Impact of Social Media on Romantic Relationships

Hasan Balci, Ilkin Safarli

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Abstract

As in all areas of the life, social media also have an important impact on the romantic relationships. Especially in the last decade, rapid expansion of the Internet, its reduced cost and increased accessibility of smartphones lead to an increase in the number of social media apps and users, which makes this impact inevitable. In this paper, we analyze the effects of social media in different stages of the romantic relationships including dating period, relationship period and divorce period. We also touch on the exposure of infidelities on the social media and give advice to use them safely. Our analysis[1] demonstrates that while social media can be an accelerator during dating period, it can affect relationships negatively in the other periods. Taking precautions to reduce these negative effects can be useful in some sense, but it does not provide a comprehensive solution.

1 Introduction

Do you want to contact with an old friend from high school? No problem, you can use Facebook. Do you want to share your happy moments with your family abroad? There is Instagram. Or do you want to group chat with your friends? You can download WhatsApp to your smartphone. Can you imagine a day without using one of these tools?

In the early 1990s, the Internet started to expand rapidly. The Internet had significant influence on various industries. As news became available on the Internet, people started to read them online. Reading news online is more practical, it can be accessed anytime from anywhere and in general it is free. Nowadays, the Internet media is about to replace printed newspapers. Some newspapers have already stopped printing and they publish their content only on the Internet [2, 16, 27]. Another industry that has been affected by the expansion of the Internet is the entertainment industry. Before the Internet, the main

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[1]Unless otherwise stated, all the statistics and analysis are based on data from the US.

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entertainment source at home was television. People watched news, concerts and movies on the television. But as high-speed Internet connection became affordable by everyone, the way people consume entertainment changed. Since the Internet gives people the freedom of choosing time and location, it is preferred over the television. The Internet has also revolutionized the way people communicate and connect by making it possible to create a platform for connecting millions of users in a cost-efficient way. Entrepreneurs and developers took the opportunity, and created Web services on which users were able to connect and communicate with each other easily. By the time, these Web services evolved into social media platforms where users not only communicate, but also share their life with other users.

Nowadays, social media is everywhere in our lives. It connects hundreds of millions of people to each other. Especially in the 21st century, with the rapid expansion of the Internet worldwide, social media platforms have gained enormous popularity and commercial importance. Today, only Facebook has almost 2 billion users and it has a market cap of about \$430B [21]. The number of social media apps is increasing every day and it is very easy to find one for every specific need.

Each social media app aims to help people by facilitating the communication between them with instant messaging or teleconferencing, or by providing easy access to many useful resources such as news, videos or audio contents. Besides its intended advantages, this enormously growing market, however, brings its drawbacks together with it. The personal information people share on different platforms decreases their privacy and makes them vulnerable to cyber attacks. Moreover, the extreme usage of social media leads to addiction and implicitly to health problems such as depression, poor sleep patterns and poor academic performance especially among teenagers. The increasing amounts of time spent on these platforms decrease the face-to-face communication and cause social isolation. Furthermore, these platforms behave their users as potential customers to make money by targeting advertisements related to their activities [10].

Apart from all these, have you ever thought about how the social media may affect your romantic relationships? Today, social media is widely used to find a romantic relationship, which is called as online dating, and also play an important role during and after this type of relationship. In this paper, we analyze how the social media affect the romantic relationships between couples. We will especially focus on the effects during dating period,

relationship period and divorce period. As a result, we conclude that while social media platforms help couples to meet and get to know each other during dating period, they have a negative impact on the marriage and leads to increase in divorce rates.

2   History of the Social Media

The history of the social media dates back to the end of 1970s. We can consider Bulletin Board System (BBS) (1978) and UseNet (1979) as the first examples of social media. BBS was a program that users could connect via their terminal and read bulletins, news and share comments with other users. UseNet was more like a discussion platform which users could discuss about different topics. It may be accepted as a primitive version of the today's Internet forums. Until the introduction of the World Wide Web (WWW), BBS and UseNet were the main media tools. As the WWW was emerging as a public platform in the early 1990s, it became much easier to share information on the Internet. At the same time, new applications known as browsers were developed to surf the Web easily. These developments prepared the ground for exponential growth of Web services.

