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**Discuss the role of anonymity and how this promotes discriminatory behaviour on social media.**

Social media is one thing that our current generation could not simply live without. Whether it is the ability to make and connect with friends across the planet or its seemingly bottomless source of entertainment, a growing number of people have been raised with closer proximity than ever to such a “social” media. There are however, clear and inherent dangers to the ever increasing role of social media in youths day to day lives: not least of which is the role of anonymity in promoting discrimination.

I grew up in a household that mostly favoured physical communication in place of social media. As the years passed and I grew more accustomed to the workings of the internet, I began to realise a clear difference in the way that my parents and I approach online behaviour. For instance, they often take offence to comments made on Facebook or Twitter, but I rarely do. I find that this difference in interpretation is to do with a kind of veil that looms over the younger generation’s perception of social media. There is that assumption that those individuals who act the way they do on the internet are just individuals with strong opinions and that in the rare to non-existent chance that you come across them in “real life” that they are not as bad as they were online.

What I just described was the effect of anonymity at play. We unconsciously assume a virtual persona as we become accustomed to the way others seem to behave on the internet and since even partial anonymity makes you assume you have severed any potential connection between the effects of your actions online, and your real life, you are able to unveil those potentially hurtful opinions or act in a way that is inappropriate if it were otherwise done offline. In short, people assume a kind of “virtual immunity” when they are anonymous where what is done online is different from what is done offline.

It is also because of that virtual immunity that discrimination in all its forms thrives on social media. Although discrimination is and historically has been an inevitable part of human nature, freedom of expression of all kinds as nurtured by a virtual immunity compounds that problem. And in light of youth health, that is a problem. In 1969, Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment was a notable illustration of the impact of what perceived power and immunity can have on human behaviour. In this influential study, college students were randomly assigned the roles of guards and prisoners in a simulated prison environment. The experiment had to be terminated prematurely

because the guards exhibited abusive behaviour, and the prisoners showed signs of extreme stress and emotional turmoil, highlighting the significant influence of situational factors on human conduct. The Stanford prison experiment serves as a stark reminder of the potential consequences of anonymity and power dynamics, showing how individuals can be influenced to engage in discriminatory behaviour.

The behaviour witnessed in the experiment echoes within the domain of discriminatory behaviour on social media. The anonymity online - much like in the experiment - can embolden individuals to express their discriminatory views. The virtual veil, much like the psychological distancing observed in the study, contributes to the proliferation of discriminatory behaviour, making an environment where individuals feel detached from the real-world consequences of their actions. Fortunately, internet discriminatory behaviour falls far short from what was observed in the experiment; nevertheless, it still remains a concerning phenomenon, especially as it is one that fits into the broader narrative of social interactions in the digital age.