

Do more 'followers' and 'likes' equal better connected?



Optus is committed to empowering the next generation to reach their full potential in the digital age.

Our Digital Citizenship Blog Series will share insights into how parents, teachers and youth advocates can help young Australians to thrive in the face of rapid technological advancements.

Insights are drawn from the latest research into digital citizenship, contributions from subject matter experts, and our experience running the award-winning Digital Thumbprint program.

Do more 'followers' and 'likes' equal better connected?

Research released by Facebook suggests that we are more connected to one another than ever before.

Forget six degrees of separation theory – active social media users are now only separated by an average by an average of 3.57 steps.

While the rapid expansion of social media has made us more connected, the question of whether we are better connected is still up for debate. On one side of the argument, many fear that the distance created by social media "erodes our efforts to genuinely communicate with others". Yet, others argue that opportunities to show respect and empathy may simply manifest differently in digital spaces. In this blog, we explore the two sides of this contentious topic.

Does digital technology lead to disrespect?

What's the first thing you do in the morning? Stretch? Brush your teeth? Greet your family? Or are you one of the increasing number of people who check their social media accounts as soon as you disable your mobile alarm, even before you kiss your other half good morning? According to critics, this is one of the many ways digital devices stop us from forming meaningful connections with one another.

As well as distracting us from investing in the person in front of us, some researchers caution that digital devices make it easier to overlook the feelings of others by allowing us to delay responding to messages we want to avoid and removing the immediate feedback of facial expressions.

Professor Sherry Turkle warns that digital devices could also be stopping young people from having the kinds of interactions where intimacy can flourish. According to Turkle, with increased connectivity comes increased pressure to provide instantaneous responses to emails, messages and social media communications. With little time left to stop and think carefully about their responses, our kids' ability to develop 'slow skills' such as empathy may be impaired. Turkle discusses this in her prolific TED talk, Connected, but alone?

Even if we are not actively using our digital devices, having our smart phones present in face-to-face social situations may promote shallow interactions. With the constant reminder that we might be interrupted, we could be tempted to "keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence".

Do online spaces have the potential to increase our empathy?

While there seems to be a never-ending influx of sensationalist headlines around smartphone use, it may not be that simple. Advocates on the other side of the debate point to research showing that digital interactions do not replace face-to-face interactions, and that face-to-face empathy and virtual empathy are positively correlated.

Other research suggests that opportunities to develop empathy may simply manifest differently in digital spaces. For example, Psychologist Dr. Tracy Alloway suggests that compared with face-to-face connections, the internet can expose us to people who we wouldn't ordinarily be associated with. While the friends our kids have on the playground often come from similar walks of life, social media can expose them to world-views that are starkly different from their own.

Social media sites such as Facebook, who recently celebrated 15 years, may also increase our potential to connect with the emotions of others by making us more aware of the significant life events of our networks. In a way, this could help us to feel a little closer to our "friends" when we next see them in person.

Based on these findings, it seems that physical and online spaces can offer us different and complementary opportunities to express empathy. Compared to the physical world, online spaces may have the potential to make us more aware of the emotions of others. Yet, a physical hug is still six times more effective than a virtual hug to help someone feel supported. As parents, educators and mentors, perhaps our next step is to start chatting to young people about when digital technologies enhance their relationships, and when it is better for them to put their devices down.

3 conversations you can have with young people today

1.

How does social media influence how emotionally close you feel to your friends?

2.

When is the last time you experienced FOMO after being on social media?
How did it change your feelings, thoughts or behaviour?

3.

Do you think that digital devices and social media platforms make it easier to overlook the feelings of others? What can you do to seek out and create empathy in digital spaces?

Resources for parents, caregivers and educators

Optus supports digital citizenship education in Australian schools so that young people can be safe, responsible and positive online. Digital Thumbprint with Kids Helpline is an early intervention and awareness program for primary school students. Within secondary schools, our Digital Thumbprint program focuses on positive behavioural change.

Additional resources and information:

- The Digital Thumbprint Parent Resources were designed help parents have structured conversations with their children about digital topics. You can access these free discussion guides [here](#).
- Kids Helpline Guides for Parents are available [here](#).
- The eSafety Commissioner also has a range of information to encourage safer, more positive experiences for young Australians online. You can access this information [here](#).

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