

The Impact of Social Media on Intimate Relationships among Chinese College Students

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Abstract. With the high degree of openness of the Internet, the number of young people exposed to social networking sites is increasing. Previous research has shown that there are many ways to influence people's perceptions of intimate relationships, and social media has played a role in recent years. Yet, the exact aspects influencing people's perceptions of relationships still need to be discovered. The current study focused on how social media affected Chinese college students' perceptions of romantic relationships through questionnaires and offered suggestions for improving young people's well-being in relationships. The findings highlighted that social media is associated with relationship dissatisfaction. It influenced college students' perceptions of these aspects of relationships: love permanence and commitment, confidence to enter a relationship, gender dyad, and financial and emotional independence. Such results suggested that social media may have a detrimental effect on young people's impressions of relationships but not on their desire to establish close connections. Besides, this study revealed that these effects are correlated with the individual's media usage, personality, and self-esteem. This study has implications for changing young people's views on relationships and enhancing their sense of well-being in a relationship.

Keywords: Social media; Intimate relationships; Social cognitive theory; Emotion perception.

1. Introduction

A romantic relationship refers to the sexual, physical, mental, emotional, and psychological attraction that is present or expected between two people [1, 2]. Additionally, it has been suggested that romantic relationships foster intercultural, regional, tribal, and religious bonds, enhancing the well-being and contentment of those involved [3]. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of people who resist entering a relationship in China.

According to a report released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of Internet users in China is 1.051 billion, and 21% are students. The Internet penetration rate is 74%, and the amount of time spent on the Internet per capita is 29.5 hours per week [4]. Marriages and birth rates have been on the decline in China for years. In 2021, an estimated 7.64 million marriages were recorded, the lowest number over three decades. At the same time, the number of newborns decreased to 10.62 million in 2018 compared to 12 million in 2020 [5].

Netizens have begun investigating the reasons behind this trend -- What leads some of the younger generations to have a negative view of relationships? What causes them to feel intimidated before they have experienced marriage or a romantic relationship? Some internet users point to social media and suggest that the online environment and ethos influence young people significantly. Indeed, social media platforms enable users to generate and share content with other platform members and enhance global networking, which could sustain and improve the relationships between romantic partners [6, 7]. Nevertheless, several netizens proposed that these platforms also play a role in influencing young adults' views of relationships. The reasons can be concluded as follows: (1) Social media presents a great deal of negative news about romantic relationships, most often through trending topics on Weibo, including high divorce rates, infidelity, and domestic violence. In 2021, the national average divorce rate reached 39%. Some regions even reached more than 60% [8]; (2) The idea of economic independence for women spread through social media. Women are becoming high-employed and no longer need to depend on marriage to make ends meet; (3) Misconceptions about relationships. For example, the discrepancy between reality and the image of the ideal partner reduces the individual's desire to enter into an intimate relationship. Therefore, research into the reasons for resistance to

entering relationships is essential to improving the well-being of young adults. To investigate the reasons behind the decline in young people's desire for a relationship, this study will focus on collecting data from Chinese college students through a questionnaire.

2. Literature Review

With relationships playing a vital role in one's social life, some previous studies have been done to study the correlation between social media usage and romantic relationships. According to Arikewuyo et al.'s study, the diversity of social media usage enhances contentment, attachment, jealousy, surveillance of intimate relationships, adultery, and diversion [9]. Some evidence suggests that social media offers a significant distraction in romantic relationships since it gives an alternative to one's romantic partner, which might result from frequent usage of social media platforms [10]. Social media use in intimate relationships has also been identified as a leading cause of infidelity among romantic partners [11]; this may be explained by the fact that social media provides an opportunity to meet new people, allowing individuals to become intimate with online friends due to the frequency of these interactions [12]. In addition, a study by Utz & Beukeboom established that satisfying the need for physical, psychological, and emotional desires is critical to satisfying the need for physical, psychological, and emotional desires [13]. Conversely, dissatisfaction may occur if romantic partners start monitoring one another, engage in extramarital affairs, suffer jealousy, and become preoccupied with their online activities rather than their partner [14].

The cognitive thoughts of individuals will be altered by viewing negative content spread by social media, which could also explain young people's resistance to getting into an intimate relationship. A study by Han et al. reveals that individuals tended to show an attentional bias toward and a preference for negative news, which indicates that they are more readily influenced by negative than by positive news content [15]. Likewise, viewing negative social news increase people's cheating behaviors and negative emotions [16]. These findings show that people have an attentional bias toward negative stimuli, which is consistent with social cognitive theory, a social learning theory. It argued that environmental information could influence individuals' behaviors directly and affect their cognition, emotions, and information processing indirectly. That is, social media's negative information about relationships, such as divorce, cheating, and domestic violence, may impact young adults' multifaceted views on romantic relationships.

