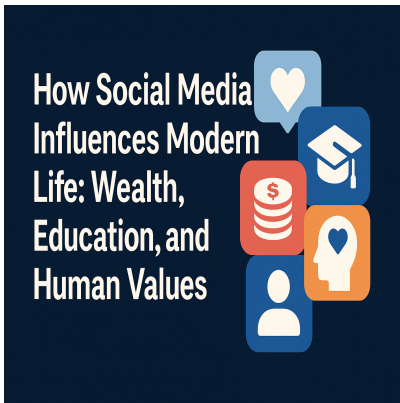




How Social Media Influences Modern Life: Wealth, Education, and Human Values

Description

Introduction

In the past, wealth and social recognition were demonstrated through palaces, luxury banquets, and political authority. Today, the new palaces are digital platforms, and the new sultans are influencers and YouTubers who display their cars, mansions, and expensive lifestyles to millions of followers. What was once considered excessive indulgence is now part of daily consumption in cyberspace. This spectacle reflects a transformation in how success is measured and how people define the value of human existence.

When we see influencers speaking casually and confidently before vast audiences, it often makes us wonder whether formal education still holds the same power it once did. A generation that is more interested in YouTube tutorials and TikTok commentary than in classroom lectures represents a seismic cultural shift. Education is no longer confined to the classroom; it has been absorbed and even surpassed by the digital stage, where anyone with charisma and a smartphone can command attention.

Similarly, religious life has experienced its own transformation. Preachers who once built their reputations within pesantren now find themselves competing with viral clips on social media. Sermons are often crafted to attract views, likes, and shares rather than to cultivate spiritual depth. If pesantren once represented the backbone of moral education, today its role is challenged by online personalities who blend religious talk with commercial advertisements.

This dramatic reorientation of authority is not accidental. Social media has created new spaces for recognition and wealth. What once required decades of dedication to scholarship or religious training can now be bypassed by producing viral content. The authority of knowledge has been democratized but also diluted, creating a new hierarchy where visibility trumps substance.

At the same time, this condition has left us with an unsettling question: what if we did not have social media? Could human society still sustain its values and systems without the influence of platforms that shape our worldview daily? Would we still value learning in pesantren, classrooms, and universities as much as we value instant content online?

This article reflects on these fundamental questions, weaving together observations about wealth, education, religion, and human values in the age of social media. It aims to highlight both the opportunities and dangers that come with a society so deeply embedded in virtual realities. Ultimately, the issue is not whether social media exists but how profoundly it redefines our notions of success, morality, and culture.

Social Media and the Shift in Human Standards

The emergence of social media has redefined what it means to live successfully. For centuries, wealth and social recognition were tied to tangible achievements—land ownership, academic titles, or religious authority. Today, those markers are often replaced with virtual symbols: the number of followers, the frequency of likes, and the ability to trend on digital platforms. This shift may seem superficial, but it reflects profound changes in the standards by which society judges human value.

In this context, disasters and tragedies—once sources of communal empathy—are commodified. A flood, an accident, or a social injustice quickly becomes a viral post capable of attracting sympathy but also generating income. This blending of profit with tragedy has raised ethical questions. Is empathy genuine if it is followed by monetization? Are influencers documenting disasters for awareness or for clicks and revenue?

These questions are not easy to answer because social media itself blurs the lines between altruism and self-promotion. For instance, influencers may indeed raise awareness of important causes, yet their rising fame also benefits their careers. What we are witnessing is the commodification of human suffering—where every event, no matter how heartbreaking, carries a potential commercial value.

In this environment, educational institutions struggle to maintain relevance. Schools and universities, once the guardians of human knowledge and values, now compete with platforms that reward entertainment over intellectual rigor. The authority of teachers and professors is undermined when students find more engaging narratives from influencers than from textbooks.

This shift also creates new behavioral standards. Success in cyberspace often rewards boldness, even when it crosses ethical lines. Bullying, exposing private spaces, or mocking parents may once have been taboo, but now such acts are normalized because they attract attention. The digital audience becomes both judge and jury, redefining what is acceptable and what is rewarded.

As a result, societies face a paradox. On the one hand, social media creates opportunities for recognition and financial independence. On the other hand, it threatens to erode the ethical foundations that bind communities together. Standards of morality, once rooted in education, religion, and family traditions, are now shaped by algorithms and trends.

