



Social media has become a *catalyst for the demise* of friendships.  
Are you a case study? By Michelle Bong

There was a time when you had to meet, or make phone calls and send texts to friends to find out what they were up to. These days, you just need to make your way to Facebook or Instagram.

Within the space of just two minutes, you'll have all the information you need: Christopher is overseas at a comic convention. Theresa made a kick-ass seared prawn salad. Cherry, Kenny and Antti are all watching the Mayweather-Pacquiao fight (albeit at different venues). Oh, and Sera rescued, and is fostering, a tiny kitten.

Ah, technology. Few will disagree that taking real-life friendships online has its benefits. Staying in touch, technically, has never been easier — social media has arranged many a long-overdue catch-up. Happily, it has also helped develop new friendships in an age of social capital, and a tiny city with only two degrees of separation between people.

All this is supposed to help us foster closer friendships right? Well, that depends. See, the problem with receiving friends' updates constantly leads to feeling less of a need to catch up in person with them. We already know what they ate/how they feel about a hot-button topic/where they've been on holidays. Hell, we've even seen the photos. While we know social networks do not replicate human interaction, why meet for coffee only to be on the receiving end of a complete rehash?

#### MIRROR IMAGE

Social media gives fast-track insights into someone's personality, often highlighting a side of them that doesn't always reveal itself through physical interactions. Newsfeeds have become virtual soapboxes for rhetoric-spewing or unapologetic whingeing, and a megaphone for

bigotry, self-righteousness and more.

Cases in point: A funny cartoon about a woman getting cat-called on the street can unleash rants about how women are objectified; a remark about the enjoyment of an Asian-American sitcom incites a withering response about Chinese stereotypes in the Western world. Angsty, much?

Then there are those who don't walk the talk. Some upload posts every few minutes, but have no time for a coffee with you. Others repeatedly insist "we should do drinks!", but nothing gets planned. Yet others regularly cry off appointments citing a repeated excuse — only to be tagged in pictures having fun at another venue.

Suddenly, you realise that some of the intelligent, confident, fun women you call friends are negative, close-minded attention-seekers — as far as the Internet seems to show.

#### INFORMATION OVERLOAD

How do we reconcile our online interactions with our offline ties, and minimise rifts and

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tensions? We should remind ourselves of three basic tenets when we communicate online with our friends (or even strangers), says Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS). These may be summed up in five words: Think carefully before you post.

"First, due to the mediated nature of communication, we tend to be less inhibited with our communication... and may say things we would not say offline. Second, there is no private space in cyberspace. Everything we post — a status update, a photograph or a comment — can go viral, especially if the content

is provocative. Finally, due to Web permanence, it is difficult to wipe the slate clean and hope that people will forget our transgressions," she says.

It's not difficult to see why failure to heed the above will go on to affect friendships offline. Researchers are already cautioning that Internet use reduces social ties and increases social isolation. And like it or not, online interactions continue to be deeply embedded in offline situations and social relationships.

NUS associate professor of sociology Dr Tan Ern Ser stresses that the two should be mutually reinforcing. "There is a continuity... One picks up from where the other left off. But conflict resolution has to be done offline."

#### DISCRETION, PLEASE

We're all human. We crave acceptance, and above all, affirmation, which underlies the use of social media. And we're driven by insecurities — be it when reacting to posts, or uploading posts that disguise contempt with discourse.

It doesn't hurt to do our social checks and balances. Friendships should be safeguarded, and sometimes all it takes is for us to pause and consider the ripple effects of a provocative post. If it gets too much, it's better to unfollow someone, or be discerning and maintain a lighter tone online.

In an age where social media is so entrenched in our lives and won't be going away anytime soon, what does the future hold for the state of our friendships? Dr Soon says, "We are seeing the rise of issue-based groups formed online among friends, and oftentimes among strangers. While some complement offline interactions, others exist independently of the real world.

"Regardless of its form and shape, our online interactions, when conducted with respect and responsibility, help build social capital. Online connections are invaluable in providing material and non-material resources." ELLE