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LET'S MAKE SOCIAL MEDIA A SAFE SPACE

By Life Conversations Forum, Aga Khan University

Over the last couple of years, Kenya has seen a rise in the use of social media. As of January 2023, the country had 10 million social media users aged 18 and above, according to a report released by [DataReportal](#). Content creators, media houses, governments and international agencies use at least one social media platform to disseminate information and news to their audiences.

Social media has also become an essential strategy for building brands by increasing their reach and allowing users to respond to content put up in real-time. Many are also making a living from social media with the mushrooming of content creation as a career. This is to be celebrated and supported.

In today's digital age, social media platforms have become easily accessible on our smartphones and devices. Many of us continuously engage with our screens, driven by diverse motives and interests. These platforms can be used for good but can also be misused and cause harm to others. Social media's positive purposes include communication and connection, spreading awareness, education and knowledge sharing, empowerment and activism, support and mental health, crisis response and humanitarian aid, entrepreneurship and business growth, creativity and inspiration. Unfortunately, it also has a dark side, including cyberbullying, hacking, addiction, anxiety, depression, isolation, and the fear of missing out, often referred to as FOMO. These can spiral out of control and affect one's mental health.

How, then, can we balance the good, the bad and the ugly of social media? The Aga Khan University in Kenya held a public forum with different actors to discuss this issue. Here is a summary of the recommendations:

Social media education.

In Kenya, the digital space is becoming an essential tool for learning, as seen by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Digital Economy's Investment of Ksh. 450 billion in digital literacy programmes in 2022. The impact on the education sector is, therefore, immense.



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Even as we entrench digital learning and the digital economy, the safety of children needs to be prioritised. Actions by different state and non-state actors need to be encouraged and supported. Agencies like the Communications Authority of Kenya, which launched a campaign on child online safety in 2021, have shown their commitment and urgency to ensure children's online safety as we experience rapid technological advancements.

Social media breaks are healthy.

Although social media has become a part of our lives, its excessive use can lead to negative consequences such as increased stress, anxiety, and reduced productivity. Social media breaks are essential in maintaining one's mental health and overall well-being in the digital age.

Taking regular breaks from social media allows individuals to disconnect from the virtual world, regain a sense of balance, and focus on real-life relationships and activities. Studies have shown that social media breaks can improve emotional well-being, increase self-esteem, and enhance overall life satisfaction.

According to a research study conducted by [Hunt, Marx, Lipson, and Young \(2018\)](#), frequent use of social media was associated with higher anxiety and depression among college students. The study also found that taking breaks from social media significantly reduced these adverse mental health outcomes.

Understand and limit what you share online.

Social media does not have gatekeepers who control the platform allowing people to comment and share anything without fact checks. It, therefore, calls for social media literacy as more users sign up for the various platforms. Social media can give the facade of near-perfect presentations of different people and brands, which may provide a wrong perspective of reality. Protecting and keeping personal information private is crucial, meaning do not share it, including confidential information like passwords. This can help to address the challenges of cyberbullying, hacking, and blackmail.

Use social media community guidelines to report misuse.

With escalating issues like cyberbullying, platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Telegram have community guidelines that outline how to behave and engage with other users online. Increased awareness of how to use these tools to report



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misuse is required. Netizens should prioritise creating a safe space and, at times, rally together to call out irresponsible social media use practices.

Seek legal action against unlawful disclosure of private information.

It is also possible to seek legal action against those who misuse social media. For instance, if one shares private and intimate content online, the victim can petition for breach of privacy according to Article 31C of the Constitution of the Republic of Kenya. They can also file for criminal charges under section 27 of the [Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act of 2018](#). This allows victims to seek justice and discourages further misuse of social media.

As more technologies evolve and new tools are presented to us, social media should be used intentionally as an opportunity to share and learn. Organisations and institutions should also create spaces to educate staff and develop policies and handbooks on social media safety. An example is the [Handbook on Digital Safety and Security](#) published by the Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK) in 2021.

Despite the adverse effects of social media, it is encouraging to see many initiatives aimed at making the digital space safer for people to learn, get informed, enjoy entertainment and even earn a living. Undoubtedly, social media can be used as a force for good when used correctly!