Manchester
Metropolitan
University

A Thematic Analysis exploring the Impact of Social Media Use on Romantic Relationships

Charlotte Mould

Supervised by: Jeremy Hopper   April 2019

A Thematic Analysis exploring the Impact of Social Media Use on Romantic Relationships

ABSTRACT

Whilst research considers the role played by social media in romantic relationships (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016; Vaterlaus et al., 2016), little focuses on potential positive impacts or opinions from sexual minority relationships. Thus, existing research may have provided limited findings into the impact of social media use on relationships. The present research aimed to explore the positive and negative impacts of social media use on romantic relationships, using semi-structured interviews of eight participants. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis in which three themes were formed: interpretation of online actions, digital trace surveillance, and formation and maintenance of romance. Findings suggest that the impact of social media can be both positive and negative, and thus, may affect the maintenance of romantic relationships. Furthermore, future recommendations were discussed, including the suggestion of dyadic interviews to obtain a deeper comprehension of the impact on both partners.

Introduction

The 21st century witnessed major advances in the continual development of popular social media sites (Edosomwan et al., 2011). To represent this particularly popular series of online platforms, the term 'social media' was coined, designed on the basis of enabling social interactions (Bertot et al., 2012). Although this term appears to be a relatively novel concept, the notion of interacting via the internet has existed for quite some time, with email services facilitating online connections dating back decades ago (Bertot et al., 2012).

Pew Research Center (2015) discovered social media usage to be exceptionally heavy amongst young people, with 90% of young adults classifying themselves as social media users. Similarly, it was revealed by Ellison et al. (2007) that 94% of undergraduate students in their sample were members of Facebook, a well-known social media site. With an ever-growing population of billions of individuals connecting to this online world, social media use is assisting and encouraging connections on a worldwide level (Hansen et al., 2010).

Differing from traditional media, social media requires user-generated content in which unpaid contributors voluntarily post content such as pictures or videos (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Personal information is shared with other users, often regardless of whether those users are close friends, acquaintances (Ellison et al., 2007), or even strangers, as the term 'friend' has a much broader meaning in the online sense, with users adding hundreds of people to their 'friends' lists (Utz and Beukeboom, 2011).

Wang and Wellman (2010) highlighted the role of social media in enabling the formation and maintenance of social ties, connecting individuals who know one another offline, as well as those who are unlikely to meet offline, with 22% of users having 'virtual friends'. However, only 15% reported that these online friendships made the transition from an online platform to the offline world (Wang and Wellman, 2010). Therefore, social media is changing the way in which individuals form relationships, interact, and thus, can be deemed beneficial in fulfilling the need for social connection (Kross et al., 2013).

Despite differing in quality and resemblance (Agnew, 2014), romantic relationships can generally be defined as mutually acknowledged ongoing expressions of affection (Collins et al., 2009). As individuals are now open to new ways of meeting romantic partners, with potential romance stemming from online connections (Blunt-Vinti et al., 2016), the impact of social media use on romantic relationships is fundamental. Relationships were found to be facilitated by Facebook as a means in which communication is enabled (Fox et al., 2013), and romance is initiated and progressed (Yang et al., 2014).

The impact of social media use on romantic relationships is an important concept to consider, as negative experiences in romantic relationships, particularly in early adulthood, can lead to problems in psychological functioning over time (Kansky and Allen, 2018). Additionally, improving romantic relationships has beneficial outcomes for individual mental health (Braithwaite and Holt-Lunstad, 2017), and declines in externalizing behaviours (Kansky and Allen, 2018).

Jealousy and other forms of controlling behaviour, such as password sharing, may occur as potential behavioural outcomes of using social media whilst in a relationship (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Jealousy may arise from the idea that online actions are deemed purposeful as "liking" or "favouriting" content is seen as a way to initiate engagement with others (Marwick and Boyd, 2014). Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) also revealed that liking a post from another user was a way in which romantic interest was expressed, subsequently leading to private messages being sent through the chosen online platform. Therefore, research provides a useful insight into how social media may impact romantic relationships through jealousy and controlling behaviour. However, this insight is limited as Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) failed to assess the sexual orientation of participants, thus it is unknown whether perceptions of sexual minority groups differ to views from a heteronormative perspective.

Additionally, it is important to note that the type of social media site may have more of an impact on romantic relationships when compared to others. For example, Snapchat is a form of social media with users sending pictures and videos, with or without text, to friends, that once opened, disappear within seconds (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Due to the private nature in which messages are deleted immediately and involuntarily without a trace, Snapchat has been found to be a cause for concern amongst numerous individuals, having negative consequences within romantic relationships (Utz et al., 2015). It is seen as a platform for sending explicit, sexual images to one another, without essentially being 'caught' (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Thus, interactions on one social media site may be deemed more impactful than interactions on others. Vaterlaus et al. (2016) provided a good starting point in revealing the perceived role of Snapchat behaviours in young adult relationships, but a wider focus is needed to reveal whether potential positive impacts exist, rather than solely focusing on negative impacts.

On the other hand, Utz et al. (2015) reported that only 13% of young adults admitted to using the site for sending sexual or explicit images. Although these findings could be a result of social desirability bias, Bayer et al. (2016) also emphasised the lack of explicit image sharing, through revealing that the majority of Snapchat users send mundane or humorous, non-sensitive content. Snapchat contains a feature in which an individual has a list of 'best friends', the users who they interact with the most (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). The best friends feature can induce feelings of jealousy and upset, particularly when a partner is not at the top of their partner's best friends list, as concerns arise from the private nature of this site (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). This research implies that Snapchat is perceived by many as a potential avenue in which relational deviance can occur. Nonetheless, not all social media sites pose such threats as Twitter, a microblogging site in which the majority of interactions remain public, may thus be regarded as less threatening in nature, despite users still having the option to send messages in private (Marwick and Boyd, 2010).

