

Commentary

The Façade of Virtual Intimacy

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Karl Marx has described human beings as social animals, with an innate need for connection – physical, emotional, social, or spiritual. Even the most introverted will find themselves rooting for connections with non-human things like nature, gadgets, or books. In this context, we have witnessed a steep upward bend in the evolutionary curve of human relationships with the advent of digital platforms. Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram have revolutionized the modes and range of our interactions. Inadvertently it has revolutionized the trends of intimate relationships. Let us look closely at how internet and social media are deeply intertwined with relationships in our day-to-day lives.

Our recent tryst with the pandemic-imposed lockdown made us present to the many benefits of digitalisation; staying connected with estranged loved ones to say the least. It was evident that online connections help dampen the dullness of isolation, creating an almost surreal experience of spending time with a loved one through the video interface. It helps to bridge geographical gaps in a relationship and in most cases, save it from emotional gaps of silence or spaced conversations. We could simply appreciate how a small text or voicemail from our partner could brighten our day or make us feel like we matter.

The first things that anyone especially those seeking to form a new relationship would notice about media platforms are its attractive features and quick paced interactions. The popular filters in reels and various applications help beautify new age netizens in their desired way and make them feel comfortable in their skin. How far does this take them, is the real question though.

It would not be alarming to find that someone on the other end of a digital conversation turns out to be deceitful or fraudulent, and not who they posed as in an online profile. The nature of the interface is such, that it allows the dark side of an individual to play roles devoid of accountability or actual investment. Someone who is vulnerable and emotionally available could be the most likely target of hurt and exploitation, like meeting in non-public places or blackmail, from untrustworthy elements. It could be very easy to generate unreasonable expectations from lofty promises made online, only to find them unfulfilled. Thus, virtual reality could never replace the intuitive judgments which can be made in real life face-to-face interactions.

One also needs to consider the risk of emotional, if not actual infidelity. Digital interface could be equally hazardous for a relationship that entails one or both partners seeking ventilation. The thin line of emotional infidelity carries equivalent risks of emotional and overt trauma to an individual. It would be debatable though to understand what exactly defines infidelity on emotional grounds. The concept of loyalty and fidelity is highly subjective. On one end it reflects the deep-rooted tradition of Indian philosophy which advocates monogamy, and on another, it allows expression of a wide range of interpersonal relationships, not necessarily confined to the expression of libido or sexuality.

By nature of being human, we experience a natural physiological high on varied planes – through the gut (food-gasm), through the mind (sapiosexuals) or through the body (orgasm). A rush of dopamine is the common mechanism

behind these experiences which makes us want to experience them more. Today's world exposes the human brain to a plethora of options which entangle us into the vicious cycle of dopamine highs and lows – for example, alcohol, nicotine, heroin, cocaine, LSD, and other psychoactive drugs. To add to this list, we cannot underestimate the comparable impact of comfort foods or even internet use (screen time) on our vulnerable minds. If the role of physiological urges and the induced cravings of these new-age innovations were to be combined, one can only imagine how compelling and hazardous their effect could be.

In the midst of a surge of emotions, ruled by hormones and neurotransmitters, the primitive mind (amygdala, orbitofrontal cortex) takes over the more evolved rational and logical mind (prefrontal cortex) and illudes a person into acting on impulse. These are very challenging to resist and reason with and most likely draw a person into an addictive dependence – which by definition explains that indulgence into that particular thing/ person takes the highest priority over any other role or

responsibility in life. The person may find it hard to stop him/herself and continue to engage despite acknowledging its side effects or psychological implications. At this point, the emotional dependence on a certain person or relationship can be as strong as the yearning for water in a mirage. It could easily be encapsulated into a medical model of brain dysfunction, wherein no amount of evidence or rationality would potentiate a person to abide by social/ moral/ ethical norms, rather just operate on basic instincts.

In a nutshell, digital media brings the basket of good, bad, and the ugly to our relationships, but knowing to spot red flags and draw lines to ensure safety could turn it into an advantage. The responsibility would be tremendously higher when forming new relationships online, as compared to maintaining it with someone you already trust.