

Technology and Communication in Romantic Relationships: A Fact Sheet

Examining how new media is influencing how couples come together and interact

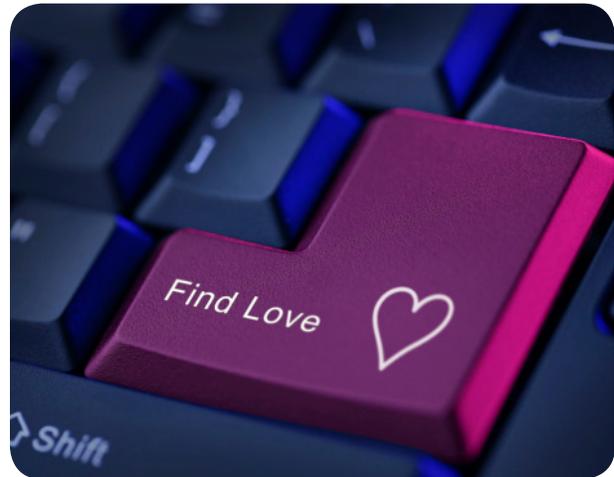
Background

Increasingly, people use the Internet and cell phones in many areas of life: to manage finances, do business, and even more often, communicate with one another. In a Pew Research Center survey of 895 technology experts, 85% of respondents agreed with the statement: “In 2020, when I look at the big picture and consider my personal friendships, marriage and other relationships, I see that the internet has mostly been a positive force on my social world”.¹ The other 15% saw it as a negative force, but in both cases, they saw the Internet being an important influence in their relationships.

The Internet, along with mobile phones, has come to play a part in communications within intimate partner relationships. This Fact Sheet examines the use of online and mobile technology by teens and adults and how that technology is influencing how they communicate and interact with their romantic partners. It includes data on how many people are using the Internet to meet and find partners but also how the Internet and mobile technology can contribute to strains on relationships.

Definitions

Social networking sites are online communities where users can create public or private profiles



with information about themselves and their interests and interact with other users of the site. These sites are grounded in real life, as participants generally use their real names and have actual photos. They are used to keep in touch with pre-existing networks as well as to connect with strangers based on shared interests and activities.² Forty-seven percent of adult online users (about 80 million adults) use social networking sites. The most popular social networks among adults are Facebook (73% of users), MySpace (48% of users) and LinkedIn (14% of users). Ten to twelve percent of social networking adults (about 17 to 20 million adults) also report being on “other sites” including Match.com, an online dating site.³ The most popular online dating sites, according to 2006 data, are Yahoo! Personals and Match.com.⁴

Dating websites are dating systems that allow individuals, couples, and groups to make contact and communicate with each other over the Internet, usually with the objective of developing a personal romantic relationship. They typically provide unmoderated matchmaking over the Internet. A prospective member is generally required to provide personal information before he or she can search the service provider's database for other individuals using pre-set criteria such as age range, gender, and location.

Texting, or text-messaging, is the practice of sending short text communications of 160 characters or less via mobile phone. Texts can also include photos and other images.

Sexting is an activity where users exchange sexually suggestive nude or partially nude photos or videos of one another through text messages on their phones.

Flirting online is a means of one person using the Internet to show another person that they're interested in the other, either in a casual or intimate sense, without any physical interaction.

Headlines/Trends

A large percentage of the American public is online and on their phones—and for significant amounts of time. As of 2009, 93% of youth between 12 and 17 (about 23.5 million teens) were online, as were 74% of adults 18 and older (about 170.4 million people). Almost two-thirds (63%) of teens go online daily, and 36% of them are online several times a day. About 68% of adults are on the Internet at least once a day.⁵