Moreover, social media has been found to encourage damaging behaviours within a relationship such as infidelity and flirting with others (Abbasi and Alghamdi, 2017). Clayton et al. (2013) discovered an increase in potential negative relationship outcomes including relational deviance, such as emotional cheating, when Facebook usage was increased. The recent use of social media in this way has led to confusion around what truly defines infidelity (Schneider et al., 2012). In the light of social media, although limited to an online world, online interactions with others in a

flirtatious, sexual manner can lead to negative impact on romantic relationships, including broken trust (Schneider et al., 2012). Infidelity can either be sexual, where one engages in sexual relations with an individual other than their partner, or emotional, where deep, romantic connections are formed with another individual (Frederick and Fales, 2016). Both types of infidelity are enabled through social media, from sending explicit, sexual images on Snapchat (Vaterlaus et al., 2016), to forming romantic connections through online interactions with others (Yang et al., 2014). As people interact through social media in order to maintain existing relationships (Young, 2011), the nature of these relationships remains unknown and discrete (Vaterlaus et al., 2016).

The ambiguous nature of online contact expands opportunities for dishonesty (Arora and Scheiber, 2017). Frederick and Fales (2016) found differences amongst gay, bisexual and heterosexual males' opinions on infidelity, suggesting that gay and bisexual men were possibly more accepting of a sexual non-exclusivity than heterosexual males. This suggests that certain individuals may be less impacted by their partner interacting with others through social media, but as research tends to take a heteronormative view, with predominantly heterosexual samples across much research in this field (Blunti-Vinti et al., 2016; Mod, 2010; Tokunaga, 2011), this pattern remains a mystery. Thus, it would be a worthy addition to current research to gain opinions from individuals of varying sexual orientations.

Moreover, social media users have been found to continually monitor others through investigating the digital traces they leave online, such as comments on a photo (Marwick, 2012). Social media is therefore a means of monitoring others, gaining information about their online and offline behaviours (Tokunaga, 2011) in a way that is deemed socially acceptable (Utz and Beukeboom, 2011). Monitoring behaviour is facilitated and somewhat normalised through the sharing of passwords as a common, expected sign of trust and commitment to one's partner (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). What would have once been deemed unnecessary and excessive, is now deemed to be typical, standard behaviour (Andrejevic, 2002). As interactions between users can be seen, and often interpreted as threatening, this leads to jealousy within relationships and a desire to further investigate these interactions (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Muise et al. (2009) proposed the existence of a feedback loop whereby ambiguous information that individuals see on social media creates suspicion, subsequently leading to jealousy, which then leads to more profile visits to gain further information. However, Muise et al. (2009) discovered this feedback loop to be common in Facebook users and thus, whether this behaviour exists within other social media platforms is unknown.

On the other hand, social media may have beneficial impacts in that certain individuals experience increased happiness and a sense of certainty within their relationships through public expressions of love, such as posting photos of a romantic partner (Mod, 2010). These public displays of affection were seen as progressive steps in relationships and as a way of deterring others from flirting (Mod, 2010). Unlike other research, Mod (2010) provided an insight into the positive impact that social media has on relationships. However, like much of the other research discussed, there is a sole focus on the impact of Facebook alone and a sample consisting of heterosexual individuals only. Thus, it is unknown whether other social media platforms and differing sexualities would generate similar results.

Sternberg (1986) proposed The Triangular Theory of Love in that different combinations of the three main components; passion, intimacy, and commitment, form 8 different types of love. These types of love include consummate love, or in other words, complete love, consisting of all three components, or non-love, referring to an absence of all three components (Sternberg, 1986). Thus, if one component is affected, the type of love the relationship holds is also affected. With regards to social media, it could potentially restrict or enable the experience of complete love, a love that many individuals strive to achieve (Sternberg, 1986).

With new social media gaining popularity (Vaterlaus et al., 2016), and much of current research focusing exclusively on one social media site in particular, such as Facebook (Muise et al., 2009), findings may be limited. The rationale for the current study will therefore be to focus on social media as a whole, acknowledging whether various social media sites provoke different impacts. Research also tends to focus largely on negative aspects of social media (Abbasi and Alghamdi, 2017; Clayton et al., 2013; Muise et al., 2009). Therefore, the present research recognised the importance of widening the focus to allow participants to reveal both positive and negative impacts of social media. Across much of the research discussed there is gap in that often a heteronormative perspective is taken (Blunti-Vinti et al., 2016; Mod, 2010; Tokunaga, 2011). Thus, the current study will set out to consider the impact of social media amongst relationships of varying sexual orientations. Therefore, the current research aims to gain an insight into the positive and negative impacts of social media use on romantic relationships.

The research question for the present study is:
"How does social media use have an impact on romantic relationships?"

