



Social Alienation in the Virtual Space

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Abstract:

The world is witnessing a rapid technological development that has greatly transformed individuals' lifestyles and the nature of social relationships among them. Modern means of communication have imposed a new form of human interaction characterized by superficiality and weak cohesion, leading to the noticeable emergence of the phenomenon of social alienation. This is reflected in the individual's feeling of isolation and disconnection from their surroundings, withdrawal from social participation, and a weakened sense of belonging to society. Moreover, economic and living pressures, along with individuals' preoccupation with life's burdens, have contributed to reducing genuine human relationships, especially within the family. The seriousness of this phenomenon lies in its negative impact on social cohesion, as it fosters individualism and the decline of social values. Therefore, it has become essential to confront social alienation by promoting human communication values, strengthening family bonds, and encouraging collective activities that restore individuals' sense of belonging and active participation in social life.

Keywords: Social alienation, virtual space, globalization, social responsibility.

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Introduction:

The issue of social alienation is considered one of the most prominent topics that sociology has addressed, as it represents an increasing and widespread phenomenon in modern societies, exacerbated by rapid technological changes. These transformations have altered patterns of human behavior and produced new forms of social relationships in the context of the emerging digital world with its various communication channels and social networks. With the growing reliance on these platforms, individuals have become increasingly isolated from their communities, losing their original identities and adopting foreign values and relationships. In this paper, we aim to understand the risks associated with individuals' unregulated and unconscious use of social media and its impact on psychological and social alienation, withdrawal from social responsibilities, and the decline of collective awareness.

First: Social Alienation

1. Definition of Alienation

1.1 Linguistically: According to Mukhtar al-Sihah, "al-ghurba" and "al-ightirab" mean estrangement; the verb tagharraba means to become a stranger and ghuraba' is the plural of gharib (stranger). The term also refers to those who are distant or far away. (Salah al-Din Ahmad al-Jama'i, 2010)

1.2 Conceptually:

1.2.1 From a psychological and sociological perspective, alienation refers to an individual's feeling of detachment from the social whole to which they belong. It reflects the individual's position in society

because of social sanctions such as isolation and rejection imposed for deviating from prevailing beliefs and traditions. Thus, the alienated person is the one who departs from social and religious norms. (Same reference)

1.2.2 In the modern dictionary, alienation also refers to the absence of friendship and emotional estrangement. (Sayed Ali Sheta, 1993)

1.2.3 *Alienation as objectivity* refers to an aspect of alienation that emerges from the individual's awareness of others' existence. When a person perceives others as entities independent of themselves—regardless of the nature of their relationships—this perception is considered by some researchers as one of the main indicators of alienation. (Salah al-Din Ahmad al-Jama'i, 2010)

2. Definition of Social Alienation

Social alienation is the individual's inability to socially engage with the customs and traditions of the culture in which they live, leading to a tendency toward isolation, loss of the ability to perceive life events objectively and rationally, and a sense of meaninglessness. (William, 2000)

2.1 Social Alienation in the Digital Space

It is the individual's feeling of social isolation resulting from reduced real-life interaction with others, excessive attachment to people within the digital community, and overuse of virtual communication platforms, leading to detachment from the real world. (Amina Said Al-Badwawi & Ayat Jibril Jabr Nashwan, 2024)

2.2 Social alienation is a state in which an individual feels detached from their group and unable to adapt to it as a result of excessive use of social media. This occurs when a person becomes preoccupied with and prefers spending long hours in their virtual world provided by social networking sites rather than engaging and interacting in their real social environment. Consequently, this leads to isolation and loneliness, resulting in the breakdown of many of the alienated individual's social relationships as well as numerous familial and social problems. Such a person becomes disconnected from their real world, overly identified with the virtual one, and detached from their family, community, and culture. (Previous reference, 2024)

2.3 The negative effects caused by the use of electronic communication platforms can, when used excessively or with abnormal intensity, lead to an individual's separation from others and from their immediate social surroundings — including family and community. This occurs as the person focuses more on virtual communication than on real-world interaction. (Faisal bin Saad Mohammed Al-Muneea, 2017)

3. Causes of Social Alienation:

- Weak family and social bonds resulting from dysfunctions within the socialization institutions.
- The emergence of the digital world as a parallel substitute for real life due to rapid technological developments.
- The generational gap that has caused individuals in modern societies to become alienated from inherited cultural values.
- Economic pressures such as unemployment and poverty.
- Social pressures such as favoritism and class divisions.
- Psychological problems that drive some individuals to withdraw and isolate themselves from social participation.

4. Causes of Psychological Social Alienation

According to Al-Zughbi (1995), the causes of psychological alienation stem from several factors, including (Salah al-Din Ahmad al-Jama'i – previous reference, p.59):

- The absence of religious and humanitarian values in the lives of young students.
- The gap between the culture of young students and that of the adults around them.
- The lack of meaning and goals in life, and the failure to achieve self-realization, leading to an inability to accept oneself.
- The contradictions present within the adult society around them, which cause young people to lose the moral ideals they can look up to and emulate.

