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## Relationships in the Digital Age: Understanding the Impact of Social Media

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### ABSTRACT:

Digital connectivity has changed the nature and dynamics of human society. Its impact ranges from the way we work, engage and interact in formal environments to the way we form our personal bonds. In the context of personal relationships, the social media networking sites have harbingered a revolution. This includes apps like Tinder, Bumble and Hinge for finding suitable intimate partners to apps like Gleeden which even caters to those looking for relationships outside their marriage.

The present study offers an insight into this side of the digital world and its impact on Indian society with the help of data from a number of secondary sources. It has been further enriched with the help of case studies. We have explored the influence of social media on relationships from three dimensions:

Formation of personal bonds mediated by social media sites.

Leveraging digital platforms to find life partners.

Infidelity and dissolution facilitated by social media.

Such a comprehensive approach has aided in exposing the frailty of the modern world while simultaneously underlining its significance. The conclusions help to determine the direction of changes brought by social media sites and their impact moving from traditional face-to-face interactions to virtual interactions.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Digital Age, Personal Relationships, Facebook, Tinder, Gleeden.

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### INTRODUCTION

Societies, across the globe are transitioning towards an era determined by digital technology. Its most significant and apparent presence can be observed in the way humans interact. In the words of Daniel Goleman, "Smartphones and social media expand our universe. We can connect with others or collect information easier and faster than ever (Daniel Goleman Quote, n.d.)." This evolution in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) domain has opened new ways to interact; be it written, verbal/oral or virtual. Also, the sphere with whom one could interact has enlarged. Causing dynamic shift in the fundamental nature of social relationships and interaction patterns. Owing to these, the society which according to MacIver, in itself is "...a web of social relationships (Gautam, 2016)" has undergone significant transformation.

In light of these developments, the present study focuses on the influence of social media platforms in shaping the personal relationships. By establishing itself as an integral part of human lives, they aid not only in connecting with the intended people but affect our behaviour, choices and activities. In this regard, Anthony Weiner has remarked, "*Social media is not just an add-on to life, it is life.*" This statement seems particularly apt once we become cognizant of the depths to which these platforms have penetrated. Becoming quintessential for all sorts of tasks including the personal ones i.e., to stay in touch with our loved ones, form new bonds, share our experiences/views, etc.

Even in the sphere of finding life partner, social media platforms seem to have an ever increasing role for modern generation. They facilitate the search for new bonds, help in maintaining them and even cater to those looking for partners after divorce or to have an extramarital one. For each of these functions both dedicated (Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, etc.) and the general (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) platforms exist. This dimension of social media platforms is critical, as it provides each individual with multitude of options in their quest to find according to their need.

However, to believe that the impact of social media on personal relationships is entirely positive would be naive. We must acknowledge the dual nature of these platforms. While they facilitate the formation of new bonds, they also contribute towards various immoral or illegal activities under the guise of connecting people. For example, platforms like Gleeden provide for relationships outside marriage. Alongside, people exploit these platforms to find targets for the sole purpose of cheating or blackmailing them.

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## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

In this day and age the human society appears to be under metamorphosis, particularly in the context of technological advancements. Since 1960 and 70s the processing power of the computers has grown exponentially; doubling every one and a half to two years (McCain, 2023). Besides, the adoption rate of internet stands at 99% (as per 2020 data) among the youth population (McCain, 2023). And to cater their needs, 1.35 million tech startups exist across the globe which is over four times higher than any other sector (McCain, 2023).

These statistics demand qualitative explanation of the outcomes for the human society. Taking this demand into account, the present study focuses on one of the core aspect in which internet is shaping the modern world i.e., the personal relationships. These interactions are of critical importance as they not only provide for the innate physical needs of the adult population but also determine the character, behaviour and social outlook of individuals. The social media platforms are emerging as enablers of these for the adults, espousing this work relevant.

