Connections aren't conversations – while technology enables, it can also interfere

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A prisoner was in the US was recently released after 44 years of incarceration for the attempted murder of a police officer. Emerging onto the streets of New York City, Otis Johnson, now 69, found himself

bewildered by the world before him. Seeing people apparently talking to themselves on the street, futuristic headphones dangling from their ears, reminded him of CIA agents. People barely paid attention to their surroundings, and instead studied their smartphones while crossing the street, engrossed in their own personal bubbles.

Technology had delivered Johnson a massive culture shock, the shock of a world where technology has quickly changed the way we live and the way we relate to one another.

In 2013 Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and esteemed professor at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote Alone Together, in which she questioned the extent to which social media is bringing people together. Following decades of research on the profound impact of modern technology on human relationships, Turkle concluded that with the omnipresence of technology "we're moving from conversation to connection".

Connection, it seems, denotes a very different quality of social interaction in comparison to conversation, as it refers to continuous streams of little titbits of information, such as those neatly packaged into 140 characters on Twitter.

Conversation, on the other hand, refers to listening and empathic understanding, actively attending to another person, rather than fleetingly commenting on their status updates online while simultaneously talking on the phone, doing the laundry, or preparing the children's dinner.

Something similar has happened in the world of online dating, which has moved away from traditional, detailed dating profiles that allowed compatibility matching based on detailed psychological assessment questionnaires. Instead new superficial dating apps such as Tinder provide matches based not on any suggested compatibility but on the

user's reaction to a profile picture. You don't like the look of this Tinderalla's haircut? Swipe her away. Don't fancy that guy's moustache? A swipe and he's gone.

This couldn't be further from meaningful conversations and real intimate relationships. The emergence of this new hook-up culture poses new challenges in how we relate to one another, and the criteria we use for mate selection. Research in this area is virtually non-existent, and it remains to be seen what sort of effects this has on forming and sustaining relationships.

Alone together?

The internet increases our levels of connection, but may decrease our ability to have actual, deep and meaningful conversations with each other. This phenomenon was called the internet paradox by Robert Kraut and colleagues in their 1998 paper, referring to how the increased connectivity made possible by technology may counterintuitively reduce social involvement and increase loneliness. Are we in fact alone together when using social media?

My own research examines the possible negative consequences of internet use. I have explored how psychotherapists from around the world treat individuals who arrive at their practice with the problem of internet addiction. One of the 20 therapists I interviewed told me:

[My clients] actually believe people want more from them than they actually do. They certainly fear the sort of relentlessness of ongoing messaging … But concurrent with that is an absolute terror of exclusion."

This interviewee alluded to what is now known as the fear of missing out (or FOMO in text lingo): the "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent". FOMO is

the pressure to be ubiquitously connected and present in social media environments, switched on 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

FOMO may lead to the compulsive use of social media, which in turn may develop into an addiction. Research on social media addiction is relatively scarce in comparison to that covering gaming addiction, but in a 2011 paper I outlined the usage patterns, motivations, user personalities, and negative consequences of use and potential addiction.

In my research I've shown that social networks are primarily used for social engagement, particularly to maintain real-life relationships. Different people also use social networks in different ways. For instance, extroverts use them for social enhancement, whereas introverts use them for social compensation, suggesting social network use can have distinct relationship benefits for users.

On the downside, I found that using social networks may lead to less participation in real life relationships, as well as lower academic achievement, and relationship problems. All of these may be indicators of pathological use. This may suggest that moderate use of social media may indeed be advantageous; however, excessive use may lead to problems associated with addiction.

So where does this leave us? How about we put on our researcher hats and try a little self-experiment over the holidays.

Let's try and leave our smartphones, tablets, laptops and smartwatches in the drawer, if only just to spend a few festive hours attending to our family and loved ones. How about we try and resist the urge to live-tweet Uncle Dave's witty remarks and keep our followers up-to-date with pictures of our dogs in their Christmas outfits. Who knows, we might end up having a conversation without technology coming between us.