In the 90s, the instant messaging tools started to become the new trend. The aim of these tools was to enable direct communication with others by sending instant text messages, photos or files through computers. ICQ (1996), AOL (1997), Yahoo! Messenger (1999) and MSN Messenger (1999) can be seen as the popular tools of those days. Beginning with the 21st century, today's popular social media tools started to emerge. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. became highly popular especially with the rapid expansion of the Internet and the extreme growth in the number of smartphone users throughout the world. In every second, 6000 tweets are sent [25] and 95 million photos are uploaded to Instagram in a day [22]. These statistics show the high interest of people to such tools.

The place of the social media on romantic relationships shows a similar historical pattern. The first online dating tool, MatchMaker, is started as a BBS for romance in 1986. Then, Match (1995), eHarmony (2000) and Ashley Madison (2002) are started as websites and became very popular in a short amount of time. Those websites were designed desktop users in mind. But as mobile Internet became cheaper and faster, users were moving away from desktops to mobile phones [6, 11, 12]. As a result of this, the

number of smartphone users was increasing rapidly. The industry responded accordingly and new mobile apps were developed for online dating. Badoo (2006) and Tinder (2012) are the popular examples of those apps. During this period, special-purpose online dating apps are also developed. Grindr (2009) and Hornet (2011) for gay people, Muslima (2000) and Inshallah (2011) for Muslim population, JDate (1997) and JMatch (2014) for Jewish population can be given as examples of such apps.

3   Looking for Love Online

Online dating is the popular trend for finding romantic relationships in today's world. Using it provides more and different alternatives to find the true love than using traditional methods. The user has the option of selecting specific characteristics and features of the opposite side based on its preferences. The well-known online dating sites use efficient matching algorithms that increase the chance of finding a good match. Moreover, these sites offer computer-mediated communication tools between matching users that facilitate the process of getting to know each other before face-to-face meeting.

Aaron Smith and Maeve Duggan from Pew Research Center published the results of a survey about the usage of online dating tools in the United States in 2013 [1]. The survey was conducted on 2252 adults, age 18 or older, via telephone interviews. It includes useful statistics to illustrate the evolution of the online dating in the minds of people from 2005 to 2013. According to the survey, there is a positive inclination in the attitudes of people towards the online dating over time. The number of people who know someone who used online dating increased from 31% in 2005 to 42% in 2013. Moreover, the 59% of the internet users agree that "online dating is a good way to meet people" with an increase from 44% in 2005. While the 43% of the people gone date with people they met online in 2005, this ratio increased to 66% in 2013. One of the main reasons of this positively increased attitude towards online dating is the mentioned advantages these sites provide. The increase in the number of online dating users from 23 million in 2007 to 45 million in 2013 [8] also supports this positive attitude.

Well, but how does this increase in use and positive attitude towards online dating affect the outcomes? A study from Chicago University with 19131 respondents tries to answer this question [5]. 35% of the couples married between 2005 and 2013 met

online and the marriages that began online are slightly less likely to result in a breakup. While 5.96% of the couples married with online dating divorced, this ratio is 7.67% in the marriages done through traditional ways. Moreover, according to the survey, couples married with online dating have a 5.64 average satisfaction score out of 7 compared to the average score of 5.48 for couples married offline. Furthermore, Match.com helped to establish 517.000 relationships, initiate 92000 marriages. As a result of these, about 1 million babies were born in the worldwide during 20 years of website's existence [23]. An average of 438 eHarmony members marry every day in the US as a result of being matched on the website [24]. These statistics show the positive impact of the use of online dating to establish romantic relationships and marriages. It is expected that, by 2040, almost 70% of relationships will be formed by people who met online [13] and this means that those positive impacts may increase as well in the future.