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## STUDY AREA:

The theme of this study is explorative, therefore statistical data has been collected from host of sources for different countries across the globe. This has allowed to put forward reliable and valid information which could establish the distinction of this study. However, the core area has been India, which boasts the world's largest social media user base (China has highest number of users but it has banned most global companies). Thus, purposively the case studies have been selected from India which elaborate about the dynamics of relationships mediated by social media platforms in the country.

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## METHODOLOGY:

The present study is qualitative in nature, it employs various secondary sources to provide an accurate understanding of the topic. To establish the credibility of our findings, we have followed a multi-source approach. The aspect under examination has been explained with the help of relevant information followed by identification of the related academic concepts. Alongwith case studies from numerous reputed sources.

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## FINDINGS:

Based on the observed phases of natural progression of usual personal interactions, the findings of the paper have been divided into three sections. These include:

1. Social Media for Friendships
2. Social Media for Marital Relationships
3. Social Media for Extramarital bonds.

However, we maintain it is not necessary that this structure follows in each case. Often, one pursues multiple interest before tying knots with someone, similarly someone may not have used the social networking sides before marriage or for that purpose. But they might use it later in the life to enter into relationships post dissolution of their marriage or to have an extra-marital relationship among other possibilities.

### Section 1. Social Media for Friendships

The foundation of friendship relies on common beliefs, values and mutual respect. These bonds are cultivated through nurtured ties of shared experiences and in-person interactions. However, with the advent of social media the dynamics of friendship has changed. The accessibility to platforms like Facebook, Instagram Twitter, etc. render people to communicate virtually regardless of the geographical boundaries.

Social media has become essential for teenagers to make new friends and learn more about them, helping to develop deeper relationships. 64% of the teenagers who have found new virtual acquaintances claim they did it through social media. In order to stay in touch, two-thirds (62%) of teenagers claim they give their social media username and other credentials to any new acquaintance (Lenhart, 2015).

These platforms facilitate maintaining relations based on each individuals' unique requirements and conditions, which the younger generations have exploited effectively. This shift reflects broader change from *Close Knit Communities* to what has been termed as *Networked Individualism*. In this, the individual has the complete agency to craft their social circle; earlier limited by hindrances particularly the accessibility issue (Tanabe et al., 2002, pp. 10–25).

With the world emerging as *Global Village* (Nombela, n.d.), the excessive social media usage has transformed the nature of friendships. Despite lacking the richness of face-to-face interactions, the social media platforms have emerged as the preferred mode of engagement.

### **Case Study 1**

*Gurgaon-based entrepreneur Srishti Singh and Anubhav Agarwal from Mumbai have been friends for close to two years. "We talk every day," says Srishti, "We share things about work, what movies to watch and random stuff." Then the pandemic happened and we didn't meet. But that does not change the fact that she isn't one of my closest friends," explains Anubhav. It may not be everyone's cup of tea but 'social media friendships' make sense to some. The concept of pen pals may be slightly outdated for most millennials and Gen Z but they have found their own 21st century version of it (Mathur, 2021)*

Srishti Singh and Anubhav Agarwal's digital friendship, flourishing despite pandemic-induced physical distance, highlights the adaptability of relationships in the digital age. It seems to emulate the role of pen pals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Besides, the resilience of their bond, unaffected by the absence of face-to-face interactions, underscores the significance of meaningful digital connections. Spanning geographical boundaries between Gurgaon and Mumbai, their friendship exemplifies how virtual platforms enable relationships to thrive irrespective of the physical distance. Prompting to reflect on the transformative impact of technology on the dynamics of friendship in the midst and aftermath of global episodes such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The case study touches on the fact that social media plays crucial role in present day social dynamics. Even though, the relationship between Srishti and Anubhav is virtual yet the absence of face-to-face interactions doesn't seem to affect their bond. Due to availability of virtual platforms where they can share their thoughts and ideas extensively. Thus, the case study underlines the importance of social media in volatile situations like the Covid-19.

