



Ng Wei Kai

When 16-year-old Dayamaye Baskaran gets up in the morning, one of the first things she does as she gets ready for school is to open Discord to see what her friends are talking about.

The Secondary 4 student uses the messaging app to chat with her classmates about school, gaming, family and everything else in between.

But once she gets to school, she does not speak to many of her classmates, despite how intimately she knows them online.

She told The Straits Times: "It's just weird speaking to them in person. I feel awkward... like my laugh is too loud or something."

Dayamaye's experience may be far from unique, with interconnectedness fostered by technology on the rise in Singapore and around the world.

The proportion and number of people using the Internet has risen exponentially. Digital insights firm DataReportal found that more than five billion out of the 7.8 billion people on earth now use it.

In 1990, seven years after the Internet's creation, only about half a per cent of the world population was online.

In Singapore, 96.9 per cent of the 5.8 million residents use the Internet, creative agency We Are Social and consumer insights company Meltwater found in a 2023 study. According to the study, over 85 per cent of the population each uses more than seven social media apps, and users cited keeping in touch with family and friends as the primary reason for their use of the Internet.

The main reason for using the Internet, for many, is to communicate and connect.

HOW CLOSE CAN YOU BE ONLINE?

Singapore Management University's professor of communication and technology Lim Sun Sun told ST that the main difference between online and offline relationships is that online communication often gives users more control.

She said: "Online communication can be 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous', with asynchronous modes like texting giving users the ability to edit and present the best possible version of yourself."

In synchronous communication, people are speaking at the same time, like in phone calls, while asynchronous communication comes with a time delay between messages, like texting or e-mail.

This makes it possible for users to be less authentic in their online communication, she said.

Prof Lim said: "When manipulation is involved, authenticity can be undermined, like if one were to edit the pictures one puts up on Instagram or dating apps."

And even in trying to be as authentic as possible, there is always the instinct to hold something back, said a former influencer who wanted to be known only as Teresa.

In the past, she helped companies sell their products on social media using her extensive following, in exchange for gifts or payment.

Teresa, who is 26 and has over 10,000 followers on Instagram, said: "I think I was as authentic as I could be on social media."

"More specifically, I let my real personality show - but I would never bare 100 per cent of my soul."

She added that she tried not to show too much negativity, and used social media as a photo album of things that made her happy.

But it was not possible to be fully authentic when posting about items she was selling, she said.

Beyond this, the exposure to so many people made her feel

constantly wary. She said: "My social media pushed me to become more introverted..."

"Once someone I didn't know showed up at my house saying he knew where my dog was after I had posted about her being missing, and I received death threats from middle-aged men saying they knew where I lived."

Mental health and applied psychology researcher and educator Jonathan Kuek said the

impulse to obscure or edit how users' lives look on social media is natural or even necessary in the face of scrutiny from so many strangers.

He said: "After all, many of us are only willing to put the best parts of our lives online and share only the positives, which can create an illusion of sorts that prevents people from seeing the real person underneath the glitz and glamour..."

"This desire not to show

students. The primers will broach contemporary topics, such as strengthening intergenerational bonds, the sharing economy and doing good. Each primer topic will give a local perspective to

help students draw links to the issues' implications for Singaporeans. This programme is jointly organised by The Straits Times and the Ministry of Education.

vulnerability is natural and given the nature of social media, even necessary to protect ourselves from the horde of anonymous people who are waiting to pounce on any mistakes we make or flaws we may have."

He added that in such a space, being authentic can be even more challenging than in person.

Mr Kuek, the co-founder of social enterprise Total Wellness Initiative Singapore (TWIS), said: "With negative comments and

information often being perceived more strongly than their positive equivalents, it is understandable why people choose not to be their real self online."