Reduced gender identity discrimination and preventing harmful behaviors are crucial [17]. In a book by Blossfeld and Kiernan, the authors mention that due to recent advancements in contraception, women are getting more education, marrying later in life, working outside the house more often, and enjoying more reproductive freedom [18]. In other words, instead of finding a partner for survival, social media conveys a new message: women should have jobs, be financially independent, and stop relying on partners. Notably, most of the content transmitted by social media, including advertisements and television programs, is still gender-stereotyped. "The heterosexual script" promotes that females should act sexually passive, set sexual limits, use bodies and appearances to attract men, seek stability and emotional investment, and please boys/men, while males should actively pursue sexual relationships, focus on women as sexual objects, and avoid commitment & emotional attachment [19]. These gendered sexual scripts disseminated through social media contradict the idea that "women should be independent," which might negatively impact their sexual assertiveness. They may feel resistant to a romantic relationship since they are confused about how to position themselves in that relationship.

The previous studies provide some potential reasons for how social media affect people's thoughts and emotions. However, analyses explicitly focused on the change of views of romantic relationships in the social media impacts are relatively few, and the results are still too mixed to be conclusive. To address these gaps, the current study aims to take a deeper look at the emotional impact of social media on young adults through a questionnaire. The intentions of this study are thus to 1) specify the effects of social media associated with Chinese college students' perspective toward romantic

relationships, and 2) to clarify how to avoid and reduce the impact of negative news on social media and thus increase the well-being of the young generation.

3. Method

The participants were Chinese college students ranging from 18 to 24 years old, recruited randomly online from four platforms -- WeChat, QQ, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu. College students were explicitly targeted since they are in the age range of having relationship experience, are in relationships, and will enter marriage.

An anonymous questionnaire was designed on a Chinese survey website called Wenjuanxing to collect participants' answers and administer the online survey. After five days of open-to-participate periods, 242 out of 254 participants responded validly by the collection data of Nov 15, 2022 (response rate: 95%). Of these, 76% had been in a relationship before, and 40% were in a relationship. None of the respondents had been previously married prior to the start of the study.

In this study, participants need to indicate to what extent they felt about the impact of social media on their perspectives toward romantic relationships. They were asked to complete a twenty-five questions survey, which included five potential aspects that may cause a change in their views toward romantic relationships: 1) negative news about relationships, 2) "Perfect images" of both genders, 3) Gender dichotomy, 4) Economic Independence and 5) Commitment (the intent to persist) and fidelity. Each category includes five items that are related to it. The response category options for each item and scale were standardized to 7 points Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

4. Results

With a total of 242 participants (Female = 149, Male = 93), the results suggested that 183 participants (76%) have experienced romantic relationships, and 100 college students agree that a romantic relationship is critical to their lives. A relatively significant proportion of participants (70%) desire to get married, and the average age they reported they wanted to get married was 27 years old, with 38% indicating that the reason for wanting to get into a relationship stems from social influences, including peer pressures and family prodding.

4.1 Negative News about Relationships

Of the 242 participants, 170 reported that they could often see negative intimacy news on social media, such as divorce, domestic abuse, cheating, and breakups. According to the results of these 170 college students who were often exposed to negative news about intimacy, 55 believed that love between two partners could last forever. By contrast, 71 Chinese college students reported that after prolonged exposure to information related to negative intimate relationships, they held a pessimistic and skeptical attitude toward the stability and longevity of relationships. Regarding the longevity of relationships, a ratio of 4 to 5 of whether they agree that social media can negatively impact the length of a relationship was shown. 68 % of the participants believed the love between couples or spouses would disappear at some point.

In terms of whether participants' desire to fall in love with someone decreases with the increase of negative intimacy news spread on the Internet, it showed that 66 college students (39%) agree that the negative content of romantic relationships caused a decrease in their desire to get into a relationship. In contrast, 49 participants (29%) disagree with this statement.

4.2 Perfect images of Both Genders

A perfect image includes an attractive appearance, gender-typical behavior and personality, and a solid financial capacity. When asked if the abundance of images of gender perfection on social media reduced their desire to enter into intimate relationships, only 48 college students (20%) agreed.

Nonetheless, 129 participants (53%) were inclined to state that their requirements for their partners increased after they were immersed in the perfect personal image spread by social media.

