Sociologists find emerging condition, 'cyberasociality'

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(Phys.org) —Not every single user – among the billions collecting friends and followers on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn and other social media platforms – is perfectly comfortable conducting his or her social life online, according to sociologists at Cornell and the University of North Carolina.

Some people don't find online interaction to be "real," and the researchers dub these individuals the "cyberasocial."

If you strongly agree with statements like, "I need face-to-face interaction before I can decide someone is trustworthy," you, too, could be among the cyberasocial. Cybersocial (without the middle "a") users of social media are likely to say, "I prefer to communicate online when discussing important or deep issues."

Says Cornell's Matthew E. Brashears, "We define cyberasociality as the inability or unwillingness of some people to relate to others via social media as they do when physically present. Cyberasociality may be emerging as a modern variation in digitally mediated sociality."

An assistant professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences, Brashears is co-author (with Zeynep Tufekci at UNC-Chapel Hill) of "Are we all equally at home socializing online? Cyberasociality and evidence for an unequal distribution of disdain for digitally-mediated sociality," published this month in the journal Information, Communication and Society.

Brashears and Tufekci found plenty of unequally distributed disdain in the 827 undergraduate students they surveyed. Virtually all the research subjects used social media in their daily lives. But not all were comfortable using social media to be social.

Cyberasocial students happily used Facebook to find classmates to study with, for example, or Instagram to keep in touch with old friends at other schools. They were just uncomfortable using social media to broaden their social networks or to forge new social ties online.

The researchers tried to find patterns and correlations in their survey data, mostly without success. Gender hardly mattered, and neither did personality traits like introversion or openness. And the cyberasocial report having just as many offline friends and social connections as do the cybersocial.

But for some reason, online social connectivity – so engaging and fulfilling to the highly cybersocial – feels "hollow" and "vacant" to others, the authors report. (They highlighted one finding of interest: The odds of an African-American having made friends online were twice that of a white person, they wrote, "perhaps indicating that racial boundaries are easier to cross through online interaction.")

The Cornell sociologist stops short of tweeting: "Cyberasociality is the new motion sickness." But there are technology-related parallels, Brashears says: "Having the inner ear's input stream disagree with the eyes – essentially, motion sickness – was not a problem when all we did was walk and run. Cars and boats and planes changed all that."

The modern condition of cyberasociality – the possibility that a segment of the population remains unable or unwilling to relate to others socially via digitally mediated sociality – "could only emerge with the spread of online social interaction," Brashears says.

Is cyberasociality the new dyslexia?

"Whatever the cause of dyslexia may be, it would not have been detectable in a pre-literate population as among such people, words are always and only just sounds," Brashears and Tufekci write in their article. "Dyslexia emerges as a disadvantage only as a society incorporates the ease of use with the written word into the portfolio of expected competencies and, similarly, the increasing incorporation of online sociality may expose a segment of the population that is similarly disadvantaged in terms of using these technologies as effectively for social purposes."

Think of all the online invitations to baby showers and bar mitzvahs the chronically cyberasocial will miss, the authors muse.

"On the other hand, less social interaction online may protect them from digital surveillance, and perhaps even emerge as an advantage in reputation management," they write, leaving so much to the digital imagination.

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