The other side of the coin is that in some scenarios, online dating platforms are used with bad intentions. Even though users generally have positive experiences with these platforms, negative experiences are not rare. One common problem is that people misrepresent themselves on online dating platforms. Unlike real life, it is much easier to manipulate the appearance by using photo editing programs or by using another person's picture as a profile picture. Providing misleading information in online dating profiles such as wrong name, age, profession is not unusual and in some cases even wrong information about sexual orientation is provided. According to Smith and Duggan [1], 54% of online daters misrepresented themselves in their profile. Another main problem is that in some cases, people are contacted in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable or harassed. Overall 28% of online daters had experienced such type of contact and women are more likely than men to be the victim of this type of contact [1]. Around 42% of female online dating users have experienced this type of contact at one point or another, while only 17% of men users have [1].

As discussed above, while online dating platforms can be used with bad intentions, if the users behave carefully and take necessary precautions, they can avoid ill-intentioned people on online dating sites. Although there is no direct way of determining profiles with misleading information, usually after with a couple of text messages and image interchanges, it becomes evident that whether the information in the profile is correct or not. In order to prevent contact by unwanted strangers, users can make their profiles

private (so that only his/her friends can contact him/her) or block that specific person. Moreover, we have similar issues in the real life: people get hit on by strangers and some are harassed on the streets.

Considering the fact that in online dating platforms, with the help of sophisticated algorithms people are more likely to find a good match among much more alternatives and their negative effects can be eliminated by taking proper cautions, online dating sites are useful tools for finding the right person for a romantic relationship.

4   Impact of Social Media During Relationships

Once people find romantic relationships, social media continue to have an effect on those people. This effect of social media is more likely to be negative rather than positive this time. At this stage of the relationships, social media starts to have a separative effect on couples instead of connective. As a result, it may cause a decrease in the relationship quality.

The way of a happy and successful relationship passes from sharing and communication between couples. However, social media can be an important obstacle in this way. The excessive usage of the social media may lead to the lack of communication and sharing between couples. The time spent on these platforms by one of the partners may disturb the other side. One may get the feeling that his/her partner does not give enough value to their relationships. In a survey done by Lenhart and Duggan [14], 25% of the surveyed people state that their partners felt distracted by their cell phone usage. Furthermore, some studies show that excessive usage of the social media causes addiction problems and consequently to isolation, loneliness and depression [10, 26]. Even a term called Facebook Addiction Disorder (FAD) is introduced by American psychologists to define this kind of addiction [29]. A partner, who has isolated himself/herself because of the dense usage of the Internet and social media platforms, can be an important factor for the other couple to initiate an argument. In a related survey [30], 85% of the individuals with the Internet addiction state that they had relationship problems because of the time they spend on the Internet. These findings show how excessive usage of social media can have a negative impact on a relationship by decreasing the communication between the couples.

Another way in which social media websites affect romantic relationships is through

jealousy. First in 2009, Muise et al. [18] brought up the idea of social media websites (Facebook) having a negative effect on romantic relationships by increasing jealousy. Romantic jealousy is an emotional defensive reaction which is triggered when a threat to the relationship is detected [20]. Jealousy is considered one of the most dangerous emotions which can destruct the relationship [4]. On social media platforms there are many actions performed by the user which can trigger or increase the jealousy of the opposite sex. On social media, users have access to an extensive amount of information about their partner: they can see what kind of pictures/posts their partner shares and likes, who are their friend and etc. Simply liking a picture of another opposite sex can result in jealousy. Having access to expensive amount of data on social media platforms, makes is easier to monitor the partner. According to a survey done by Sonja and Camiel [28], around 30% of users are likely to check their partner's profile on a regular basis and monitor their activities on social media websites. Monitoring partners give users access to every part of their partner's life on social media. As users dive into the details, actions of the opposite sex which may cause jealousy become evident and the jealousy in turn impacts relationships negatively.