Method

Participants
An opportunity sample recruited 4 male students and 4 female students, between the ages of 19 and 23 years old, from Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Subjects were sent an email with a participant information sheet attached, inviting them to participate in the study (See appendix 9). The sample size was deemed adequate as qualitative sample sizes tend to be smaller (Dworkin, 2012), with as little as 5 participants producing large enough volumes of data (Ayres, 2007). As research needed to account for varying sexual orientations, the sample consisted of one bisexual male, one gay male, two heterosexual males, one bisexual female, one gay female, and two heterosexual females, who were known to the researcher through mutual friends. The inclusion criteria required participants to be active users of at least one social media site and currently be in a romantic relationship. The exclusion criteria were therefore anyone whose marital status were single, and individuals who were not active users of at least one social media site. The reasons for these criteria were that single participants may give biased opinions when reflecting upon past relationships or be unable to reflect at all depending on relationship history. Additionally, nonusers of social media could not provide detail on its impact.

Data Collection

The present study adopted an interpretivist epistemological position in which reality is seen as a socially constructed concept, formed through individuals making sense of their own social realities (Tuli, 2010). To explore how social media use impacts romantic relationships, the data collection method deemed most suitable in answering this research question was qualitative semi-structured interviewing (Banister et al., 2011). This method was fundamental in gaining extensive, high quality data by enabling participants to reveal their experiences, opinions, and perceptions (Peters and Halcomb, 2015) through open-ended questioning and follow-up queries (Adams, 2015). This flexible conversation allows interesting matters to be followed up so that the breadth of information being collected and analysed, is increased (Adams, 2015).

Initial exploration of research by Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) provided ideas for potential questioning as their study investigated the role of social networking in young adult romantic relationships. The interview schedule (See appendix 6) consisted of 12 pre-determined questions regarding information about participant's experiences of social media use within relationships, such as 'Can you describe how important you think it is for your partner to post photos of you on social media?' and 'What is your attitude towards the surveillance of a partner's social media?'. Alongside planned questions, spontaneous questioning was implemented to develop answers further and gain additional information. Awkward questions were asked nearer the end of interviews as this was deemed essential in allowing time for a rapport to be built with the researcher, enabling the participant to feel more comfortable and confident in their answers being of genuine interest (Adams, 2015). Participants were interviewed within their chosen environment, with all 8 participants choosing their home as their preferred setting. This increased familiarity and convenience, creating a relaxed environment for free-flowing conversation. A total of 8 semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes long, were conducted and transcribed verbatim (see appendix 7). It was considered essential to use verbatim transcription for analysing and interpreting verbal data (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006). Interviews were recorded using an iPhone, and recordings were deleted once transcribed onto a password protected laptop.

Data Analysis

The analysis method used in the present study was thematic analysis, a means in which the researcher can identify key themes that arise within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and the frequency in which they arise (Joffe and Yardley, 2004). This method requires the researcher to scrutinise the transcripts and identify areas of interest that arise during the interview in order to organise data into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was deemed the most suitable method for identifying and summarising key aspects of the data. An inductive data-driven approach to thematic analysis was adopted, acquiring semantic themes from explicit, surface meanings of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was carried out in accordance with the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process required familiarisation with the data, followed by a generation of codes such as 'lack of trust' and 'monitoring behaviour' (See appendix 7). From these

codes, the researcher carefully searched for themes. Themes were refined, labelled, and later reviewed and defined with the use of a thematic map (See appendix 8).

Ethics

Numerous ethical considerations were of particular relevance to this study (See appendix 1). Informed consent was gained through consent forms (See appendix 3) and participant information sheets (See appendix 4) given prior to the interview. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw were addressed clearly at the start of the interview and although the extent of confidentiality was limited as the analysis required discussion of participants' answers, names were replaced by pseudonyms to respect anonymity. Upon completion of the interview, participants were thanked and given a debriefing information sheet (see appendix 5). In the unlikely event of a participant becoming emotional during the interview, the protocol would be for the researcher to offer support and provide the subject with the opportunity to discontinue the interview or take a break. Thus, the current study was carried out in accordance with The British Psychological Society (2018) ethical guidelines and those set out by MMU (See appendix 1).

Analysis and Discussion

A thematic analysis looked at gaining an understanding of the impact of social media use on romantic relationships. From analysing the data, three distinct themes were assembled: interpretation of online actions, digital trace surveillance, and formation and maintenance of romance. These three themes are detailed below, with supporting interview segments and references to appropriate research and theory throughout.
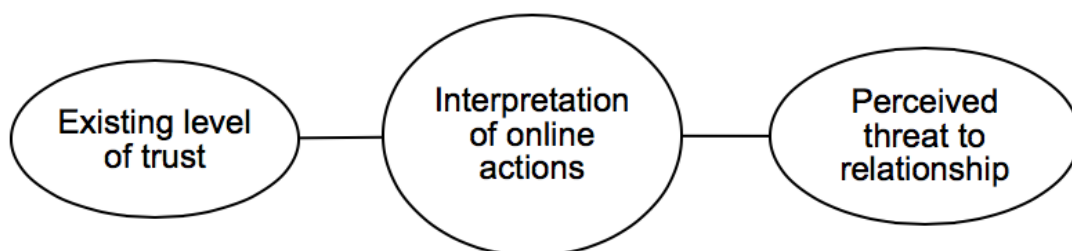
Interpretation of online actions

Figure 1: A visual overview of the thematic refinement of the theme 'Interpretation of online actions'.

Participants expressed mutual confusion when interpreting online actions, often inferring these actions in relation to existing levels of trust and the perceived threat to the relationship. Due to the ambiguous nature of online behaviours, the motives and outcomes of online actions remain unknown.

Several participants considered online actions to be purposeful, and often interpreted these actions negatively, evoking feelings of jealousy and upset.