5. Theories of Social Alienation

5.1 Karl Marx's Theory (Alienation / Estrangement): Marx viewed alienation as the loss of individuals' connection with themselves and with others due to economic and social conditions, such as the emergence of class divisions in society. The worker, in particular, loses the freedom to determine their destiny and to control their social relations. As a result, the individual feels a loss of self-worth and opportunities for self-realization, becoming alienated from the employer, the produced goods, the work environment (the factory), and the broader society (the social reality).

5.2 Émile Durkheim's Theory (Anomie / Normlessness): Durkheim's concept of *anomie* refers to the gap that arises from the absence of adherence to social norms, leading to a decline in social solidarity. This situation produces a state of disorder caused by the lack of rules regulating individuals' behavior and distinguishing between normal and abnormal conduct, especially in urban societies. According to Durkheim, alienation results from the disintegration of values, the detachment from social commitments, and the erosion of the moral and normative systems that guide and regulate individuals' behavior in society.

5.3 Robert Merton's Theory (Functionalism): Merton discussed the concepts of *manifest* and *latent functions*, as well as the *strain theory* (the gap between goals and means). He argued that social alienation arises when societies define desirable goals but fail to provide legitimate means to achieve them. This mismatch leads individuals to frustration and a sense of helplessness, often resulting in rebellion, withdrawal, or even deviant behavior — all of which are manifestations of social alienation.

5.4 Max Weber's Theory (Bureaucracy): According to Weber, *rationalization* led to the creation of the "iron cage," a metaphor for the rigid bureaucratic systems that restrict individual freedom through strict rules and procedures. This rigidity causes individuals to lose their creativity and autonomy, becoming separated from themselves and others within impersonal formal relationships — a clear form of social alienation. When applied to modern reality, Weber's "iron cage" can be seen in the *digital world*, where individuals become trapped by its allure and dependency, leading to further social and psychological alienation.

5.5 Melvin Seeman's Theory: Melvin Seeman attributed the occurrence of social alienation to a failure in social communication, which results from a set of psychological and social dimensions that lead the individual to become disconnected from the group to which they belong — and even from themselves.

These dimensions include:

- **Powerlessness:** the individual's sense of inability to control their reality and future.
- **Meaninglessness:** the inability to find meaning or understand others' behaviors and life events.
- **Normlessness:** the absence or collapse of social norms, often leading to deviant behavior.
- **Social Isolation:** the feeling of detachment and lack of belonging to the community.
- **Self-Alienation:** the individual's estrangement from their own identity and values due to overpowering external circumstances.

Second: The Virtual Space

1) Definition of Virtual Space: "A virtual world is something with the following characteristics: it operates using an underlying automated rule set (its physics); each player represents an individual in the virtual world (that player's character); interaction with the world takes place in real time; the world is shared—other people can play in the same world at the same time as you; and the world is persistent—it's still there when you're not in the real world." (*Richard Bartle, Designing Virtual Worlds, 2003, p.244*)

2) The Digital World: The term *digital device* refers to any tool that operates using computer language, such as smartphones, digital televisions, and similar technologies. The digital world has become the environment in which we live and communicate through its various channels, shaping modern human interaction and connectivity.

2.1 Operationally: The virtual world is considered one of the most significant products of modern technology. It provides access to a three-dimensional digital environment that mirrors and represents reality through interaction with virtual elements via specialized devices and tools. This environment simulates technological advancement and offers individuals a realistic digital experience made possible by various social media platforms.

3) Social Media: Social media platforms connect nearly half of the world's population, allowing people to make their voices heard and communicate with others across the globe in real time. These platforms have transformed human communication, creating new forms of social interaction that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

3.1 Operationally: This term refers to the various communication channels within the digital world that individuals use to interact and engage with one another virtually. These include platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and others, which serve as spaces for dialogue, information exchange, and social interaction in a virtual environment.

In the modern era, humanity has found itself facing a digital and virtual world filled with mechanisms of attraction and engagement, which have turned individuals into consumers of this world at the expense of their real-life experiences. In the past, people enjoyed genuine relationships and interacted within their communities based on a set of social values that acted as guiding norms for individual behavior within their social groups.

Undeniably, some of these traditional values no longer align with the requirements of modern life. However, others have played a crucial role in maintaining social order and regulating human behavior. Yet, modernization and globalization have created a parallel virtual world, inhabited by individuals and groups bound by virtual values and norms that conform to the new digital fabric of relationships. In this setting, the individual gradually detaches from *realsocialties*, which are perceived as sources of psychological pressure and social constraint.