The results further suggested that 135 respondents (56%) thought the "perfect images" of men and women shown online could lead to a lack of self-confidence in their appearances when entering intimate relationships. The impact of these "perfect images" spread by social media on individuals' self-confidence in their abilities is even more pronounced. One hundred fifty-three people (63%) said they were hesitant to enter into a relationship because they thought their abilities were off compared to those on social media.

Besides, the ratio of agreeing that a couple should be well-matched in appearances is nearly 4 to 5. Among the 242 participants, 138 college students (57%) believed that a couple's appearance should be in the same class. If there is an apparent disparity between two parties, the party at a disadvantage in appearance would be subconsciously suspected of having a higher socioeconomic status.

The "perfect image" content on social media also triggers couples into conflict to some extent. 56% of participants reported that they had sent content to partners about the "perfect image" of the other gender they had seen online, including photos and videos; 52% of participants said they had received these from their partners. Moreover, nearly 3/5 of the participants said they disagreed with the message conveyed in videos about "what a perfect boyfriend/girlfriend should be like." Of those, 62 (43%) said they got into arguments with each other, and 46% of participants felt emotions such as dissatisfaction, anger, and aggravation toward their partners who shared the content.

4.3 Gender dichotomy

60% of respondents reported frequently encountering gender-opposing comments posted on social media. When asked if they would "fight back" when they saw offensive remarks about their gender on social media, the number of people agreeing and disagreeing was nearly equal.

4.4 Economic and Emotional Independence

More than half of the participants focused more attention and energy on their studies than on obtaining a romantic relationship. Among the 242 participants, 127 agree that one's academic achievements are more important than having a good romantic relationship. Furthermore, of those 127 people, almost half were female participants. This indicates that college students today are guided by social media to believe that financial independence and academic success are more necessary than having a partner to rely on.

4.5 Commitment

The final set of analyses examined the effect of social media on a partner's commitment and fidelity. The results of the fidelity analysis showed a nearly even conclusion: 88 of the participants agreed that social media increases the infidelity of individuals in a relationship, 91 of them were against it, and 63 were neutral. Most of those who concurred said that this was caused by social media platforms offering too many unknown temptations. Furthermore, an even distribution of results (50% agree and 50% disagree) emerged regarding whether they suspected their partner had other lovers via the Internet.

Similarly, when participants responded to whether social media negatively affects one's commitment in a relationship, there was an almost equal split between those who agreed and those who disagreed. However, participants showed a slight tendency to agree with this statement (agree: 78, disagree: 67).

5. Discussion

The current research examined how five factors—negative news about intimacy, idealized pictures of both genders, gender dichotomy, independence, and comment & fidelity—affect Chinese college students' perceptions of intimate relationships. This study offered evidence of a correlation between

the content of social media communication and Chinese college students' perceptions of intimate relationships. However, the five aspects have different degrees of influence.

Seventy percent of participants reported that they had seen negative messages about romantic relationships (divorce, domestic abuse, cheating) on social media, whether from celebrities (on Weibo) or other online users, indicating that Chinese college students are highly exposed to an open online environment. It is worth noting that as exposure to negative news increases in time and frequency, a slightly decreased desire exists among college students to step into a relationship. Besides, more pessimistic thoughts about the longevity of a relationship are slowly increasing. Although it is likely that most of the college population has developed a stable view of relationships and can understand that these negative elements are not probable events, they may still linger to some extent in the subconscious of college students, making them feel anxious and fearful about relationships.

One possible explanation may lie in the effect of the availability heuristic; in other words, people overestimate small probability events and fear that they will happen to them as well. However, at odds with this, most college students still express wanting to marry and be in a romantic relationship. Of these, about half of the participants said it was due to social pressures, which shows that peer effects and parental prodding also influence individuals' perceptions and choices of romantic relationships to some extent. This highlights the need to implement some approaches: 1) to appeal to internet users to remain rational and not overestimate small probability events or substitute their situations, and 2) to reduce negative news related to intimate relationships in the media. Because in addition to college students, there are many younger Internet users, and the content is harmful to those who have not yet formed a mature mind.

Based on examining how social media portrays the ideal images of both genders, it can be deduced that these contents harm romantic relationships among college students and lower their self-confidence. In this study, participants did not show a decreased desire for relationships because of the "perfect image" displayed on social media. However, after browsing numerous perfect images of men and women on social media, there were clear signs that college students began to think couples should be matched in appearance. They started to feel less confident in their appearance and abilities and were hesitant to enter into an intimate relationship for fear of not being perfect. Noteworthy, this finding is related to the individual's personality and self-esteem. For instance, a person with poor self-esteem is more likely to have concerns about his or her own abilities after viewing a significant number of other people's outstanding accomplishments, leading to reluctance to begin a romantic relationship.

