The Impact of Social Media on Romantic Relationships in China

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Abstract: The vast majority of people worldwide regularly access social media on their smartphones. The increasing popularity of social media has undoubtedly impacted people's social relationships and is gradually becoming a new hotspot for research in communication, sociology, and psychology. This study sought to understand to what extent social media has affected the emotional health and relationships of real-life couples, utilizing several literature reviews and factual case studies. The study's results suggest that an individual's likelihood of experiencing negative effects on their overall emotional well-being and declining quality in their romantic relationships was positively correlated with the amount of time they spent on social media. Social media can contribute to the development and maintenance of romantic relationships to a certain extent. However, at the same time, over-reliance and blind use can hurt people's emotions, including disappointment, frustration, and social comparisons. It can cause couples to spend less time together offline in a relationship, become distracted and irritated, and erupt into more conflict. An analysis of these results and their respective implications are discussed in this research.

Keywords: Social media, romantic relationships, social media applications, unrealistic expectations, social comparisons.

1. Introduction

One of humanity's fundamental needs is to form social relationships [1]. This basic need can be satisfied in a variety of ways. In particular, technological developments such as computers, the Internet and smartphones have created new ways for people to communicate with each other. Social media is among the most compelling new means of communication. Social media is often used as an umbrella term to describe a variety of online platforms, and facilitating the socialization of users is one of the most apparent commonalities between all sorts of social media types [2]. The growth of social media also facilitates modern romantic relationships, especially regarding the chances of meeting a potential partner and maintaining a relationship.

The number of Internet users in China is currently about 1.05 billion, and there are 1.03 billion social media users, accounting for 72% of China's total population [3]. In China, more and more people are using social media and sharing their lives through it, and once-private romantic relationships have become one of the objects of sharing. This essay explores how social media affects the establishment, maintenance, and change of romantic relationships in China. By analyzing the specific role of social media in relationships, such as ways of communicating and

emotional impacts, this study will reveal its positive and negative effects. Using literature review and empirical research methods, this study will present a comprehensive picture of social media's impact on romantic relationships, provide helpful guidance to people and promote the development of healthy and stable romantic relationships.

2.   Positive Parts

2.1.   Expanding the Social Circle and Increasing Chances of Meeting a Potential Partner

Social media has completely broken down the boundaries of traditional social environments, allowing individuals to make friends beyond geographical limitations [4]. Through platforms such as WeChat and TikTok, users can easily reach out to people from different regions and cultural backgrounds. According to recent studies, social media offers a diverse and open environment that effectively fosters cross-cultural communication, the broad dissemination of information, and the development of relationships and understanding between people from different backgrounds [5]. This function is essential because it supports exploring cultural diversity and pursuing cross-cultural romantic experiences.

In addition, according to findings in another study, individuals with lower extroversion showed higher extroversion and lower frustration in fundamental social interactions after self-disclosure on social media [6]. This finding highlights how social media can help widen the social circle for these introverts by providing them with a safe and comfortable environment to interact and get to know potential romantic partners more efficiently without the pressure of face-to-face interaction. A good example is the relationship social app Soul. The social software designed for young people labels users through personality tests and uses algorithms to calculate matches and recommend potential friendships or romantic relationships. Soul's anonymous socializing feature also allows users to share their moods and daily lives without the pressure of face-to-face interaction and to find a partner with whom they are psychologically compatible safely. Moreover, users can carefully consider their responses without worrying about their appearance when talking/chatting online, making flirting with someone on social media less stressful than face-to-face conversations [2]. Social media has become an effective tool for modern romantic relationships, which not only breaks traditional social limitations but also expands one's social circle and provides more opportunities for people from different cultural backgrounds and personalities to find potential romantic partners.

2.2.   Promoting the Maintenance of Long-distance Romantic Relationships

The definition of long-distance romantic relationships (LDRR) can take many forms. When communication opportunities are restricted due to geography and both parties anticipate staying in close contact, the relationship can be defined as long-distance [7]. Another more digitized definition of LDRR is a distance of more than 50 miles between partners, related to a decrease in daily face-to-face interactions [8]. Generally, LDRR presents the challenges of reduced face-to-face interaction, time spent together, and shared activities among couples.

