

FACEBOOK:

CYBER-CUPID OR KISS OF DEATH?

AS WE STRUGGLE TO MANAGE ROMANCE IN THE AGE OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK, IS IT TIME TO UNFRIEND YOUR GIRLFRIEND?

WORDS MARIA HANNAH BASS ILLUSTRATION RODRIGO MOREIRA

You can't escape Facebook. Your mum, your nan and your cat are on it. We use it to plan nights out and to survey the carnage the morning after. With more than 30 million Brits now using the social networking site, it's become an everyday fact of life.

A love-life without Facebook is practically unthinkable. Pokes and private messages have replaced love letters and even dating websites, while the relationship status update has made the marriage announcement pages redundant.

On the other hand, when was the last time you bitched about an ex without mentioning Facebook? A 2011 study found that the site is mentioned in one third of UK divorce petitions. When it comes to love, is Facebook friend or foe?

FEEL YOU'RE BEING WATCHED?

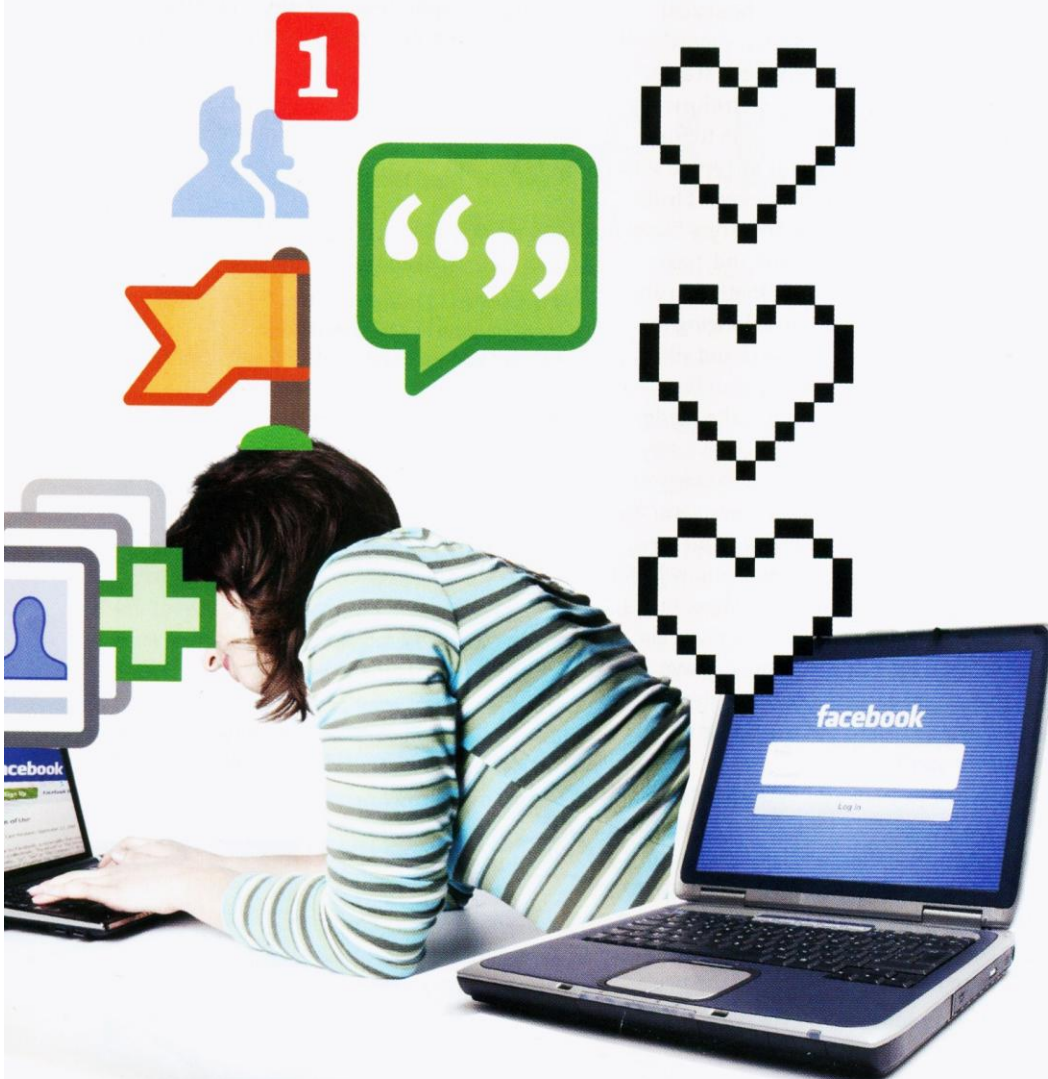
We've all done it. We've even given it a sinister nickname: Facebook "stalking". With just a few clicks I can see what my girlfriend was saying to her ex three years ago; I can scour the photographic evidence of her messy night out; I can hunt for conspicuously attractive women on her friends list.