> *"... I really do trust him, but it just makes me feel a bit shit when he's liking someone else's photo."* (Penelope, lines 119-120).

> *"... It's weird because I do trust him but if he's liking someone else's photo he's obviously trying to get their attention."* (Ken, lines 188-189).

> *"... If you fancy someone then you tend to like a lot of their posts, so obviously if my girlfriend likes another girl's photo it's going to be a cause for concern because she obviously fancies them more than me"* (Lucy, lines 82-84).

Participants experienced feelings of jealousy and a change in mood when witnessing their partners interactions with others, regardless of existing levels of trust. In accordance with findings from Marwick and Boyd (2014), participants considered 'liking' to be purposeful, as a way to gain someone's attention. Participants believed they could interpret underlying motives for online actions, and subsequently deemed these actions to be threatening.

Furthermore, Lucy expressed a belief that 'liking' someone's photo was suggestive of her partner being more attracted to others. This could have a detrimental impact on the relationship, as the passion component of love may be missing if she feels that her partner is no longer as attracted to her, meaning that complete love is unachievable (Sternberg, 1986). Additionally, Zurbriggen et al. (2016) similarly revealed the nature in which interactions on social media are widely visible, suggesting that sensitive management of online interactions is crucial for the progression of blossoming relationships.

On the other hand, other participants believed that interpreting online actions in a negative way suggested that there were no existing levels of trust and that to consider this behaviour as an action of infidelity was wrong.

> *"I think accusing a partner of doing wrong just for liking someone's photo is ridiculous. There's obviously no trust there."* (Bethany, lines 55-56).

> *"It pisses me off when she questions me about why I've added this person or that person because it's like what reason is there not to trust me?"* (Pierre, lines 35-36).

Pierre and Bethany both expressed frustrations around how individuals respond to interactions with others online with suspicions of dishonesty as a default response, regardless of trust. This finding supports research by Muise et al. (2009) in that online information remains ambiguous, generating suspicion and a desire to seek further information.

However, these responses challenge findings from Darvell et al. (2011), which imply that trust plays a major role in the investigation of online actions, with less trust in one's partner resulting in an increased number of investigations of online behaviour. Nevertheless, a response from one participant does suggest agreement with these findings.

"I'd say my girls quite chill. We've been together so long now I think we both just completely trust each other by this point..." (Roger, lines 38-39).

Roger expressed a sense of contentment and security that comes with a long- term relationship and that suspicions around online actions rely on the level of trust. As Sternberg (1986) expressed the importance of the commitment component of love, the solidification of this component through high levels of trust is a vital element in gaining consummate love.

On the other hand, Jacline expressed how her suspicions resulted in discovering her partner's infidelity.

"Well I had my suspicions because she was at the top of his best friends. Then two weeks later I found out he'd cheated on me with her." (Jacline, lines 88-89).

Arora and Schieber (2017) expressed that the nature of social media expands opportunities for dishonesty, thus, Jacline provided supportive evidence implying the use of social media as a means to be dishonest and unfaithful in romantic relationships.

Similarly, another participant revealed a situation in which social media facilitated such dishonesty.

"My girlfriend sent me a screenshot once of a girl's photo and asked me why I'd liked it. I didn't really know the answer but there was no malicious intent like she was making out. I have to try be understanding because she was cheated on in her past relationship and I think she's just paranoid about these things." (Mike, lines 109-112).

Mike implied that the influence of past relationships plays a role in the misinterpretation of online actions. If the commitment component of love is threatened through the use of social media as a means of facilitating infidelity, then complete love is not possible (Sternberg, 1986).

Overall, the interpretation of online actions is often harmful for romantic relationships, highlighting broken trust and hindering chances of attaining complete love (Sternberg, 1986).

Digital trace surveillance

Figure 2: A visual overview of the thematic refinement of the theme 'Digital trace surveillance'.

A common matter discussed by participants was the surveillance of digital traces. The reaction to new features including Snapchat location, and the invasion of privacy, were both frequently discussed with regards to digital trace surveillance.

Several female participants implied the surveillance of online behaviours to be a common, every day behaviour, that can be indicative of underlying issues.

> ***"I quite often look at when she was last active because say she's online, but she hasn't replied to me yet then there's obviously an issue."*** (Lucy, lines 53-54)

> ***"...I would know he was ignoring me if his score went up because that would mean he was replying to others and not me...."*** (Penelope, lines 56-58).

> ***"... I'll use my ex-boyfriend as an example. I would see different girls on his snapchat best friends all the time and his score would go up when he wasn't replying to me. That's how I knew something was up. It wasn't nice knowing he was giving other people attention..."*** (Jacline, lines 58-61).

Jacline had a particular tendency to monitor the best friend feature and snapchat score, coming to her own conclusions about not getting the same attention as others. This finding supports research by Vaterlaus (2016) as the best friend feature was found to induce feelings of jealousy and upset. Numerous participants demonstrated a tendency to adopt monitoring behaviours to see when their partner was online. There was a common belief amongst these participants that if their partner was online but not responding to their messages, then they were being ignored. These opinions were suggestive of unwritten rules about what the features of social media meant, with many behaviours highlighting underlying issues. The use of monitoring these features revealed information about offline behavioural intent, supporting Tokunaga's (2011) idea of monitoring behaviour as a means of gaining information about both online and offline behaviours.

Similarly, Ken expressed that he also habitually looked at the location feature for information about whether he was being ignored.

