

Chapter 12

The Effect of Social Networks on Relationships Outside the Network

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the impact of three different aspects of romantic discourse on social networks: romance, identity, and privacy. Qualitative research focused on the influence of the social networks on the opinions and interpersonal behavior of 11 single academics, aged 30-45 years old, men and women who used Facebook as a means for meeting potential romantic partners. The research employed semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit qualitative data. Results indicate that an intimate, romantic setting cannot exist on the social network. Most users enhanced their identity in order to appear more attractive online. Most of the interviewees clearly felt that they needed to control the exposure of their personal details, and there was a clear indication that privacy does not exist online: it seems to be impossible to limit exposure of the published contents to specific selected audiences. Online romantic relationships are a metonymy for rapidly changing values and social norms in a dynamic global reality.

INTRODUCTION

Technological developments have an indelible impact on the society in which we live, and their influence shapes new norms and rules. The Internet is seen as a world in which new friendships and support networks are formed, so that the user feels involved and supported. Nevertheless, this world often creates a fantastic illusion, and participants may feel a sense of alienation and loneliness.

The dynamics and interactions on social networks (SNs) create a new and varied world of online dating sites and “romantic” encounters. SNs have altered their original function and because of their unique features they have been used to form various types of interpersonal relations. Facebook is open

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to a community of users and yet it can provide the individual user with a sense of anonymity and invisibility, in other words it can seemingly maintain the user's privacy (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997).

The present study investigated how the virtual world in general and SNs in particular influence romantic interactions and interpersonal behavioral norms outside the network. The research focused on Facebook as a SN that allows the formation of social relationships between couples and investigated the opinions about the existence of romance and privacy in SNs and how SNs influence romantic relationships and social norms outside the network.

Two main questions were derived from this topic to underpin the research:

1. Which characteristics are reported by the interviewees and expressed in their Facebook texts as part of their romantic discourse in encounters between couples?
2. Do the interviewees think that the romantic discourse on Facebook influences romantic discourse outside Facebook and if so, how?

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Romantic Relationships on the Internet

The last decade has witnessed a revolution in the ways that singles meet other singles. In the “era of isolation”, the Internet offers displays of a wide array of eligible single men and women, allowing the user to form romantic encounters and helping to break through gender norms and to form new rules for dating.

The Creation of Romantic Relationships on the Net

The SNs help users to create a self-image (DeVito, Birnholtz & Hancock, 2017; Rettberg, 2017). Consequently, although the romantic connections acquired on the net may be intensive, this does not necessarily testify to any genuine reality. Couple relations on the net often create a fantasy for the user (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). The probability that two people meet on the net is insufficient to ensure that a relationship will be formed. However, geographical space is reduced on the net and this sense of geographical vicinity combined with imagination can help two partners to develop a relationship (Mayers, 1993; Halpern, Katz & Carril, 2017).

The feeling created as a result of the use of the Internet as a tool for acquaintance and to establish a couple relationship is frequently ambivalence. Although romance is usually associated with love and leisure the romantic relationship usually becomes commercialized and practical, contributing to its endurance. Network users today are usually individual, independent persons who seek self-realization (Illouz, 1997). They choose and evaluate their partners through technological means, thus, creating a new situation. This situation allows them to get to know each other through calm conversation at a time when it is suitable and comfortable for both partners. Of course, this conversation lacks the characteristics of normative discourse including meaningful components such as: facial expressions, body language etc.

The development of face-to-face relationships undergoes metamorphosis: from the initial encounter, based on vicinity in space and physical attraction, to the revelation of the potential partner's image and self-exposure (Illouz, 1997). In contrast the development of romantic relationships on the Internet space

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