While social media platforms and online dating websites help people to find a partner, some greedy users keep using these services for finding new matches even though they have one. A survey done by Smith and Duggan [1] shows that 32% of Internet users believe that online daters do not settle down with a partner, because they always have options for dating with someone else. It is not only those who are dating, but also people who are married looks for new "opportinities" on online dating websites. In these scenarios, social media networks make cheating easier and once the partner finds out, the relationship is over.

Of course, there are some useful points of the social media during relationships. For example, when partners are at work or one of the partners is away from home for a time, social media tools facilitate the communication between partners. These platforms can be used by the couples to share happy moments with their friends. In addition, partners can connect with other couples from all over the world to share their experiences and improve their relationships. Nevertheless, when we look at the big picture, negative effects of the social media usage outweigh the positive ones. Especially, when they are used excessively and inappropriately, the damages of it may lead to the end of relationships.

5   Social Media and Divorce

Once the negative impacts of the social media reach to dangerous dimensions, partners start to think about ending their relationships. Coming to an ending point in communication, increased jealousy behaviour between partners or being suspicious about the social media activities of the opposite side are some of the reasons that lead couples to divorce. According to a study [17], one in seven married people have contemplated divorce because of their partner's social media activity. What is more, Valenzuela et al. [29]'s study finds that the diffusion of Facebook between 2008 and 2010 is positively correlated with the increasing divorce rates during the same time period across the U.S. For example, when communication and sharing end between couples, they may think that there is no meaning to keep their relationships on. Moreover, if one side catches its partner while messaging with an ex or another person in an inappropriate way, this may be a serious reason for divorce. We can see a recent example of such a situation in the Ashley Madison data hacking case. In July 2015, the user data of the Ashley Madison dating site was stolen and revealed by the hackers. It is stated in a magazine article [9] that data of about 37 million users of the website was leaked and many people learned the infidelity of their partner. According to the same source, one in six US married men was registered on the website. It was also estimated that this case would lead to 800000 extra divorces in the following four year period after the case [3]. The social media becomes one of the important factors that lead to divorce, especially with its increasing role in our lives. These examples show the power of the social media in breakdown of relationships.

Furthermore, social media platforms have effected the divorce process. Nowadays, popular social media sites are routinely cited in divorce cases [17]. During the divorce process, both parties can request information related to social media accounts from the other party. In the case, this information can be used to investigate the facts relating to the issues and prepare for a trial [17]. Sometimes such information may not be available to the party due to privacy settings of the other party. In such scenarios, this kind of information can be retrieved easily with a court order. According to Mindy [17], information such as posts, messages and pictures from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and online dating websites are regularly used against the other party in court proceedings. This information from social media websites is not limited to posts, messages and pictures. Much more information from social media websites are used to show different kind of evidences [17]:

- A person's state of mind

- Documented communications

- Evidence of time and place

- Proof of spending or income

- Evidence of actions

- Evidence of who a person spends time with

With the help of social media platforms, gathering evidence has become much more easier. A survey done by Mindy [17], shows that there is an increase in usage of evidence from social media and 81% of American Academy Matrimonial Lawyers have used or encountered evidence taken from social media websites in divorce cases. Information gathered from social media is also used in child custody cases. What a parent shares on social media websites can give the other parent a cause to use it against the parent in these cases, even if the post is not illegal or the custody agreement is not broken. In some cases, this results in loss of custody of the child [17].

As social media has an effect on the other stages of the relationship, it also affects the divorce process. It weakens the relationships with different factors and as a result, it may bring the relationship to an end. Once the divorce process starts, evidence gathered from social media facilitates and speeds up the end of the story. Overall, social media is one of the main reasons that leads the couples to divorce, it also shows its effect during the divorce period significantly.

6   Exposing Cheating Partner on Social Media

While social media is used to share happy moments of couples, it is also a mean to disclose the infidelities and extramarital relationships. There are many examples of these scenarios in which a partner posts text messages, photos and videos that expose infidelity and cheating [15]. The general intention behind this action is to take revenge from the other partner by publicly shaming him or her. Especially, if the couples have a shared social media account or they share passwords of their accounts with each other, the shared one or the cheater's account is used for this purpose. In this way, the effect of revenge and the public pressure on the cheating partner increase.