### **Section 2: Social Media for Marital Relationships**

The Dawn of Digital era has marked a shift for India in the method of finding life partners. For many, the prevailing vibrant and diverse structure to find the suitable spouse has turned obsolete. Studies highlight the key role of social media platforms in modern relationships. Those who meet via traditional route; take the assistance for the maintenance of their new bond. And those who meet through social media itself, the platforms act as mediator in deciding the future course of their relationships. Alongside, in both the cases such platforms help in better understanding of someone's past, life choices, social outlook, likes/dislikes, etc.

However, sometimes it is done with ulterior motives which is rather termed as 'stalking' but more often, the process of probing through someone's social media profiles while you have that inclination towards them is considered necessary and healthy. Researches have shown changes in the patterns of social media usage during different phases of the relationship. They note even though in the initial phase of the online relationships, social media has an extremely important role to play, but as the bond grows stronger, this reliance dwindles.

(Duik, 2014) has noted an affirmative change in the online behaviour once someone gets into an intimate relationship. This behaviour complemented with sharing the news, photos and other details on one's profile. (Weigel, 2008), (Papp et al., 2012) and (Dainton, 2013) have also showcased positive role of social media in strengthening the relationship.

In India also, one can observe the influence of social media platforms in finding intimate partner. Those in metropolitan cities utilise dedicated platforms (Tinder, Hinge, etc.) while those in suburbs/rural areas with relatively more traditional structure, engage through general platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.).

### **Case Study 2**

*Rishika and Shahwat, who connected on Bumble in 2020, clicked instantly because of similar interests and got engaged last year. In a nod to the dating app that brought them together, they held a whimsical "roka" ceremony with a Bumble theme. We've always wanted to text each other and have been happy to look at our phones all day," Rishika says. They immediately stopped using the dating app and started talking on the phone, which strengthened their relationship even more. But what drew them together was their shared passion of words. "We're both very particular about grammar and punctuation, which sounds nerdy, but it's something we were both really impressed by in each other," she says (Arya, 2023).*

The above case study represents the way dating and relationships are evolving in the modern era. With individuals coming together and writing love stories with a finger swipe. "Match made on dating apps" is swiftly replacing, "Match made in heaven (Arya, 2023)."

In this case of Rishika and Shawant social media platform Bumble played an important role. To the extent that they acknowledged its role by putting their Roka ceremony themed around the dating app. This case challenges the stereotypes which taint bonds formed over dating apps, declaring them ephemeral. Here, the union appears to be flourishing with mutual appreciation and trust. Thus, the social media also plays an affirmative role in bringing individuals together for a committed relationship.

### **Section 3: Social Media for Extramarital bonds**

The social media platforms have made the maintenance of intimate bonds relatively easy. At the same time, various reports suggest their involvement in separation and divorce. In metropolitan cities the situation is so severe that 4 out of every 10 divorce cases, are due to increased intimacy of husband/wife with other people over social media and resulting extramarital ties (Eser, 2023). Moreover, social media platforms often portray idealized version of others' life, creating unrealistic expectations and disenchantment from the existing relationship among couples.

In addition to this, a study found that 7% of couples terminated their relationships due to social media-related issues, emphasizing the profound indirect impact of digital interactions on modern relationships. The United Kingdom implicated one single social media platform i.e., *Instagram* behind 20% of the divorce cases in 2015 (Eser, 2023). *LinkedIn*, a dedicated platform for professional networking was linked to 9% of the UK's divorce cases in the same year. This showcases the latent consequences of a professional platform on personal lives (Eser, 2023).

However, at this point in absence of required data it is difficult to predict how the modern world perceives the lose of bonds. Particularly because now some social media platforms have started to surface which intend to exploit this market. For example Gleeden, a one of its kind app; exclusively for married individuals allows people to connect exclusively for extramarital relations. Its survey on Indian (in Tier I cities only) and British couples made some striking claims. According to which 55% of Indian couples are oriented towards having an extramarital affairs (Shiddell, 2020). These statistics are alarming for India, a country deeply rooted in its venerated culture where marital ties are sacred and indissoluble.