This evolution in human standards is perhaps the most critical challenge of our time. It demands not only reflection but also action to prevent the erosion of values that make human life meaningful beyond the virtual stage.

The Double-Edged Sword of Social Media

Social media is often described as a double-edged sword because it carries the potential to uplift or to destroy, depending on how it is used. On one edge, it serves as a remarkable tool for connection, communication, and innovation. It enables people to share knowledge across borders, amplifies voices previously silenced, and democratizes access to information. On the other hand, it promotes superficiality, fosters addiction, and commodifies aspects of human life that were once sacred or private.

One of the greatest benefits of social media is its ability to foster empathy during crises. Natural disasters, humanitarian emergencies, and global challenges are brought to light through viral posts and real-time updates. This global attention often leads to quicker mobilization of aid. Yet, at the same time, the same events become commercialized, as tragedy is packaged into consumable content. Thus, empathy and exploitation coexist within the same platforms.

This dual nature extends to education. On one hand, students now have access to endless resources—online courses, educational videos, and digital libraries. On the other hand, the same platforms encourage distraction, replacing long-term intellectual growth with short bursts of entertainment. The line between learning and amusement becomes increasingly blurred.

Religious authority faces similar challenges. While social media provides opportunities to spread messages of faith more widely, it also incentivizes preachers to package their sermons in ways that prioritize popularity over depth. Religious messages risk becoming diluted when they must compete with comedic skits, celebrity gossip, or flashy advertisements.

This double-edged nature of social media requires what we might call *double-edged literacy*. People must learn not only to consume information but also to critically evaluate it. They must be able to distinguish between genuine knowledge and clickbait, between authentic faith and commercialized preaching. Without such literacy, societies risk becoming passive consumers of whatever the algorithm promotes.

Another troubling effect is the normalization of behaviors once considered unacceptable. Exposure of private lives, exploitation of personal suffering, and manipulation of vulnerable audiences are increasingly common. The danger lies not only in these behaviors themselves but in the way audiences reward them, making them appear normal and even desirable.

Ultimately, the double-edged sword metaphor captures the essence of social media: it is a tool with immense potential but also immense risk. The challenge is not to eliminate it but to cultivate the wisdom necessary to wield it responsibly.

Ways Social Media Shapes Our Daily Lives

The presence of social media in everyday life is no longer an optional addition but an inseparable reality. From the moment we wake up and check our notifications to the last scroll before bed, social media has woven itself into the rhythms of daily existence. It has become not just a tool but a culture, shaping how we think, speak, interact, and even how we perceive ourselves. The digital mirror of social media reflects not who we truly are, but who we want the world to believe we are.

One of the most profound impacts is how social media replaces traditional forms of communication. Letters, face-to-face conversations, and even phone calls are now often substituted with direct messages, voice notes, or video calls. This convenience has created an illusion of intimacy even across great distances. Families separated by continents can feel close, but at the same time, neighbors living side by side can remain emotionally distant because their interactions are confined to digital platforms.

Social media also changes how communities are formed. Once, communities were bound by geography, culture, or shared history. Today, communities can exist purely online, built around interests, ideologies, or even fleeting trends. This has opened opportunities for marginalized groups to find solidarity, but it has also fragmented societies into echo chambers, where people only engage with those who agree with them, reinforcing divisions rather than healing them.

The influence of social media on identity is undeniable. Many young people no longer define themselves by their academic achievements, religious commitments, or family roles, but by how well they present themselves online. The number of likes and followers becomes a benchmark of self-worth. This creates a dangerous cycle where validation is sought not through authentic human connections but through the approval of strangers.

At the same time, social media serves as a powerful stage for creativity and self-expression. Musicians, writers, visual artists, and comedians can reach audiences that were once unimaginable without the backing of large institutions. This democratization of creativity allows hidden talents to emerge. Yet, it also saturates the market, making it harder to distinguish art from noise, sincerity from performance.

The economic impact is equally significant. Entire industries have emerged around social media, from digital marketing to influencer economies. For many, creating content is now a full-time job. This has shifted career aspirations, with children growing up not wanting to be doctors or teachers, but YouTubers or Instagram personalities. While this demonstrates the adaptability of human ambition, it also raises questions about sustainability, ethics, and the long-term value of such professions.