The exposure may not be necessarily done by partner on social media intentionally. In some cases, hacking of online dating websites can also reveal these infidelities and extramarital relationships. When the amount of the revealed data and its publicity are considered, in these cases the effect can reach to dangerous dimensions on a global level. The Ashley Madison case described in Section 5, is an example of such a case. After the database was revealed by hackers, a website[2] was created to query the database easily by using an email address, name or last name and IP address. In such cases, the cheaters are exposed not only to the close social circle, but also to a wide range of people.

These public exposures can have both social and psychological effects on cheaters. Cheaters may feel disgraced and therefore isolate themselves from the society. Sometimes the society itself may exclude the cheaters. Moreover, the revealed information can also affect the cheaters' social status and career, and cheaters may be subject to social discrimination. In the worst case, these effects may lead to mental health problems in cheaters.

7   Advice on Using Social Media

Social media experts suggest some ways in order to decrease or eliminate the negative impacts of social media on relationships. This advice can be useful to solve some of the problems caused by social media usage or prevent a breakdown of the relationships by disciplining its usage and motivating couples to reasonable thinking. The important ones can be listed as follows [7, 19]:

- **Sharing passwords:** Sharing passwords mean a gesture of mutual respect and a way of ensuring accountability. It also implies that couples do not have anything to hide from each other. This openness gives them a chance to check each others' accounts when they feel any suspicious activities.

- **Specify relationship status:** Couples should specify clearly their relationship status in their profiles. Users who do not share their relationship status on social media websites are more likely to be contacted by others for the establishment of a possible relationship. Therefore, clear indication of relationship status as "married"

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[2]https://checkashleymadison.com/

or "in a relationship" is necessary. Couples can also share photos and videos that show them together to reflect their identity as a unit.

- **Establishing Boundaries:** At the beginning of the relationship, couples should listen each others' thoughts and express their expectations about the usage of social media. They need to come up with a mutual agreement in order not to have problems in the rest of the relationship. They need to consider some issues such as the rules for accepting friend requests, how much time they should spend on social media, how their relations should be with the people outside of their close social circle etc. Deciding and following rules can help couples to have a healthy relationship in terms of social media usage.

- **Post with discernment:** Before partners post through their social media accounts, they need to think carefully in order not to post something that may harm their relationships. Something posted that violates intimacy of the relationship may make the other side angry. Thinking twice before posting can save the couples from a lot of trouble.

- **Let your spouse know with whom you are contacting:** If partners share with each other with whom they are contacting on social media, this is also a sign of openness between partners. For example, if a partner contacts with an ex and does not inform the other partner in advance, once the other partner finds out this, an argument is inevitable.

Acting on the advice given above can decrease the negative effects of social media, which lead to jealousy and argument between couples. But this will obviously not prevent people from cheating who are determined to do so.

8 Conclusion

In this study, we evaluated the effects of social media and online dating websites on various stages of romantic relationships. While social media have positive effects in finding partners, it negatively affects the ongoing relationships and it is an important factor along the way to the divorce. They facilitate the process of establishing a romantic relationship by providing many different alternatives and suggesting likely matches with the help of sophisticated algorithms. On the other hand, their usage can be problematic during

relationships by yielding lack of communication, increasing jealousy and serving as a mean of cheating. Extensive usage of social media takes these problems to the next level, which usually results in divorce. Furthermore, the usage of social media as evidence in divorce cases has increased lately. Beside these effects, social media can be a powerful tool to expose infidelities and extramarital relationships publicly, which in return may cause social pressure on the unfaithful partner.

The negative effects of the social media on relationships can be mitigated by taking several precautions. These precautions can be helpful to alleviate several problems which arise due to the social media, but they are not sufficient to prevent cheating: at the end, its people who are cheating.

Consequently, while we see the social media as a useful medium to find a good match, we suggest that in other stages of the relationships, its usage should be limited and necessary precautions should be taken.

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Word Count

The word count without including words in this section and references is around 4620.