The individual's interaction within their real-life community once gave rise to social relationships from which they have now chosen to withdraw, replacing them with virtual relationships that seem more emotionally satisfying. The individual perceives themselves as a stranger to their real environment, rejecting its negativity and incongruence with their personality and mindset. Consequently, they turn toward a modern, controllable pattern of interaction within the virtual world — one that fulfills their desires and provides a sense of privacy and self-expression that the real world often fails to offer.

According to psychologists and sociologists, there are several forms of alienation, each involving specific dimensions. Despite their diversity, they share common characteristics: (*Salah al-Din Ahmad al-Jama'i, previous reference, p. 64*)

1. **Powerlessness:** The individual feels unable to control their own destiny, as it is determined by external factors — most notably, social institutions.
2. **Loss of Purpose or Meaning:** A general sense of aimlessness in life and a belief that existence lacks meaning.

3. **Normlessness:** The absence of social norms that guide shared behavior within the community.
4. **Cultural Estrangement:** The detachment from the core values and traditions of one's society.
5. **Social Isolation:** The feeling of loneliness, withdrawal from social relationships, or a sense of rejection.
6. **Psychological Alienation:** The most complex form of alienation, characterized by the individual's perception that they have become **disconnected from their own self** and inner identity.

A. Powerlessness:

In the modern era, the individual finds themselves in a time of rapid and constant change, creating a sense of uncertainty and inability to determine or control their own destiny. To escape this confusion, many turn to a **virtual alternative world** embodied by various social media platforms, which provide psychological and social relief. Within these platforms, individuals build **virtual identities** that offer them a sense of freedom, greater control, and symbolic social value — gained through likes, comments, and interactions with followers across different social networks.

B. Loss of Purpose: This refers to the individual's **loss of direction and meaning in life**, leading to feelings of emptiness, lack of goals, and uncertainty about the future. As a result, the person seeks refuge in the **parallel virtual world**, which becomes a substitute for the lost real world. Immersed in this space, they unconsciously fall into **digital addiction**, experiencing an illusory sense of accomplishment that temporarily fills the existential void.

C. Normlessness: One of the major sociological themes explored by scholars such as Émile Durkheim, who introduced the concept of *anomie*, normlessness describes a state of value disintegration and the collapse of social and moral order. This condition arises from rapid cultural and social changes, crises, and the weakening of socialization institutions, whose roles and influence have diminished. The rise of the media sphere and social networking sites has further encouraged individuals to detach from traditional norms, replacing authentic value systems with artificial and superficial models. These new "influencer" figures have become role models regardless of differences in identity, culture, or belonging, reinforcing detachment from genuine societal standards.

D. Cultural Dissonance: Every individual holds a set of values and beliefs inherited from their society. Cultural dissonance occurs when a person is confronted with foreign or conflicting values and beliefs, imposed by global cultural exchange and media exposure. This clash between tradition and modernity leads to an identity crisis, often expressed through blind imitation of Western lifestyles and uncritical adoption of foreign behaviors and values. This dissonance drives individuals toward social media in search of cultural stability, where they construct hybrid digital identities that blend inherited and imported values. Such a fusion contributes to the deepening of social alienation, weakening the foundation of original cultural norms and behaviors.

E. Social Isolation: Social isolation is a state of detachment from one's community and withdrawal from social relationships — whether intentional or unintentional, physical or psychological. In the context of this study, it refers to intentional and psychological isolation, where the individual deliberately distances themselves from their group due to a sense of non-belonging, even while being physically present among them. The person retreats inward, avoiding real social participation and replacing it with virtual engagement in online spaces. These interactions offer a temporary sense of belonging and emotional fulfillment, which quickly fades after prolonged browsing, leaving the individual feeling even more disconnected.

F. Psychological Alienation: This form of alienation is characterized by the individual's sense of inner disconnection — feeling detached from oneself and from society, believing that one does not belong or resemble others, and that mutual understanding is impossible. Such individuals experience psychological emptiness, loneliness, and self-dissatisfaction, leading them to seek comfort in social media, where virtual acceptance serves as a substitute for real emotional support.

However, this dependency fosters further withdrawal from real-life relationships, replacing them with artificial virtual connections, which in turn intensify both psychological and social alienation.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, it can be said that the phenomenon of social alienation in the virtual space has become one of the most prominent contemporary social phenomena that reflect the depth of transformations in modern social relationships. Social media platforms, with their unlimited interactive and communicative potential, have contributed to reshaping the individual's social consciousness, yet at the same time, they have deepened the gap between the individual and their real environment due to excessive and uncritical use. The virtual world has thus become a symbolic substitute for real relationships, leading to the spread of isolation, withdrawal, and social distancing, and the decline of real and direct social interaction. Therefore, it can be concluded that, despite its communicative advantages, the digital world has become a parallel space that reproduces new forms of social and psychological alienation in modern societies.

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