In addition, nearly 2/3 of participants in relationships said they sent and received content about "ideal girlfriend/boyfriend characteristics" to their partners. An intriguing result was that half of the participants had negative emotions after reading the content, meaning that while people agreed that some of the content would benefit their relationship, they simultaneously felt resentful and aggrieved because it implied that their partner was dissatisfied with some of their behavior, appearance, and abilities. One way to make a positive impact is to reduce beliefs about partners. For instance, by not always implying that partners "should... and should not..." Instead, express a desire to improve the relationship and inform the partners of what can be done or changed to benefit both people. Another approach is to stop setting specific expectations for partners; instead, hold realistic and appropriate expectations. Eli Finkel proposed that the issue is not whether people have too high or low expectations toward their partners but whether these expectations are realistic and appropriate for their relationship [20]. In other words, appropriately tailored expectations are beneficial to a relationship. Properly using the information disseminated by social media can positively impact romantic relationships, while the premise is that the content is pertinent to the couple's situation. For example, a woman in a financially difficult relationship should not ask her partner to act the same way just because she sees a man on social media buying expensive jewelry for his partner.

Additionally, this study found that it is not uncommon for people to see gender-opposing comments on social media. Whenever there is negative news related to intimate relationships (e.g., cheating, domestic violence, etc.), users are highly likely to express sympathy for the victim's side

and critical comments about the perpetrator's gender in the comments section. While the data showed that the number of people who wanted to fight back and chose to ignore when they saw offensive comments about their gender was evenly distributed (50% agree, 50% disagree), nearly 30% of the participants who decided to fight back were men, which was unexpected by the researcher. One explanation might be that, as presented on social media, women usually get hurt more in a relationship, both psychologically and physically. Therefore, in most cases, females typically make negative and critical comments about males' behaviors (men as a group, not as individuals) in the comments section of such news. More future research should be conducted to find a more accurate explanation.

According to an analysis of whether social media influences college students' perceptions of financial independence, the results show that more than half of the participants consider achieving academic success more important than obtaining a romantic relationship. An intriguing finding is that nearly half of these were female participants, reflecting that as gender equality expands among the highly educated, female college students become more independent (financially and emotionally) and hold less of the idea that they have to depend on men to survive. This is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that women are getting more education, becoming more financial independence, and enjoying more reproductive freedom [18]. However, it is worth noting that this finding cannot ensure that it is due to the effect of social media. Educational and social advancements are more likely to be the cause. Therefore, it may not serve as a reasonable basis.

Half of the participants expressed concern that social media may lead to a greater likelihood of infidelity among their partners. They explained that social media offers more variety and change and that their partners can more easily develop relationships with others. This concern and anxiety are more common among college couples in long-distance relationships. Exceeding expectations, a higher percentage of participants did not believe that social media had a negative impact on commitment. In other words, while they suspect their partner may have cheated on them because of the abundance of temptations on social media, most still believe that social media is not the leading cause of infidelity. This highlights that social media makes some temptations more accessible, but its impact on people's relationships depends on individual use.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to determine whether social media impacts Chinese college students' perceptions of romantic relationships and the potential ways to improve their well-being. While there was no significant adverse effect on their desire to enter intimate relationships, an association was found between the information disseminated by social media and college students' perceptions of romantic relationships. As they read increasing reports of negative relationships, these young adults begin to question the longevity of love. This led to the phenomenon that young adults are feared to start a relationship and are worried about whether their relationships might end suddenly. Besides, the popularized "perfect image" conveyed on social media can cause appearance anxiety, body image anxiety, ability anxiety, and thus lower self-confidence to enter a relationship. The study also found that there are gender dichotomy comments shown online under the news of negative intimate relationships, and the majority of the participants reported that they had seen these contents before. One noteworthy finding is that males are usually the target of attacks in these comments because most of the victims in the news are females. Infidelity is a factor that was a concern by fifty percent of the participants, suggesting that social media does bring more temptations to users due to network openness. Conversely, half of the young adults still agree that this is not a direct cause of partners' infidelity. Instead, infidelity should be attributed to the individual. Furthermore, the results also indicate that female college students have changed their views on romantic relationships because of the spread on the Internet that women should be financially and emotionally independent. They are highly educated, and instead of depending on others, they are taught to believe in themselves and think that gaining academic achievements are more essential than having romantic relationships. Nevertheless, there is little evidence to confirm that this result is entirely due to social media, and

other factors may indirectly contribute to this conclusion. Therefore, further research is needed to ensure a more in-depth investigation of the association between social media and young adults' perspectives toward intimate relationships.

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