A Study of how Social Media Impacts Human Relationships and Family Mediation

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Abstract

Internet usage across Australia has grown significantly recently. The types of devices being used to access the internet is also changing. Of special significance is the increasing use of smart phones. The mobility of computing devices provides ease of access to information, but it also poses a challenge.

Recent advances in technology are transforming the way we communicate with friends and family and how we make new friends. Social network sites “satisfy the need for escape, for exploring, for interaction and socialization”.

Social media describes a suite of sites, including social networks that provide the user with the ability to post content quickly and easily to a network of individuals online. Excessive social media use can have a detrimental effect on family and intimate relationships, leading to mistrust, breakdown of relationships and potential legal disputes. The research presented here is concerned with quantifying the impact that social media has on human relationships as a first step to developing a model for managing the impact of social media use on family life, human relationships and partnership breakdowns.

Anecdotal evidence from Australian family dispute resolution practitioners indicates that many people form, maintain and dissolve human relationships via social media. These practitioners are concerned about how parents inappropriately use social media following the dissolution of their partnerships. The posting of “derogatory” comments about co-parents further poisons already fragile relationships and makes it very difficult for parents to work together to appropriately care for their children.

Two preliminary studies we have and are now conducting explore both university student and the general public internet and social media use and their perceptions of how such usage impacts upon their relationships. The general public survey has been funded by the Centre for Cultural Diversity and Wellbeing at Victoria University and has a special emphasis on whether those from culturally diverse groups and from socio-economically disadvantaged populations have a different social media usage than the general public.

The majority of respondents to the surveys indicated that they used Facebook several times a day to stay in touch with friends and family. Despite significant internet and social media use, the majority of respondents did not feel it reduced the amount of time spent speaking to friends and family.

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1 Primarily from Family Relationship Centres administered by Relationships Australia Victoria
However, a small minority of respondents feel that their use of social media does indeed detract from the number and quality of face to face relationships. In addition a third of interviewees reported meeting online friends in an offline setting – often without taking precaution as to where they first meet. These findings alongside the impact of mobile internet use on our relationships have emerged as areas of focus for further research with our partner Relationships Australia Victoria. Current work is exploring key issues such as the impact of internet and social media use on negotiation skills and empathy as well as the use of social media by separating parents and its impact on children and the separation process. These issues will be discussed in the presentation.