The Effects of Social Networking on Young People: Lessons from the Buddha's Instruction to Rāhula

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites provide young people with opportunities to maintain friendships, communicate with family members, share information, and participate in online communities. However, excessive or inappropriate use may interfere with education, family responsibilities, and other activities. Cyberbullying, misleading information, social comparison, and harmful online groups also present risks to young users. These concerns raise an ethical question: how can young people benefit from social networking without harming themselves or others?

This article examines the positive and negative influences of social networking, particularly Facebook, through a conceptual discussion of selected sources and Buddhist teachings. It draws on the Buddha's raft analogy, the importance of discerning beneficial conduct, and the instruction to Rāhula to repeatedly reflect on bodily, verbal, and mental actions. The article argues that social networking should be regarded as a means of communication rather than an object of attachment. Reflective practice encourages young people to consider the consequences of their online conduct and refrain from actions that cause harm. Parents and educators can support this process through open communication, guidance, and responsible technology use. The discussion proposes Buddhist ethical reflection as a practical approach to responsible social networking, rather than as an empirically tested intervention.

Keywords: Social Networking; Youth; Buddhist Ethics; Rāhula; Reflection

Introduction

Social networking platforms have become an important part of young people's lives. During the period considered in this article, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LINE provided opportunities to communicate across geographical and temporal boundaries. These services supported family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships, and participation in groups. Although social networking offers considerable benefits, its inappropriate use can also disrupt daily life and expose young people to harmful interactions. The central question is therefore not simply whether young people should use social networking, but how they can use it responsibly. This article examines selected benefits and risks and considers how Buddhist teachings, particularly the instruction to Rāhula, can inform ethical conduct online. It is a conceptual discussion based on the sources available to the author, rather than an empirical study.

Young People and Social Networking

This section defines social networking, introduces selected platforms used by young people, and examines their potential benefits and risks. The subsequent discussion considers Buddhist teachings as a framework for responsible use.

Social Networking

The term social network refers both to relationships among people and to digital services that facilitate those relationships.[1] It may be understood in two senses:

(1) A network of social interactions and personal relationships.

[1] Oxford Dictionaries, "Social Network," accessed September 12, 2017, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social_network.

(2) A website or application through which users communicate and share information, messages, images, and other content.

Online social networks allow people with shared interests to exchange information and resources. The following examples illustrate prominent platforms discussed in the sources available in 2017.

Facebook

Founded in 2004, Facebook enables users to create profiles, identify acquaintances, and join communities based on shared interests. For adolescents, it offers a virtual space for maintaining friendships and interacting with peers.

Facebook also enables friends and family members to maintain contact across geographical distances. Moreau reported approximately two billion monthly active users at the time.[2] Facebook Messenger provided an additional channel through which young people could communicate and share experiences.

Instagram

Instagram is a platform for sharing photographs and short videos. The sources cited in the original discussion describe its popularity among young users and its growing role in advertising.[3] Users create profiles, publish visual content, and interact with other accounts.

Patterns of platform use differ across countries. Snapchat, Twitter, YouTube, and other services also provide opportunities for online interaction.

[2] Elise Moreau, "The Top Social Networking Sites People Are Using," accessed September 12, 2017, https://www.lifewire.com/top-social-networking-sites-people-are-using-3486554.

[3] Raychelle Cassada Lohmann, "Top Five Social Networking Sites Used by Teens," accessed September 12, 2017.

The Effects of Social Networking

Social networking can have both beneficial and adverse consequences. Facebook provides a useful example through which to consider these effects on young people.

Negative Influences on Youth

Excessive engagement with social networking may displace activities such as schoolwork, family interaction, and sport.

Cyberbullying and social comparison may contribute to emotional distress, dissatisfaction with physical appearance, and other difficulties. Such outcomes should not be attributed to social media alone, since individual circumstances and other influences also matter.[4]

Reports in 2017 concerning the so-called Blue Whale Challenge illustrate public concerns about harmful online pressure and the vulnerability of young users.

Media coverage described allegations of coercive online activity and encouraged parents to remain alert to signs of distress.[5]

The reports should be interpreted cautiously: they do not establish the prevalence of the phenomenon or demonstrate that the online activity caused every death attributed to it.

The case nevertheless highlights the importance of recognizing harmful online interactions and providing timely support to vulnerable young people.

[4] Kamailittle, "What Is Wrong with Social Media?" (2016), accessed September 12, 2017, https://kamailittle.wordpress.com/2016/09/08/what-is-wrong-with-social-media/.

[5] BBC News, "Blue Whale: Should You Be Worried about Online Pressure Groups?" accessed September 15, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-39729819. Jaide Timm-Gacia and Kaylee Hartung, "Family Finds Clues to Teen's Suicide in Blue Whale Paintings," CNN, July 17, 2017.

Positive Influences on Youth

Social networking has also become part of everyday communication among young people. Its potential benefits include maintaining relationships, accessing information, and expressing ideas.

First, online communication helps friends maintain contact when they cannot meet in person, although it should not necessarily be regarded as equivalent to spending time together face to face.[6]

Second, social networking provides access to information about events beyond the immediate community and facilitates the exchange of social and political information.[7]

Third, online platforms offer opportunities for self-expression, social interaction, and the development of friendships based on shared interests.