### **Case Study 3**

*When Anisha married her sailor husband eight years ago, it was based on the understanding that he would soon quit his job. His work took him away for months at a time and both agreed that such absences were not conducive to a healthy marriage. Two years and a child later, not only had her husband not left his job, he had also become emotionally distant. His visits and communication became sporadic, leaving Anisha frustrated and emotionally bereft. The pandemic made matters worse - the couple did not meet or speak for more than a year. When they did manage to connect, they argued. Eventually, the relationship deteriorated into indifference (Kashi, 2023).*

*Later, as part of her work as an online content creator, Anisha was asked to write about Gleeden, which describes itself as a "dating site for discreet encounters" - typically extramarital affairs. What started as research soon turned out to be more significant (Kashi, 2023).*

*"I connected with a few men and interacted with some of them; eventually I met someone who gradually became a good friend, an emotional anchor and someone I could call at any time for anything," Anisha said. Her relationship is now more than two years old and she said she finds it very fulfilling. "I don't have that kind of vibe or spark with anyone; not even in my marriage. It is not just about being physical; I feel like he is my soul mate. Ours is a very mature relationship and he gives me everything I deserve (Kashi, 2023).*

Anisha is among a growing number of Indians looking for relationships outside marriage via dating apps like Gleeden which was launched in India in 2017 and has over 2 million users in the country. It conducted a survey with 1,503 married Indians, both men and women, aged between 25 and 50 and living in tier-1 and tier-2 cities to determine the society's general perception of infidelity, personal experience of infidelity, the effect of the pandemic on people's mindset towards infidelity, and new trends in relationships (Magan, 2023). The findings suggest that out of 55% who confessed of being part of *extradyadic* relations, 56% i.e., the majority was formed by women (Magan, 2023). With Supreme Court decriminalising adultery in 2018, the stigma against it has also suffered a blow.

App-based platform like Gleeden and websites like ExtramaritalAffair.com help individuals to find partner of their interest and get connected. Apart from these specialised apps, there are online chat platforms where one can get connected to people from around the globe. These platforms have accorded a different perspective to marital ties and made it easy for individuals to pursue intimate relationships involving multiple sexual partners simultaneously.

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## **CONCLUSION:**

The findings and their analysis provide glimpses into the vast world of Social Media. These platforms provide an opportunity to engage with others of similar interest and expand one's network. The nature of which might vary based on the intended conception behind having them. In this study, we have examined only those networks which dealt with personal relationships. Based on which two major conclusions can be drawn:

1. The usability of social media platforms is extremely diverse. In context of personal relationships they have something for everyone. However, we must understand that these platforms only stir what's in someone's mind and oblige accordingly. Branding any of these for social upheaval can't be a step towards the solution. Majority of the users benefit by getting the desired results. The user base of billions boast about their exigency in today's era. In cities, which have majority of individual migrating for livelihood opportunities or otherwise, finding someone with similar interest and background can be a daunting task. Social media platforms make that feasible. Similarly, in suburbs/rural areas particularly in India we have strict social environment constraining individuals particularly of opposite gender to bond; even those which doesn't have anything to do with intimacy aren't appreciated. In such scenario, these platforms provide a safe and secure environment to bond.
2. Often, the social media platforms are not limited by geographical boundaries thus, the culture harbingered over these may not serve the local culture. The perspectives promoted over these might appear to threaten the established norms and values of a country; destabilising the traditional social structure. In those times, it becomes incumbent upon the policy makers of that country to redefine the regulations as per the requirement to maintain the harmony and protection of cultural heritage. However, in the process we need to take into account that some of the customs might not be relevant in today's day and age and have outlived their utility. Those need to get scrutinized before reaching any conclusion. Still, the ethics and morals doesn't deserve to get compromised under the facade of modernity.

Therefore, the patrons of Social Media Platforms must remember:

*"Swipe right for love, but don't lose sight of reality (RELATIONSHIP and SOCIAL MEDIA QUOTES, 2023)."*

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