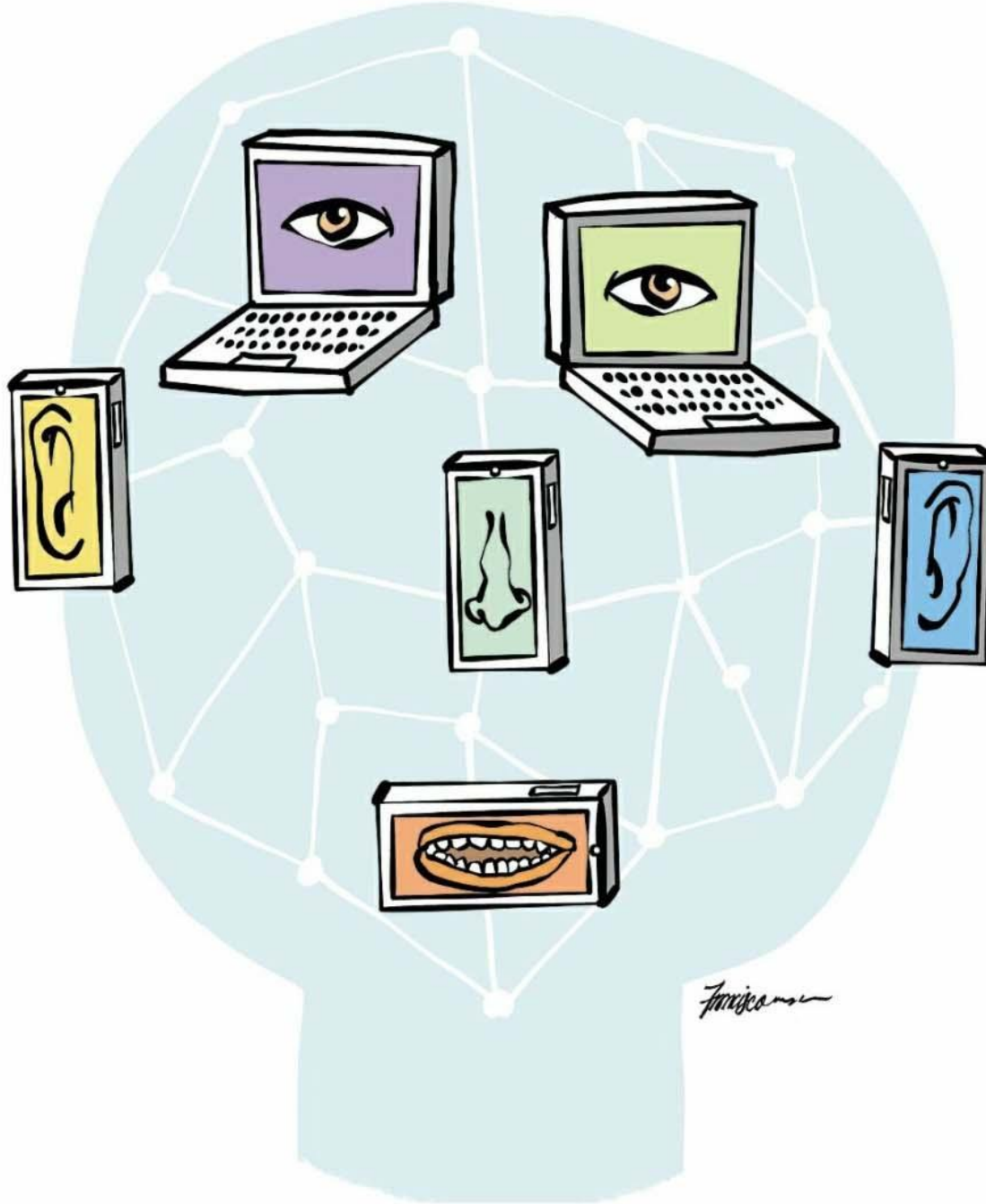
He added that research suggests technology may have detrimental impacts on social relationships.

He said: "People who find themselves living on social media more than in the real world could also experience a greater sense of disconnectedness when around others, preferring instead to be on

Primer

When you connect through a screen, who are you?

This is the seventh in a series of 12 primers on current affairs and issues in the news, and what they mean for Singapore.



their phones and continuing to exist within the social media world. "This ease of access has certainly impacted the way we interact with others, even when physically around them, which is why it is so important to be intentional and mindful about our tech use."

ARE THERE UPSIDES TO ONLINE CONNECTEDNESS?

But paradoxically, the asynchronicity of some modes of online communication may help some people be more authentic, Prof Lim said.

She added: "Social media gives us more tools to present multiple facets of ourselves to others... there is no straightforward answer whether this makes us more or less authentic."

"Let's take the case of a difficult interpersonal discussion - arguably, taking the time to think through and edit what one wants to say may lead to a higher level of authenticity than is possible in a face-to-face conversation."

Online relationships can hence in some instances be more authentic than relationships in 'real life', said Prof Lim.

She gave the example of the social networking app Bondee, where users create avatars in the form of cute comic representations of themselves.

Prof Lim added: "Apps like Bondee can relieve us of any hang-ups we may have about our physical bodies and in a way, give us avatars which may be more representative of what we see as our true personalities."

This may foster relationships which are more authentic than any we can have in our physical bodies, she said, as online others do not have to interact with people's public personas which are not necessarily representative of their inner selves.

Mr Kuek said a person's background and personality can play a role in how far this is true. He said an introvert could feel more comfortable communicating and establishing relationships online, and culture also plays a role.

In South Korea, for instance, he said, there is almost an expectation that technology will play a huge role in the formation of relationships, especially romantic ones.

Beyond individual relationships, technology may bring about a sense of global interconnectedness.

Mr Kuek thinks that technology will play a big role in bringing the world closer together.

He said: "It already has, as demonstrated during the pandemic where technology was the main means for many people to stay connected while movement restrictions were in place, showing us a whole new way of living."

He added that there is arguably already an entire generation who may have spent the better part of their formative years online and have had to learn how to navigate the social world through a digital medium.

Experiencing such interconnectedness may have a positive impact on people's sense of global or civic community, and inform a wider desire to do good, collectively.

A six-month study of 336 young people in Hong Kong found a positive relationship between interconnectedness and civic duty.

The researchers found that people who were more aware of the interconnected nature of all matter were consequently more aware of the interconnectedness of people and systems during the Covid-19 pandemic and more compassionate. Other studies have shown that compassion has a "potent effect" on civic duty and collective action participation, argued the researchers from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

As Dayamaye put it: "I do feel like other people are more genuine online..."

"Someone else's judgment should not curb our ability to speak and should not weigh down our confidence."

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