occupied individual from wholeheartedly participating in family functions in substitution to be online on social media or other means of entertainment. The majority of the respondents (72.73%) chose to socialize in the family event than be preoccupied with their phones. With the amount of saturation, media presents to their users; it would be customary to be preoccupied with one's phone rather than communicate and socialize. Especially we chose family event due to the sentimental meaning behind participating, or the lack of within them could cause tension in familiar relationships towards whoever is in those family functions. However, the majority of the respondents answered positively and chose to remain impartial about phone use while in those family functions.

## Conclusion

Residents of UAE proved to be majorly in control of their usage of social media and the internet for the most part, as shown in this survey; objectively, however, there is still evidence of serious consumption of media especially when associated with time being preoccupied with it whilst at home, and some methods of family communications. Nevertheless, as shown in these survey results, there is evident motivation not to be preoccupied so heavily by Social Media and the Internet; that it hinders family communications whether inside the house or outside of it; which is all this research hopes to achieve with conducting this research and survey.

Finally, evidence has shown that the UAE community is for the most part in control of their mobile phone usage, in regards to communicating and maintain family relationships within the household. However, excessive usage could still be a foreseeable action that would lead to hindering or endangering these relationships, to the extent that might be irredeemable. So, caution and appropriate guidance from parents and governmental authorities can assist in preventing this issue from collapsing into the UAE community, and harm the future generations that will lose valuable resources such as, strong familial bonds and enhanced communication skill(s) if this issue is not addressed and taken seriously.

## Recommendations

In the light of all the research conducted in this paper, we observed a variety of resources. The empirical literature review and the survey implemented towards Social Media aware persons of UAE, tackling the effect of Social Media and family communication within household(s). We feel it is of utmost importance to be dealt efficiently as it could lead to a serious outcome from excessive use of the Internet. Which lead us to acquire a conceivable list of recommendations that will optimistically help address this issue in the future with more earnest and provide actionable solutions to limit the spread or continuity of the issue that's evident in the UAE community. They are as follows:

- (i) Planning family activities and bonding sessions such as board games and physical activities, whether indoors or out-doors, so members of the family could involve shared valuable time as well as, give family enough time of the day without the surroundings of media (social/internet/TV/video games, etc.).
- (ii) Parents should provide supportive guidance and reassurance through positive interaction, whenever one or more of their kids are behaving strange and inconsistently as a result of media consumption while at home.
- (iii) Schools and educational institutions can implement exercises and lecture on the relation between emotional and physical well-being and healthy Internet usage; for doing so would create an intellectual environment that demonstrates the appropriate behavior when introducing Social Media and Internet into their daily lives.
- (iv) Create a balanced timetable that involves media consumption responsibly, wherein kids and young adults are permitted a limited amount of time and energy they can spend on media; while providing alternatives such as, journaling, reading books, drawing, etc.
- (v) Parents have to be involved in a non-aggressive matter with the lives and social activities of their children, especially when it comes to their online presence and activity; by initiating interest-building conversations, allowing friends to come over to the house, to name a few.
- (vi) Parents can self-educate on the new media and trends happening currently; to help them stay active in their approach towards their kids verbally or otherwise, in regards to media.

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