**Digital Empathy**

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“Technology doesn’t just change what we do; it changes who we are. The more time we spend on social media; the less time we spend building real-life relationships.” A view shared by Sherry Turkle, an MIT Professor and Psychologist. Alarmingly, excess amounts of time spent online results in a shrinking presence within the real world.
Virtual is real when it comes to online relationships. While the grey hair might question the authenticity of such relationships, for the youth, it is an undeniable truth that online relationships have the power to evoke profound emotions and companionship amidst the vastness of cyberspace which comes with potential risks and vulnerabilities.
Significantly, the consequences can be lifelong. As I go through counselling sessions with my university students, it becomes fairly easy to identify similarities in all those cases. Most of them have a fair share of online interactions and relationships. More worryingly, the perils are on the rise leaving more students vulnerable in the virtual world.
The journey of Pakistani society from the famous Nokia 3310 to the latest smartwatches has been intriguing where most of the youth has been consumed by cheap entertainment and remain hooked to the inflated dose of dopamine provided by social media every single hour.
The classrooms too have changed. Now one does not find students writing their class lectures and asking questions unless it is about their impending exams. Marks are all that matters; even when there is no learning at all. Critical thinking is a rarity.
Exams too have lost the ‘thrill’ as students have the impression that their work in the university is not going to pay them in real life. Merit is bypassed and corruption is rampant in the outside world. The impression is further reinforced as they watch semi-educated TikTok millionaires flaunting their wealth.
Asad, a bio-medical student, became involved in an intense online relationship with a person from a different country. As he devoted most of his time to communicating with his online friend, he neglected his friendships and social life on campus. Eventually, his on-campus friends felt ignored and excluded, causing strain in their relationships. Asad’s isolation and loss of social support took a toll on his mental health and overall well-being. Unfortunately, he is not alone; many others suffer due to similar situations.
Online relationships can create a sense of anonymity and disinhibition, leading to behaviours that individuals might not engage in during face-to-face interactions. Therefore, it’s important to be aware of potential risks and to maintain healthy boundaries.
Another university student, Sarah, entered an online relationship with someone who appeared to be caring and supportive. Over time, her partner convinced her to send money, promising to pay it back or invest it wisely. However, her partner turned out to be a scammer, and Sarah lost a significant amount of money that she had worked hard to save. This financial setback caused her immense stress and affected her ability to pay for her education and other expenses. Consequently, it caused her to take a break for a semester.
These are some examples highlighting the potential risks and challenges associated with online relationships. However, it’s essential to approach each situation with empathy and understanding, as not all online relationships have negative consequences, and some can even provide valuable support and companionship.
“I was performing badly in my mathematics class until I found an online coach who not only helped me learn the basic concepts of mathematics but also enabled me to prepare a road map for my future. Soon I was able to clear my subject and get myself enrolled in my dream university abroad,” says Dejo who feels that her online coach came as a saviour.
It is time we acknowledge and explore the rich emotional tapestry woven within the realm of online relationships, where hearts beat across screens and souls intertwine through pixels. It is crucial to approach online relationships with mindfulness, awareness of potential risks, and a balance between virtual and real-life interactions.