Teens are at the forefront of social networking on the Internet, with 73% of online teens ages 12-17

using a social networking site. Most teens use social networking sites to stay in touch with their friends, with only 17% reporting that they use the sites to flirt. Boys aged 15-17 are more likely than girls in their age group to admit to using social networking sites for flirting, with 29% of boys reporting that they do, compared to 13% of girls.⁶ Adult use of social networking sites is growing; 47% of adult Internet users reported having used a social networking site in 2009, compared to 8% in 2005.⁷ Most adult social media users leverage the sites to stay in the loop with their connections: 89% use them to stay in touch with friends, and 57% use the sites to make plans to meet up with current friends. Twenty percent of them report using social networking sites to flirt.⁸

In terms of mobile phones, 82% of all adults report having a cell phone. The average adult makes five calls a day and sends ten text messages daily.⁹ Among teens, 77% of youth between 12 and 17 own a cell phone, and over a quarter of them (27%) use their phones to go online.¹⁰

Data

New Media and Meeting a Potential Partner

The old methods for meeting a potential partner still have a strong sway. In a survey by the Pew Research Center on dating and the Internet, most people who end up in a long-term relationship or married are still meeting each other through mutual friends or through shared interactions at work or school, and only one in ten adult Internet users has ever visited a dating site.¹¹ However, the Internet is playing a prominent role in traditional courtship practices.

Of those individuals using online dating sites, 43%

of them have gone on “offline dates” with prospects they met on dating sites, and 17% of online daters have gone on to have long-term relationships or marriages with partners they met online.¹² These numbers align with those in a survey commissioned by the dating website Match.com, which claimed that of couples married in the last three years, one in six met on an online dating site.¹³

While a small portion of online users employ explicit dating sites (e.g., Match.com) to find a partner, a significant portion of them use the Internet to facilitate some type of romantic activity. In the Pew Research Center’s dating study, 74% of Internet users who are single and looking for a relationship have used the Internet for some sort of dating activity—ranging from flirting (40% of users), asking someone out on a date (37% of users), to searching for a place to first meet (27% of users).¹⁴ Even more broadly, Internet users may publicize their availability and interest in dating simply by indicating their current relationship status in their social network profiles.¹⁵

Researchers are also finding that adults are using online tools to find out about romantic interests in the same way that they would normally tap into their friend networks for information. In the Pew Research Center’s online dating survey, 17% of “single and looking” adult Internet users had used the Internet to search for information about someone they had just started dating or were about to meet. Eighteen percent of “single and looking” Internet users reported using the Internet to keep tabs on people they had dated in the past.¹⁶

Another way to reach out to partners is over the phone, and many people are finding it easier to approach potential partners through text messaging. A survey of British university students

looking at the distinction between texters and talkers (who primarily used their phone for voice conversations) found that texters (who tended to be more socially anxious than their talker peers) were able to develop new relationships and deepen existing ones through regular and intensive text messaging.¹⁷ Research in Australia found that women, who are often less likely to initiate contact with a romantic interest, were more likely to do so via text message.¹⁸ New media thus opens up more options for meeting potential dating partners, but also provides the buffer of distance to help make approaching these new partners easier.

New Media in the Day-to-Day of Relationships

Once individuals find a romantic partner, their relationship often comes with certain expectations of regular and reciprocated communication. The pervasiveness of new media can do a lot to heighten those expectations. Looking at teens, researchers found that they “now do much of their relationship work by using new media – reciprocating in comments, differentiating their romantic attachments from less intimate friends, and giving priority to phone calls from significant others.”¹⁹ Teens expect regular and continual contact from their partners, as a way of signifying their trustworthiness, and also of showing affection. Teenagers were also able to use a range of new media, from texting, instant messaging, emailing, and social networking, to maintain relationships that would otherwise be difficult because of parental restrictions or differences in location.²⁰

Once in a relationship, the increased information and access to each other online open up new avenues for couples to share with each other and with their networks. In particular, their

social media profiles, which are viewable by their real-life connections, can become public online demonstrations of their relationship. With Facebook, for example, couples can make their relationship status public, post public displays of affection on each other's walls, share photographs of themselves together as a couple, and even share their profile passwords with one another, further blurring the line between their individual profiles and cementing their identity as a couple.²¹

With individuals not yet in relationships, the lack of physical presence that comes with texting each other on their phones can still facilitate more openness in a communications with one another. It can inspire "innuendo and sexual play among its users," offer them privacy as they surreptitiously send messages to each other, and allow them to be in regular communication, especially in situations where a phone call might be unworkable.²² The "always on" nature of new technology can thus do a lot to inspire intimacy and communication in romantic partners.

