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Social Media and Relationships: Hook-up Apps, Dating Websites, and Social Media Are Replacing The "Old-Fashioned" Way Of Forming Meaningful Relationships

<u>Introduction</u>

Are hook-up apps, dating websites, and social media replacing the "old-fashioned" way of forming meaningful relationships? Match.com, eHarmony, Tinder and OkCupid are just a small portion of the social media industry that promises dates, one nightstands and long-term relationships. As someone who has gone through the experience (and unfortunately, heartbreak) of forming love over control channels and the ping of unread messages, I have grown conscious of the power of social media and the interactions it places at our literal fingertips. After years of watching friends meet lovers, rebounds and spouses through varying channels, I cannot help but wonder how active social media has become on forming such intimate relationships and whether it is beginning to replace the "old-fashioned" way of creating romance. The rapid expansion of technology has left stretch marks on the belly of our society. My life-span has been approximately equal to the life-span of household computers and our beloved Amazon, meaning that in an unbelievably short 20-something years desktops became laptops, cellphones went from flipping to recognizing your voice, and the house phone is

practically extinct. Since I was born in the 90s, I grew up in an extremely innovative time period. I didn't have basic access to technology like children do now, but I still managed to grow and learn as the technology was evolving – I was in the first generation where the world was easily accessible anytime I wanted. Most of the generations above me adapted well to the learning curve of wireless Internet, and bi-annually changing cellphones and laptops. With the access of the world, came access to different people. Someone in Australia can connect to someone in Canada, someone in Russia can fall in love with someone in Mexico, and a child in England can find her father in California. "The introduction of dating websites, social media accounts, and phone apps simply make the process more efficient. In 2003, at least 29 million Americans (two out of five singles) used an online dating service (Gershberg, 2004); in 2004, on average, there were 40 million unique visitors to online dating sites each month in the U.S. (CBC News, 2004)." (Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006))

<u>Literature Review</u>

In Aziz Ansari's article *Love In The Age Of Like*, Ansari teams up with sociologist Eric Klinenburg to determine whether the multitude of access to romantic relationships through social media negatively or positively impacts the aspect of love in today's society. The article starts out by stating "38% of Americans who describe themselves as "single and looking have used an online dating site." This isn't limited to the younger generation though, stating baby boomers have the same likelihood to sign up for online dating sites. In fact "almost a quarter of online daters find a spouse or long term partner" through online dating. The pros of online sites and phone apps are then explored, explaining that when using those methods, someone is able to find a person

with certain "qualifications". An example given by the article is "You are a woman who wants a 28-year-old man who's 5 ft. 10 in., has brown hair, lives in Brooklyn, is a member of the Baha'i faith and loves the music of Naughty by Nature." In a face to face interaction, it would be nearly impossible to find this amount of specificity within a reasonable time period. This generation has little to no patience, mostly because we were raised with instant access. If you are a woman with this amount of necessary specificity in a man, you are left going up to every man of average height with brown hair, handing out questionnaires, hoping to find a match. The article then goes on to explain that the ease of access to "the best" has categorized us as "maximizers", according to Barry Schwartz's book *The Paradox of Choice*. This means that regardless of what we want – candles, tacos, *relationships* – we insist that we get best possible form of whatever we want. Social media grants us the access we deem necessary in order to find the best possible spouse, rebound, long or short-term relationship. Ansari also compares Tinder and traditional ways of meeting others (similar to how our grandparents met each other). Tinder is a phone application that accesses your GPS location, alerts you of potential interests nearby, and allows you to swipe left or right based on your preference. Anthropologist Helen Fisher states, ""I think Tinder is a great thing…All Tinder is doing is giving you someone to look at who's in the neighborhood. Then you let the human brain with his brilliant little algorithm tick, tick, tick off what you are looking for." In the end, I think this article leans toward the argument that social media is replacing the "old-fashioned" ways of forming meaningful relationships. The main argument can be found that while social media does have a prominent presence in helping to find romance, it is a

renovated form that has larger margins than the traditional way of finding romance. (Ansari, A., & Alter, C. (2015).