> ***"I'm quite bad for looking at his location...it tells you when they were last seen and where... if we'd had an argument, I'd know he was ignoring me if he'd been seen recently.*** (Ken, lines 23-25).

However, Ken implied that he did not consider this behaviour acceptable, thus contradicting findings from Utz and Beukeboom (2011) that discovered surveillance to be considered socially acceptable. This routine surveillance of behaviour poses a threat to the commitment component of love (Sternberg 1986) as participants doubt their partners commitment to the relationship. Commitment has been found to be an extremely important component in romantic relationships, as a longitudinal analysis

by Dush and Amato (2005) revealed that the shift into a more committed relationship resulted in improvements in subjective well-being.

Similarly, another participant acknowledged the invasion of privacy that comes with the surveillance of online behaviours but deemed this behaviour habitual.

> **"I feel like it's very invasive when people look at what their partners doing all the time, but it is a habit. Like I'll do it without thinking."** (Bethany, 146- 147).

Bethany believed surveillance to be invasive yet compulsive, as almost part of her daily routine, supporting findings from Marwick (2012), emphasising how monitoring of digital traces is habitual and continual.

The majority of male participants tended to have differing opinions. Rather than considering surveillance as a typical behaviour, it was deemed quite harmful, and a sign of underlying problems within the relationship.

> **"There's just no way I'd ever let her have my password. I'm not hiding anything obviously I just think that's well possessive."** (Mike, lines 48- 49).

Mike expressed that although his online actions were innocent, rather than revealing his password to prove this, he felt this was detrimental, therefore contradicting the idea that sharing passwords is common and expected (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Nonetheless, this finding does agree with the idea from Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) that the sharing of passwords was a behaviour representative of trust.

Similarly, Pierre highlighted the importance of privacy, and how it is limited due to the nature of social media.

> **"I do think that some privacy is important, because you still need to be your own person. But you can't stop them from seeing what you do on social media unless it's through private messages. Otherwise, it's easy to see who someone's interacting with."** (Pierre, lines 123-125).

Pierre emphasised the restriction of privacy within social media, providing support for research from Arora and Schieber (2017) as they discovered a tendency for individuals to deem privacy to only be of importance when with regards to private messages. As messages remain private, digital traces remain ambiguous, and it is this ambiguity that can influence feelings of jealousy within romantic relationships (Muise et al., 2009).

> **"People get obsessive with checking their partner's location or seeing when they were last online. I think if someone's doing that then the relationship clearly won't last."** (Roger 170-172).

Roger noted that the surveillance of digital traces becomes obsessive and detrimental to the relationship. This implies the existence of a feedback loop as

proposed by Muise et al. (2009) with suspicion leading to frequent profile visits across numerous social media sites.

Generally, the responses demonstrated differing opinions between genders regarding the surveillance of digital traces, as the majority of female participants were more accepting of this behaviour, yet male participants were commonly against. This finding is in accordance with Muise et al. (2014) as they discovered the existence of gender differences in that women engaged in monitoring behaviour more than men.
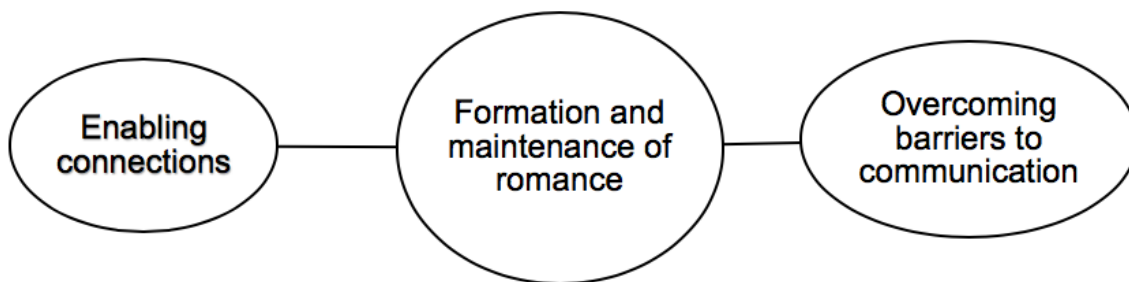
Formation and maintenance of romance

Figure 3: A visual overview of the thematic refinement of the theme 'formation and maintenance of romance'

A further impact, which the majority of participant's highlighted as a positive impact, was that social media was a means of enabling connections and overcoming barriers to communication, leading to the formation and maintenance of romance.

> ***"It's super easy to get talking to someone now. I can't imagine what it was like in the old days. Now you can just add them on snapchat or follow them on Insta."*** (Mike, lines 50-51)

Mike expressed the ease in which romantic relationships are formed through social media, supporting evidence from Blunt-Vinti et al. (2016). Participants also expressed that it takes away some of the pressure of initiating romance in person.

> ***"... it's quite daunting going up to someone and being like hey you're cute. Like no one does that. It's a lot less pressure if you start communication online... I feel like social media is the modern way of dating."*** (Lucy, 30- 33).

> ***"I added her on Facebook and we'd just chat every day after school. Until I plucked up the courage to actually speak to her face. I was very shy back then..."*** (Roger, lines 32-33).

Both Lucy and Roger highlighted social media to encourage communication, regarding it the modern way of dating and suggesting that social media helps overcome barriers to communication including shyness. This finding supports research from Yang et al. (2014) that highlighted social media as a platform facilitating the initiation and progression of romantic connections. Moreover,

Korchmaros et al., (2015) expressed that the internet is beneficial for individuals who experience difficulty forming romantic relationships due to weak social skills and can potentially use the internet to tackle these issues.