Social media can provide a platform for couples in long-distance romantic relationships to ignore geographical limitations. Couples can listen to songs, watch movies, play games, share short videos, etc., through social media. even if they are not together in physical space, they can still communicate their feelings. A sociologist proposed the Interactive Ritual Chain theory, which states that there are four main components of interaction rituals: first, participants are present and able to interact with each other; second, boundaries are set for the outsiders, and participants are aware of who is participating and who is excluded; third, people focus their attention on an exact object or activity and know each other's focus by communicating that focus of attention; and fourth, people share a

common emotional or affective experience [9]. Some LDRR apps can work well for couples to enjoy interactive rituals.

Take an LDRR app Bind as an example, which provides a virtual space where couples can chat and interact with each other with a virtual presence. The software functions are used between couples without the intervention of outsiders, so it has a sense of privacy and uniqueness. Additionally, it has features such as movies and songs together, which allows couples to focus on an entertainment activity and have a shared emotional experience. According to the Interactive Ritual Chain theory, satisfying interactive rituals creates individual emotional energy and a sense of group solidarity [9]. It is relevant to positively maintaining LDRR and can provide couples with the pleasure of a relationship experience, as well as respecting and defending the romantic relationship.

3. Negative Parts

3.1. The Trap of Social Media Addiction and Unrealistic Expectations

People can interact with each other, express themselves, and explore common interests more efficiently due to social media. However, like a coin with two faces, social media's impact on romantic relationships is not solely positive. The digital world can be a labyrinth full of distraction, jealousy, and irrational expectations, posing challenges to real-world connections. The unreasonable and excessive use of social media to the point where it negatively affects the user's daily life is a phenomenon known as social media addiction [10]. When a person becomes addicted to social media, it can hinder the development of genuine, in-person relationships [11]. In examining the general characteristics of social media addiction, it has been found that individuals tend to have disturbing thoughts about social media impulses and cravings, lose self-control over their social media use, and spend an excessive amount of time stuck on (or thinking about) social media, which in turn negatively affects their social relationships [12]. For example, they may avoid face-to-face interactions with people daily. Thus, it is crucial to investigate how social media addiction affects romantic relationships and mental health.

According to research, social media addiction hurts romantic relationships because it can lead to suspicion and jealousy as well as encourage deception between couples [13]. In addition, excessive use of social media may impede the growth of in-person relationships [11]. Couples may invest more time and energy into social media and neglect their partner's feelings. In some cases, social media use reduces the number of face-to-face relationships between couples. It significantly harms the time spent together, as each other may be engrossed in their phones. This can exacerbate conflicts in the relationship and create more disappointment and resentment.

Simultaneously, when people are trying to compare their routine lives to the exciting lives of others on social media, they may fall into the trap of unfavorable social comparisons, leading to the idea that other people are doing better or are more successful than you (based on what you see of their lives online) [14]. While social media can give people insight into the lives of others, like some couples, it usually presents a carefully curated and idealized version of reality. It can lead to unrealistic relationship expectations as people compare their experiences to the carefully crafted images and narratives they see online.

Although it is common for people to base their hopes for happiness on the realization of expectations, doing so can often result in disappointment when one fully expects others to act in a way that fulfills one's desires [15]. Social media usually presents a couple's life with care, showing highlights and positive aspects to attract more followers and likes. People tend to compare their imperfect relationships to perfectly curated "social media-friendly" relationships, which leads to a comparison trap where insecurities surface [16]. Unrealistic expectations of love and romance cause dissatisfaction in real-life couples' relationships [17]. Constant exposure to such content can

exacerbate unrealistic expectations and lead to dissatisfaction and disappointment between couples. Moreover, it can also affect couples' mental health in several ways. Psychological discomfort and a general decline in happiness can arise from feeling inferior and jealous of what other people share on social media.

Psychologically uncomfortable people frequently have non-functional communication styles that are typified by highly negative behaviors like complaining, attacking, criticism, problems listening to others, and a propensity to end the relationship [18]. In this respect, psychological discomfort inhibits couples from having healthy conversations, and unhealthy communication itself can lead to arguments that exacerbate psychological discomfort. This can continue cyclically, thus hindering relationship satisfaction. An essential aspect of a relationship is that couples should fulfill their partner's emotional needs [19]. When individuals experience psychological discomfort due to social media addiction or unrealistic expectations, they will ignore their partner's emotional needs as they try to solve their problems, which in turn may lead to lower relationship satisfaction and cause more conflicts.