New Media and Relationship Issues

Another way that sites such as Facebook allow for more communication among couples is by affording them much more information about their partners' friends and interactions than would be available off-line. Sometimes that information can bring couples closer together, but this excess knowledge can also lead to jealousy and uncertainty about a relationship. In a survey of 308 undergraduates using Facebook, "real or imagined negative situations invoke feelings of jealousy, and participants felt the Facebook environment created these feelings and enhanced concerns about the quality of their relationship."²³ Their partners may not be doing anything outside of the bounds of

their relationship, but, for example, simply knowing that their significant other is still in touch with an old partner can cause anxiety. Photographs can be especially problematic, where photos with past partners still exist on the site and are commented upon, even when the relationship is over.²⁴

New media also allows individuals who feel suspicious or jealous of their partner to seek out more information about their activities and their otherwise unspoken thoughts or feelings. In an online survey of married couples, researchers found that surveillance was common: in 17% of couples surveyed, both partners did some sort of surveillance, and in 28% of couples, at least one partner monitored the other. The most frequent modes of monitoring were reading their partner's email, going through their text messages, and checking their browser history.²⁵

Even as the Internet and mobile phones give partners more ability to track each other, they also give them more ability to stray. Infidelity on the Internet may be more of a case of emotional rather than physical betrayal, as the partners may never actually meet in person. In a survey of those who have had online relationships, some suggested that their online partners actually helped their marriages, because the online relationship discouraged face-to-face adultery.²⁶

However, for many couples, turning to another person online—even if it does not culminate in a physical affair—is still a situation where a partner is looking for intimacy and understanding with someone else and is using the Internet as an outlet rather than working through their relationships problems with their real life partner. In an online survey of adults in Australia, "people at least perceive online acts of infidelity as authentic and as real as offline acts."²⁷

Like the Internet, texting also offers a means of communication for illicit partnerships. A text can also be used by the unfaithful party to check in with his or her partner with less guilt and less chance of discovery—without the context of background noise and tone of voice, it is much easier to lie.²⁸ The same factors of intimacy and distance that play into a couple's use of the Internet and texting can also influence situations where partners are unfaithful to one another.

Finally, another aspect of texting that has come into play for those involved in romantic relationships is the phenomenon of sexting. These exchanges happen between partners in a romantic relationship, between individuals who are not yet in a relationship but hope to be, and between those in a relationship and someone who is not their partner. A Pew survey found that 6% of cell phone users who are adults (18 or older) reported texting sexually suggestive images, and 15% reported having received such texts. The survey also found that men were more likely to receive images (21%) than women (11%).²⁹

While adults engage in sexting, much of the controversy around sexting comes from its popularity among teenagers. In a Pew Center survey, 4% of cell-owning teens have sent sexually suggestive images via text message, and 15% of teenagers have reported receiving these kinds of messages.³⁰ As with online infidelity, some teens view sexting as a safe alternative to actual off-line sexual activity. However, the issues around teen sexting range from legal prosecution around the circulation of sexual images of minors, to the pressure faced by young people to sext in order to fit in with their peers, to worries about images being circulated publicly and trailing teens as they grow up.

Recent research has shown that new technology can bring people together in relationships and closer together as partners. It can also exacerbate some of the strains and issues that couples face and can do so in a very public way that lingers even when the relationship is over.

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