Wittkower describes how online interaction can extend existing relationships and encourage participation in larger communities.[8]

These benefits demonstrate why responsible use is preferable to treating social networking as inherently harmful. Its value depends partly on the purposes for which it is used and the conduct of its users.

Buddhist Education through the Instruction to Rāhula

The preceding discussion suggests that technology itself is not the sole source of harmful outcomes. As Chris Bloor argues, ethical orientation is important in determining how people use technology.[9]

[6] D. E. Wittkower (ed.), Facebook and Philosophy: What's on Your Mind? (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), p. 133.
[7] Ibid., p. 133.
[8] D. E. Wittkower (ed.), Facebook and Philosophy: What's on Your Mind? (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), p. 7.
[9] D. E. Wittkower (ed.), Facebook and Philosophy: What's on Your Mind? (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), p. 150.

Wise Use of Technology

The Buddha's parable of the raft offers an analogy for the instrumental use of material resources:

In the discourse, the Buddha explains that the Dhamma is taught for crossing over rather than for clinging to it.[10]

Applied by analogy to social networking, this teaching suggests that digital platforms should be used as means of communication and learning rather than objects of attachment. Young people can benefit from online resources while remaining attentive to the time they spend online and the quality of the information they encounter.

Self-Reflection

The importance of careful discernment is also illustrated in the following Buddhist teaching:

The discourse advises listeners not to accept claims solely on the basis of tradition, hearsay, reasoning, textual authority, or the status of a teacher. Instead, they should cultivate conduct that they recognise as harmless, praised by the wise, and conducive to benefit and happiness.[11]

In an online context, this principle encourages young people to assess information and consider its consequences before accepting or sharing it.

The Buddha's instruction to Rāhula further emphasises truthfulness and reflection upon bodily, verbal, and mental actions. Using the example of a vessel containing a little water, the Buddha illustrates the ethical danger of deliberate falsehood.

[10] M I 134–135; I. B. Horner (tr.), The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya) (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), pp. 173–174.

[11] E. M. Hare (tr.), The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara Nikāya) (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), p. 188.

The discourse warns that a person who feels no shame in deliberate lying may be capable of other forms of misconduct.[12]

Rāhula is therefore instructed to refrain from deliberate falsehood even in jest. This teaching applies to misleading posts, false identities, and deceptive online communication.

The Buddha then asks Rāhula about the purpose of a mirror. Just as a mirror is used for reflection, bodily, verbal, and mental actions should be examined repeatedly.

When an action is found to be harmless to oneself and others and conducive to beneficial results, the practitioner is encouraged to continue cultivating skillful conduct.[13]

The central question is whether a contemplated, ongoing, or completed action is skillful or harmful.

The discourse concludes by emphasizing the purification of bodily, verbal, and mental conduct through repeated reflection.[14] Applied to digital communication, this means considering whether a message, image, or comment may cause harm before sharing it, remaining attentive to its effects, and correcting harmful conduct when it occurs.

The instruction to Rāhula offers an ethical framework suitable for discussing young people's online behavior. Its emphasis on reflection and non-harming encourages responsible decision-making rather than mere compliance with external restrictions.

Parents can assist young people by acting as supportive guides and helping them recognize both the benefits and risks of social networking. They can

[12] M I 414–415; I. B. Horner (tr.), The Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikāya) (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994), pp. 87–88.
[13] M I 417; Horner, The Middle Length Sayings (1994).
[14] M I 420; Horner, The Middle Length Sayings (1994).

encourage a balanced daily routine, listen to concerns about school and friendships, model responsible technology use, and establish reasonable expectations through discussion.

In response to reports of harmful online pressure, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre emphasised calm, open communication and reassurance.[15] Young people should be able to disclose distressing experiences without fearing immediate punishment.

The same report advises against blanket internet bans and recommends explaining privacy settings, sharing concerns with parents and teachers, and reporting credible threats to the appropriate authorities when a child is in danger.[16]

Responsible social networking is therefore a shared concern of young people, families, educators, and society. Supportive relationships and informed guidance can help young users develop the capacity to recognise risks and make thoughtful choices.

Conclusion

Social networking enables young people to maintain relationships, exchange information, and participate in communities beyond geographical boundaries. Nevertheless, excessive use, cyberbullying, deceptive communication, and harmful online pressure may undermine their well-being. The potential benefits and risks of these platforms indicate the need for responsible engagement rather than unconditional acceptance or rejection.

The Buddha's parable of the raft provides an analogy for using technology as a means rather than an object of attachment. The instruction to Rāhula offers a complementary ethical framework by emphasizing truthfulness,

[15] BBC News, "Blue Whale: Should You Be Worried about Online Pressure Groups?" accessed September 15, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-39729819.
[16] Ibid.

repeated reflection, and non-harming in bodily, verbal, and mental conduct. Applied to online life, these principles encourage young people to consider the consequences of their actions and refrain from conduct that harms themselves or others. Parents and educators can reinforce this practice through open communication, appropriate guidance, and responsible examples of technology use. While this article does not establish the empirical effectiveness of Buddhist reflection as an intervention, it identifies an ethical approach that may inform education and further research.

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