 Social Networking Communities and E-Dating Services: Concepts and Implications (Setzekorn, K., & Romm-Livermore, C. (2009)) has several chapters that explore online dating. The first focus is online dating websites and the rise of memberships. It was found that since September 11, 2001 dating services are increasing 10% annually in memberships. The article states that this is because in a time of national crisis, the desire to find a companion rises. University of Wisconsin-Madison sociology professor John DeLamater reports, ""Dating services help people who have difficulty meeting potential partners in their normal day-to-day activities…They assist people in finding others with their same interests." Essentially, dating sites have helped to ease the uncomfortable transition of meeting someone when moving to different towns. The argument that dating online compared to face to face dating allows both partners to be able to connect to each other on a "level beyond simple attraction" heavily applies to the pros of dating online. Since most people base their initial impression on a potential spouse purely on the level of physical attraction they feel to them, it can often be the outcome that while the match was nearly perfect on a mental and emotional level the physical attraction was not high enough for one or both partners resulting in a missed opportunity.

 The importance of 'Facebook Official' is something many relationships are based on. It has even gone so far as to become an utter joke, mocking the pressure placed upon the necessity of being in a "real" relationship by announcing it on social media. Since social media like Facebook, Instagram, and, at one point, MySpace are constantly

inquiring about your relationship status, it often leads to a point of awkwardness in a relationship that is failing or just beginning. Still, many people turn to these sites to find their soul mates. "Digital dating can be viewed as an example of a late modern solution to the challenges of embarking on relationship." (Chambers, D. (2013) Written communication through instant messages, text messages, and direct messaging through social media platforms is found to be an easier transition into a budding romance. The written communication offers both parties a slow, thoughtful, and controlled way of creating intimate connections. (Chambers, D. (2013) Gradually, if the connection continues to grow, the applications of Facetime, Skype, and face-to-face interactions. More commonly, now, social media is an important part of the formation of relationships. The percentages of Americans turning to finding love online are on a rise. Eleven percent of all American Internet-using adults stated they have used some form of online dating forums in an attempt to meet people online. Seventy-four percent of single adults report they have used the Internet in at least one way to facilitate some type of romance. (Chambers, D. (2013) 131)

Self-disclosure is a major aspect to finding love online. When looking for love online, you are expected to share intimate details of yourself – especially with dating websites. Even on Facebook and phone applications like Tinder, you are expected to disclose personal information. This information can just be basic, like where you live (Tinder matched you with potential interests based on location), your birthdate/age, race, and relationship status. All of these sites also ask for pictures of yourself. This information is key for getting to know one another, as well as for promoting intimacy. (Boyle, A. M., & O'Sullivan, L. F. (2016)) There are also concerns for potential negative

outcomes associated with self-disclosure, stating, "the content becomes increasingly superficial." In the research conducted by Boyle and O'Sullivan, they found "the time spent in person with partners, text messaging and communicating via the Internet were frequent means of communication…Video or voice-only calls were not common." Before social media, self-disclosure was thought to be a reciprocal action. Receivers would match their self-disclosure intimacy to their partners. Now, social media users can update posts and pictures that share self-disclosures with entire social networks (Orben, A. C., & Dunbar, R. I. (2017)). Recent studies have actually "linked online self-disclosure intimacy with increasing relationship strength." (Orben, A. C., & Dunbar, R. I. (2017)) Orben and Dunbar found that "offline an online intimate self-disclosures affect relationships similarly."

Methods

Interviews: For the research conducted, an interview of five women took place. I used personal social media accounts to find the interviewees as well as conduct the interviews. Griffin, Merritt, Callie, Kristen, and Renee were the options presented who were willing to talk about their experiences in finding a spouse. All five women were single and in pursuit of a long-term relationship. They are also all adults. The age range is from 21 years to 56 years.

- Merritt, age 56, used a social media site in early 2013 to find a spouse. They texted before meeting, and went on their first date in October of 2013. They then married in 2015.
- Griffin, age 33, met her spouse at work in 2011. They used text messaging, but no other social media to entertain their relationship. They married in 2014.