Similarly, Bethany implied that it enables a different type of connection, one without fear.

> **"You get to know each other on a deeper level because when you're behind a screen its not as nerve wracking... you can let your walls down a lot."** (Bethany, lines 25-27).

This can therefore be beneficial in terms of strengthening the intimacy component of love (Sternberg, 1986) as participants felt especially connected and close to one another, thus encouraging consummate love to be achieved. Numerous participants similarly highlighted the ability in which social media can enable connections to one another and help maintain the relationship.

> **"... it's really good for keeping in contact with one another all the time, especially if you are going to go a long time without seeing one another... it just makes you feel really connected."** (Penelope, lines 149-152).

> **"He followed me on Instagram, but he lived quite far so it ended up being quite a while before we met. But by that point we'd messaged every day and I felt like I already knew him super well."** (Ken, lines 139-141).

> **"...We knew each other already but adding each other on snapchat and sending each other funny messages just made us a lot closer."** (Pierre, lines 20-21).

Participants further highlighted the intensity of bonds formed online, again strengthening the intimacy component needed for consummate love (Sternberg, 1986). It is evident that individuals are open to meeting romantic partners through the use of social media, supporting research from Blunt-Vinti et al. (2016). It is also important to note that a beneficial impact of social media, that is common throughout this research, is the ability it has to bring people closer together, forming stronger bonds and connections.

However, it was not always seen as a beneficial aspect of social media. Jacline spoke of the ease of forming romance as a negative impact.

> **"...He was flirting with other people right under my nose. I just couldn't physically see it."** (Jacline, lines 89-90).

This finding supports the suggestion of social media being a platform for opportunities of dishonesty to arise (Arora and Schieber 2017), and for romantic interest to be initiated (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Thus, posing a threat to the commitment component of love (Sternberg, 1986), also found to be an important factor for well-being (Dush and Amato, 2005).

Therefore, social media can be beneficial in enabling relationships to be formed and allowing individuals to overcome barriers to communication. However, when social media is used to form connections outside of the relationship, problems may arise.

Overall, the analysis revealed findings that generally support research from Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) as social media allowed romance to form, and as online actions were heavily monitored and often interpreted as threatening. Findings also provide evidence to suggest that romantic relationships may be impacted in the sense that the three components required for complete love; intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986), may all be impacted by the use of social media, thus impacting the type of love the relationship consists of. Opinions across diverse sexual orientations tended not to differ, however the majority of female attitudes tended to differ from male attitudes in certain themes.

Limitations

It is key to acknowledge the limitations of this study. A main methodological consideration within this study is that mistakes can be made with thematic analysis as meticulous implementation and epistemological positioning is needed, yet due to the 'easy-to-use' nature of this method, mistakes often arise (Willing, 2013). Thus, how efficiently the thematic analysis is employed determines usefulness (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Another methodological consideration is that semi-structured interviews can encourage social desirability bias (Mcintosh and Morse, 2015), affecting the validity of responses. Participants were aware of the nature of the study and conscious that responses were analysed. Thus, participant's may have reserved information that they believed would portray them in a negative light such as accusing their partner of infidelity.

Moreover, as data was obtained from one person within each relationship, information may be biased in favour of making that individual come across in a particularly favourable way. Thus, future research should make use of dyadic interviews to add value to existing research (Polak and Green, 2016) and gain a more truthful, deeper representation of the impact of social media on relationships.

Furthermore, applying The Triangular Theory of Love to findings of this study has provided some useful insights into how social media impacts the elements of love in relationships. However, it is important to consider that this theory offers a simplistic overview of what elements encompass love and does not exhaust the polysemous nature of diverse types of romantic relationships (Lomas, 2018).

Concluding Remarks

When considering the real-life application of these findings, it is important to reiterate the impact of romantic relationships on wellbeing (Braithwaite and Holt- Lunstad, 2017). With knowledge of both positive and negative impacts of social media use on romantic relationships, in addition to the knowledge from previous research (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016), there is practical application in that research can inform intervention efforts to help manage the negative impacts of damaging behaviours,

such as surveillance. Research could help provide a means of encouraging happiness in romantic relationships, as it could help specialists develop strategies that enable trust in a relationship and raise awareness about what online behaviours should be regarded as healthy and acceptable. This would be valuable in terms of encouraging positive well-being and enhancing mental health (Braithwaite and Holt-Lunstad, 2017).

Overall, the current study provided a valuable insight demonstrating both positive and negative impacts of social media use on romantic relationships. Additionally, opinions of individuals of varying sexual preferences tend to be in agreement with one another. However, further research utilising dyadic interviews could generate a stronger finding to support the present research.

Reflexivity

A qualitative approach was employed within the current study, allowing me as the researcher to explore the impact of social media use on romantic relationships. The importance of reflecting both personally and epistemologically was expressed by Willig (2013).

The current research was something that I personally felt interested in due to my own previous experiences in which social media impacted romantic relationships. However, I had never considered whether this impact was common to others, and whether this impact could be positive. As social media has increasingly become incorporated into daily life, I was intrigued by the way in which individuals use social media to form and maintain romantic relationships. I personally believe a major gap in the research that needed addressing was that many studies adopt a heteronormative perspective.