In times of crisis, social media becomes indispensable. Whether in natural disasters, political upheavals, or global pandemics, it is often the fastest way to spread information, mobilize aid, and connect people. Yet, it also becomes fertile ground for misinformation and panic. Thus, social media is both a lifeline and a liability, shaping daily life in ways that demand continuous vigilance and critical thinking.

What If There Is No Social Media?

The thought experiment of a world without social media invites us to reconsider what it means to live as humans in the twenty-first century. Before the rise of Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, people lived without constant notifications, algorithms, and digital identities. Communication was slower but perhaps deeper. Communities were smaller but often more intimate. Imagining a life without social media is not nostalgia—it is an exploration of how values, priorities, and identities could shift without its pervasive influence.

Without social media, the measure of success would return to the tangible world. Wealth would no longer be validated by a display of luxury cars online but by contributions to local communities and family well-being. Influence would not be measured by digital metrics but by the respect one

commanded in daily life. The absence of digital performance might restore the authenticity of human interactions.

Education would likely regain its central role. Instead of being distracted by viral content, students might devote more energy to books, lectures, and discussions. Teachers would once again become primary sources of knowledge, rather than being overshadowed by charismatic influencers with shallow expertise. This could restore the authority of schools, pesantren, and universities as places not just of instruction but of character formation.

Religion, too, would experience a profound shift. Without social media, preachers would not be tempted to chase likes or monetize sermons. Their messages would remain grounded in face-to-face interactions with congregations, preserving a sense of sincerity. While the audience might be smaller, the depth of the relationship between preacher and follower would likely be stronger. Faith would be less about performance and more about practice.

On a personal level, the absence of social media would reduce the culture of comparison. People would no longer feel pressured to measure themselves against curated versions of others' lives. Instead, they would be free to focus on their own journeys, ambitions, and happiness. Privacy would regain its value, and dignity would be preserved in ways that are often compromised online.

Yet, imagining this absence also highlights what we would lose. Social media has given a voice to the voiceless, connected people across the globe, and democratized access to information. Without it, many movements for justice, equality, and awareness might never have reached global audiences. Thus, its absence would also be a loss of empowerment for those previously marginalized.

Ultimately, the question "what if there is no social media" is not a call to abolish it but an invitation to reflect on how dependent we have become. It is a reminder that while social media enriches our lives, it should not define them entirely. The challenge is to find balance, ensuring that the virtual does not completely consume the real.

Conclusion

The story of social media is the story of modern humanity itself. It is a story of innovation, creativity, and empowerment, but also one of commodification, distraction, and erosion of values. Like fire, it can warm or burn, depending on how it is handled. Its impact on wealth, education, religion, and human values demonstrates that we are living in a period of profound transformation where the boundaries between real and virtual life are increasingly blurred.

Wealth today is no longer measured solely by land or gold but by online presence. Education is no longer defined by institutions alone but by the reach of a digital personality. Religion, once rooted in sacred spaces, now navigates the temptations of commercialization. These shifts are not inherently negative, but they raise urgent questions about the sustainability of values and the future of human culture.

If success continues to be defined by followers and likes, then future generations risk losing touch with deeper sources of meaning. The human person may be reduced to a performer, constantly seeking validation from audiences rather than cultivating inner character and wisdom. This trajectory is not

inevitable, but it requires deliberate resistance against the easy temptations of digital validation.

At the same time, we cannot deny the positive contributions of social media. It has opened doors for creative expression, provided opportunities for new careers, and given marginalized voices the ability to speak to the world. In times of crisis, it has connected people and saved lives. To reject it outright would be to deny the profound ways in which it has enriched modern society.

The challenge, therefore, is to cultivate critical literacy—what we might call double-edged literacy. We must learn to engage social media with awareness, using it as a tool for growth rather than a trap for validation. This requires education not just in technical skills but in ethics, values, and self-discipline.

The future of society depends on how we answer the question: *what if not?* What if we choose not to let algorithms define our standards of success? What if we reclaim education, religion, and morality from the grip of digital performance? What if we use social media as a servant of human values rather than as their master?

In the end, the destiny of humanity in the digital age will not be determined by technology alone but by our willingness to reflect, to resist, and to redefine what truly matters. Social media may shape modern life, but it is human beings who must decide the meaning of life itself.