- Callie, age 27, met her significant other on Tinder in 2016. They started dating quickly afterwards, and six months into their relationship they moved in together. They now have an 8-month-old baby girl.

- Kristan, age 23, met her significant other on Tinder in 2015. They began dating shortly afterwards, and got engaged in June 2017.

- Renee, age 21, met her boyfriend on Tinder in early 2015. They met in person shortly afterwards, and it took about 3 months for their relationship to become serious. They've recently celebrated being together for a year.

Personal Experience: I met and dated someone for several years on MySpace. Our relationship carried from MySpace to Facebook to Tumblr. We texted daily, but were engaged in a long distance relationship, so we never had a face-to-face relationship. I am currently in a long-term relationship that began meeting face to face, then budding using Facebook messenger. After a few weeks messaging through messenger, we went on our first date. We are now going on three years of being together and have a 6-month-old daughter.

Readings: I did thorough research with studies on the use of social media, dating sites, and phone applications in relationships. The five academic articles used are the basis of my research.

Findings

Throughout my observations and research of this subject, I found that social media's presence in forming relationships is at a constant rise. With the ever-evolving

technology we have at our dispense, it only makes sense that SNS is frequently turned to by all ages in an attempt to find that 'special someone'. Social Information Processing Theory has its roots deeply embedded into this concept.

Before Facebook, Tinder, or eHarmony (so basically the 90's) the most common form of meeting a significant other was through friends. The second most common way was at a bar or restaurant. (Brodwin, E. (2016, September 12)) As social networking sites have grown, ways to meet new people were created. With the increasing busy-ness of the daily life of an average American, it can be hard to find someone with similar interests. Even for younger adults who don't feel the need to use dating websites like Match.com, eHarmony and OkCupid, phone applications such as Tinder are still placed at their fingertips. The access to new and exciting is too hard to turn down. In one of the interviews that took place, the interviewee stated "I was really tired of the guys in Rome and I was primarily bartending all the time and didn't want to sleep with clientele and locals…It helped me meet some really special people that had impact on my life…People that I wouldn't have otherwise met at all."

Social Information Processing Theory "suggests that people can form deep and meaningful relationships online." (Westerman, D. K., Bowman, N. D., & Lachlan, K. L. (2014)) This theory heavily applies to this concept because there is actual proof that people have the ability to form intimate connections through the Internet. I think that there are varying levels of intensity when it comes to those relationships, though. Take me for example; I met a boy when I was in High School who didn't live near me, so we chatted through MySpace and Facebook. I knew I liked him based on how well we got along. I was in a "relationship" with this boy for five years even though we had never

met. This is a rather extreme form of a hyperpersonal relationship. Our only source of communication was through written communication, so we quickly learned how to read each other's tone over messages, we learned each other's chronemics, we even learned the different typing styles we had for our different emotions ("Okay" meant we were fine, "K" meant someone was upset). The more rational levels of this theory would be in use through dating sites and SNS, where face to face interaction is encouraged after a connection has been established through written communication. The argument for SIPT is that face-to-face interactions and mediated computer interactions are similar, except for mediated computer takes time. The textbook offers the metaphor "MC is like sipping from a straw, and FtF is like gulping from a cup. If information is like the water in the cup, a person can get all of that water (information) using either the straw or gulping. It is just that sipping takes longer." (Westerman, D. K., Bowman, N. D., & Lachlan, K. L. (2014))

Conclusion

Based on my personal experience, interviews, and readings I have reached the conclusion that social media is heavily active in almost all relationship beginnings, and it is not replacing, but improving the formation of meaningful relationships. With the statistics finding that 74% of American singles have used the Internet in at least one way to facilitate dating, it is hard to come to any other conclusion. This paper has discussed benefits to dating websites, as well as the rising number of memberships to these websites, the efficiency of finding love online, the benefits of written communication at the beginning of a relationship, and how online and offline self-disclosures affect the relationship in similar ways.

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