Regardless of my interest in this area, my aim was to remain neutral and avoid influencing the participants' responses. Berger (2015) highlighted the importance of self-monitoring the impact of one's own biases, beliefs and experiences. After reading Le Vasseur's (2003) work on adopting a curious perspective, I decided to

employ bracketing as an attempt to stay neutral and enhance the focus of my research. This meant going into the field of research disregarding preconceived outlooks or thoughts surrounding the impact of social media usage on romantic relationships and avoiding letting personal experiences produce bias. Nonetheless, I discovered that essentially trying to dismiss any existing opinions on this subject was difficult to truly achieve. Additionally, when transcribing the interviews, I recognised missed opportunities for further follow-up questions. However, as I noticed this issue at an early stage of the research, I focused on avoiding any further missed opportunities for the remaining interviews. The thematic analysis revealed some worthy themes providing a valuable insight into the impact of social media use on romantic relationships.

I was aware of the fact that upset could have been caused by certain questioning regarding times in which social media may have caused issues within an individual's relationship. Thus, whilst presenting myself in an impartial, unbiased manner, I deemed it essential to have a friendly presence and leave uncomfortable questions

to the end of the interview, allowing time for a rapport to be built and for the participant to feel more comfortable and open.

This research has allowed me to conclude that social media is heavily involved in both the formation and maintenance of modern relationships, with both positive and negative impacts on these romantic relationships.

References

Abbasi, I.S. and Alghamdi, N.G. (2017) 'When flirting turns into infidelity: The Facebook dilemma.' *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 45(1) pp.1-14.

Adams, W. C. (2015) 'Conducting semi-structure interviews.' *In* Newcomer, K.E., Hatry, H.P., and Wholey, J.P. (eds.) *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation.* 4th ed., New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, pp.492-505.

Agnew, C. R. (ed.) (2014) *Social influences on romantic relationships.* United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Andrejevic, M (2002) 'The Work of Watching One Another: Lateral Surveillance, Risk and Governance.' *Surveillance & Society*, 2(4) pp.479-497.

Arora, P. and Scheiber, L. (2017) 'Slumdog romance: Facebook love and digital privacy at the margins.' *Media, Culture & Society,* 39(3) pp.408-422.

Ayres, L. (2007) 'Qualitative research proposals—part III: sampling and data collection.' *Journal of Wound Ostomy & Continence Nursing*, 34(3) pp.242-244.

Banister, P., Bunn, G., Burman. E., Daniels, J., Duckett, P., Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Parker, I., Runswick-Cole, K., Sixsmith, J., Smailes, S., Tindall, C. and Whelan, P. (2011) *Qualitative methods in psychology: A research guide*. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Bayer, J.B., Ellison, N.B., Schoenebeck, S.Y. and Falk, E.B. (2016) 'Sharing the small moments: ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat.' *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(7) pp.956-977.

Berger, R. (2015) 'Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research.' *Qualitative research*, 15(2) pp.219-234.

Bertot, J.C., Jaeger, P.T. and Hansen, D. (2012) 'The impact of polices on government social media usage: Issues, challenges, and recommendations.' *Government information quarterly*, 29(1) pp.30-40.

Blunt-Vinti, H.D., Wheldon, C., McFarlane, M., Brogan, N. and Walsh-Buhi, E.R. (2016) 'Assessing relationship and sexual satisfaction in adolescent relationships formed online and offline.' *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 58(1) pp.11-16.

Braithwaite, S. and Holt-Lunstad, J. (2017) 'Romantic relationships and mental health.' *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, February, pp.120-125.

Braun, V, and Clarke, Q. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology' *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2) pp. 77-101.

Clayton, R.B., Nagurney, A. and Smith, J.R. (2013) 'Cheating, breakup, and divorce: Is Facebook use to blame?' *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 16(10) pp.717-720.

Collins, A. W., and Welsh, D.P., and Furman. W (2009) 'Adolescent Romantic Relationships' *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, January, pp.631-652.

Darvell, M.J., Walsh, S.P. and White, K.M. (2011) 'Facebook tells me so: Applying the theory of planned behavior to understand partner-monitoring behavior on Facebook.' *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14(12) pp.717- 722.

Dush, C.M.K. and Amato, P.R. (2005) 'Consequences of relationship status and quality for subjective well-being.'*Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22(5) pp.607-627.

Dworkin, S.L. (2012) 'Sample size policy for qualitative studies using in-depth interviews.' *Archives of Sexual Behaviour.* 41(6) pp.1319-1320.

Edosomwan, S., Prakasan, S.K., Kouame, D., Watson, J. and Seymour, T. (2011) 'The history of social media and its impact on business.' *Journal of Applied Management and entrepreneurship*, 16(3) pp.79-91.

Ellison, N.B., Steinfield. C., and Lampe. C. (2007) 'The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 12(4) pp.1143–1168

Fox, J., Warber, K.M. and Makstaller, D.C. (2013) 'The role of Facebook in romantic relationship development: An exploration of Knapp's relational stage model.' *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(6) pp.771-794.

Frederick, D.A. and Fales, M.R. (2016) 'Upset over sexual versus emotional infidelity among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual adults.' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(1) pp.175-191.

Halcomb, E.J. and Davidson, P.M. (2006) 'Is verbatim transcription of interview data always necessary?' *Applied nursing research*, 19(1) pp.38-42.

Hansen, D.L., Shneiderman, B. and Smith, M. A. (2010) *Analyzing social media networks with NodeXL: Insights from a connected world.* Burlington, MA: Elsevier.

Joffe, H. and Yardley, L. (2004) 'Content and thematic analysis.' *In* Marks, D.F and Yardley, L. (eds.) *Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology.* SAGE, pp. 56-68.