3.2. Internet Anonymity and Social Risk in the Web 2.0 Revolution

In the Web 2.0 state, the anonymity of the web encourages free self-expression, and this anonymity provides ample security. Social media sites like TikTok provided user-generated content (UGC) during this time, enabling people to join conversations and voice their opinions anonymously or semi-anonymously. People can reveal more about themselves and their emotional needs or secrets anonymously because they feel more at ease and free [20]. In addition, because of the Internet's anonymity, real individuals are less likely to be the targets of social criticism and fear rejection [21]. People can use the pause function, which is not available in real life on the Internet, to consider the message they are receiving and then respond appropriately, using a variety of symbols like emoticons, sharing links, etc., to express their emotions instead of speaking [21]. These traits promote high-intensity emotional connections and empathy, providing ample conditions for forming intimate relationships.

In these environments, the message sender frequently uses text to highlight positive aspects of their personality that align with societal norms, including having a good job, a fit body, or other favorable attributes [22]. The recipient tends to interpret the other person's behavior in a way that they find advantageous or agreeable, and there is a limit to the amount of information that can be learned from the text and a few images or videos alone [23]. From this perspective, the sender and receiver of information in social media are in an unequal position regarding information dissemination, which provides space for some wrongdoers to commit crimes. Internet anonymity makes accountability impossible so that people can engage in defamatory or criminal activity without fear of reprisal [24]. Particularly for low-esteem, low-literacy, marginalized people, some of whom are in desperate need of a caring voice and whose moral constraints may prevent them from speaking out about their situation if they are mistreated online due to their weaknesses [24]. In China, a large proportion of people are being forced by society or their parents to find a partner, which inadvertently increases the chances of being cheated. Because of the low cost and high benefit of criminal activity against this group, forging some identity information has increased the popularity of crimes like digital fraud in China's online community in recent years.

Criminals often use a staged strategy to perpetrate digital fraud on their victims, starting by creating an image that roughly matches the expectations of the marginalized, fabricating a story that fits their imagination, and gradually updating it as they continue to get to know their victims better and better. The story is constantly replaced by a better one, keeping the victim positive and expectant throughout the relationship. This continues until the con artist builds the narrative they want to use to solve the case, gets the desired outcome, and then closes it [25]. During this process, they frequently

attempt to win over the victim's sympathy by fabricating their sad experiences to obtain money, or they obtain crucial information about the victim to demand money. The technology of artificial intelligence (AI) face and voice change further enhances the authenticity of the virtual world in today's society of extreme technological advancement. Marginalized victims are more likely to believe that the "lover" sitting on the other side of the screen is real and credible when they see a moving object on the screen.

4.   Conclusion

This study has dealt with the double-edged sword effect of social media on romantic relationships. On a positive note, it promotes connectivity and enables like-minded people to meet across geographical boundaries, thus increasing the efficiency of finding the ideal couple. At the same time, it provides long-distance couples with more ways to maintain their relationship. On the other hand, the proliferation of idealized relationships portrayed on social media has inadvertently raised expectations of real partners. In addition, the prevalence of online dating scams in an anonymous environment has exacerbated the crisis of trust.

Social media's effects as a byproduct of contemporary society touch on various academic fields, including communication, sociology, and psychology. Researching how social media affects romantic relationships can foster interdisciplinary collaboration between these fields and develop fresh theoretical approaches and research trajectories. People's daily lives revolve around social media, which significantly affects romantic relationships. Researching its effects can give people scientific direction and advice on better forming and sustaining wholesome romantic relationships in the age of social media. Social media offers convenience, but it also brings with it a host of social issues, including false information, online violence, and privacy breaches. These issues are more common in romantic relationships and can cause trust issues, miscommunications, and arguments. Researching how social media affects romantic relationships can help identify the underlying causes and symptoms of these issues,and offer solutions and approaches for dealing with these societal issues.

While some theories have been proposed to explain how social media affects romantic relationships, these theories mainly build upon or modify existing theories rather than provide a new theoretical framework that considers all of social media's features. It may be challenging to fully and thoroughly uncover the intricate relationship between social media and romantic relationships due to the limitations of current theories in explaining particular phenomena. Subsequent investigations ought to explore the potential equilibrium between excessive usage of social media and abstaining from it entirely. Examining the variations in social media use between genders is another proposal for future research. Who has more idealized expectations, men or women, and who is more influenced by social media?

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