Kansky, J. and Allen, J.P. (2018) 'Long-Term Risks and Possible Benefits Associated with Late Adolescent Romantic Relationship Quality' *Journal of youth and adolescence,* 47(7) pp.1531-1544.

Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P and Silvestre, B.S. (2011) 'Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media.' *Business horizons*, 54(3) pp.241-251.

Korchmaros, J.D., Ybarra, M.L. and Mitchell, K.J. (2015) 'Adolescent online romantic relationship initiation: Differences by sexual and gender identification.' *Journal of adolescence*, 40, April, pp.54-64.

Kross, E., Verduyn, P., Demiralp, E., Park, J., Lee, D.S., Lin, N., Shablack, H., Jonides, J. and Ybarra, O. (2013) 'Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being in young adults.' *PloS one*, 8(8) p.e69841. [Online] [Accessed on 5th January 2019] https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0069841

LeVasseur, J.J. (2003) 'The problem of bracketing in phenomenology.' *Qualitative health research*, 13(3) pp.408-420.

Lomas, T. (2018) 'The flavours of love: A cross-cultural lexical analysis.' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 48(1) pp.134-152.

Marwick, A.E. (2012) 'The Public Domain: Surveillance in Everyday Life.' *Surveillance & Society,* 9(4) p.378-393.

Marwick, A.E and Boyd. D. (2010) 'I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience.' *New media & Society,* 13(1) pp.114-133.

Marwick, A.E and Boyd, D. (2014) 'Networked Privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media.' *New media & Society,* 16(7) pp.1051-1067.

McIntosh, M.J. and Morse, J.M. (2015) 'Situating and constructing diversity in semi-structured interviews.' *Global qualitative nursing research*, 2, August, pp.1- 12.

Mod, G.B. (2010) 'Reading romance: The impact Facebook rituals can have on a romantic relationship.' *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology & Sociology*, 1(2) pp.61-77.

Muise, A., Christofides, E. and Desmarais, S. (2009) 'More information than you ever wanted: Does Facebook bring out the green-eyed monster of jealousy?' *CyberPsychology & behavior*, 12(4) pp.441-444.

Muise, A., Christofides, E. and Desmarais, S. (2014) '"Creeping" or just information seeking? Gender differences in partner monitoring in response to jealousy on Facebook.' *Personal Relationships*, 21(1) pp.35-50.

Peters, K. and Halcomb, E. (2015) 'Interviews in qualitative research.' *Nurse Researcher,* 22(4) p.6.

Pew Research Center (2015) *Social Media Usage: 2005-2015 October 2015*.
[Online] [Accessed on 10th December 2018]
https://www.secretintelligenceservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/PI_2015- 10-08_Social-Networking-Usage-2005-2015_FINAL.pdf

Polak, L. and Green, J. (2016) 'Using joint interviews to add analytic value.'
Qualitative health research, 26(12) pp.1638-1648.

Schneider, J.P., Weiss, R. and Samenow, C. (2012) 'Is it really cheating?
Understanding the emotional reactions and clinical treatment of spouses and
partners affected by cybersex infidelity.' *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 19(1- 2)
pp.123-139.

Sternberg, R.J. (1986) 'A triangular theory of love.' *Psychological review*, *93*(2),
p.119-135.

The British Psychological Society (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct.* 18th April.
[Online] [Accessed on 10th January 2019] https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-ethics-and-conduct

Tokunaga, R.S. (2011) 'Social networking site or social surveillance site?
Understanding the use of interpersonal electronic surveillance in romantic
relationships.' *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(2) pp.705-713.

Tuli, F. (2010) 'The basis of distinction between qualitative and quantitative research
in social science: Reflection on ontological, epistemological and methodological
perspectives.' *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Sciences*, 6(1) pp. 97-108.

Utz, S. and Beukeboom, C.J. (2011) 'The role of social network sites in romantic
relationships: Effects on jealousy and relationship happiness.'*Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 16(4) pp.511-527.

Utz, S., Muscanell, N. and Khalid, C. (2015) 'Snapchat elicits more jealousy than
Facebook: A comparison of Snapchat and Facebook use.' *Cyberpsychology,
Behavior, and Social Networking*, 18(3) pp.141-146.

Van Ouytsel, J., Van Gool, E., Walrave, M., Ponnet, K. and Peeters, E. (2016)
'Exploring the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships
and dating experiences.' *Computers in Human Behavior*, 55, February, pp.76-86.

Vaterlaus, J.M., Barnett, K., Roche, C. and Young, J.A. (2016) '"Snapchat is more
personal": An exploratory study on Snapchat behaviors and young adult
interpersonal relationships.'*Computers in Human Behavior*,62, September, pp.594-601.

Wang, H. and Wellman, B. (2010) 'Social connectivity in America: Changes in adult
friendship network size from 2002 to 2007.' *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(8)
pp.1148-1169.

Willig, C. (2013) *Introducing qualitative research in psychology.* 3rd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Yang, C.C., Brown, B.B. and Braun, M.T. (2014) 'From Facebook to cell calls: Layers of electronic intimacy in college students' interpersonal relationships.' *New Media & Society*, 16(1) pp.5-23.

Young, K. (2011) 'Social ties, social networks and the Facebook experience.'*International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society*,*9*(1) pp.20-34.

Zurbriggen, E.L., Ben Hagai, E. and Leon, G. (2016) 'Negotiating privacy and intimacy on social media: Review and recommendations.' *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 2(3) p.248.