"Facebook is exposing us to more triggers of jealousy than ever before," says social psychologist Amy Muise. Muise's research suggests that the more time we spend on Facebook, the more jealous we are likely to be of our partners. Muise calls it a "feedback loop": women prone to jealousy are more likely to seek out ammunition against their partner, and the more they find, the more time they spend looking.

If, as some experts believe, non-verbal communication makes up 40% of face-to-face communication, it's not surprising that Facebook "stalking" leads to misunderstanding and insecurity. Sometimes, it can even ruin relationships, as Cherry, 25, knows all too well.

"My girlfriend would go nuts at any little thing written on my wall," says Cherry. "A picture of me kissing my friend on the cheek would get blown out of all proportion. She'd constantly interrogate me: 'What's that post meant to mean? Why have they put so many kisses on the end of that message?'"

"If she saw something she didn't approve of, she would 'like' it or leave a sarcastic comment. I was forever apologising to friends for things she had written." Sick of the accusations, Cherry ended the relationship.



OPEN TO ABUSE

When we're not checking up on our own girlfriends, Facebook invites us to flick through our mates' loved-up wall posts and wedding albums. Sometimes it's enough to make you sick – especially if you don't feel your own relationship matches up.

Researchers at Stanford University have found that checking Facebook, with its relentlessly cheery news feed, can actually make us more miserable. And it's almost unbearable when the sickeningly happy updates are being posted by an ex.

Your ex can no longer fade away. In the Facebook age, you have to choose between receiving endless reminders of your ex or deleting them from your life with a euphemistic "unfriend".

Daniel Miller, renowned anthropologist and author of *Tales from Facebook*, says that thanks to Facebook, "There's a whole new morality around the way relationships end. Facebook has become the medium through which often a break-up is made known to the general public. Romantic relationships and break-ups are now less a private thing and more a public thing."

Anyone who's received the flood of messages after changing their relationship status to "single" (with its blunt broken heart symbol) will agree. And, with an audience for your breakup, it's all too tempting to "hang your dirty laundry out for everyone to see," as Katie says.

After Katie, 22, broke up with her civil partner of three years, she found her every move was monitored. "I had moved out but she still kept a constant watch on what I was doing and sent me threatening messages," says Katie. "Facebook makes it too easy for people to say things that they would never say to someone's face. And I found myself watching what she was doing, too. It was really hard to let go because I was always checking up on her."

"Eventually I made the decision just to delete my account because I was getting nowhere. Facebook allowed her to keep control over my life. It's so hard to move on when you're always being reminded of the person you just want to forget."

FINDING THE ONE

But while Facebook might have made break-ups harder, it's made hook-ups easier. If there's only six degrees of separation between us and everyone else on the planet then the social network surely makes it easier to find The One – or at least the one-night stand.

Collette, 27, was settled with a man, a mortgage and two kids, but something was missing. Then one day Nic, 26, commented on a post Collette had written about her Pink tattoo on a mutual friend's wall. Nic and Collette began messaging and eventually decided to meet up "in real life".

"At that first meeting – bang. That was it. I just knew," says Collette. She ended up leaving her partner, coming out to her family and getting engaged to Nic. "We only had one friend in common. If it weren't for Facebook I would never have met Nic and I wouldn't be as happy as I am today."

Facebook is the little black book for the 21st century. If you're savvy with the search function you need never again suffer a missed opportunity or a "sliding doors" moment.

Linda, 41, from Glasgow, hit it off with Andrea, 41, on a night out in Leeds – but they failed to swap numbers. Months later, Andrea recognised a comment on the Lip Service Facebook fan page and sent a private message. Fast-forward a few years and the long-distance lovers are now engaged.

"It's all thanks to Facebook," Linda says. "I was only in Leeds for one night so I would probably have never found her again otherwise. When people ask how we met, we just look at each other and start laughing. I do believe it was fate. We were obviously meant to be together."

UNFRIEND YOUR GIRLFRIEND

So what does Facebook mean for our love-lives? Daniel Miller says: "On the fringes there are relationships that only exist or only break up because of Facebook. But for most people Facebook will only have a small impact. Facebook is good for helping people get to know each other; it's bad for stalking and jealousy issues."

Facebook is not changing the nature of our relationships but the space in which they take place – a space which, according to Miller, is "neither private nor public. Easier access to more people and information only intensifies certain human traits, it doesn't create them".

So if you know you're prone to jealousy or insecurity, here are some tips to avoid losing your head over Facebook:

- Think before you type. Whether it's a snipe or a declaration of love, if you wouldn't march into your girlfriend's office and shout it, don't put it on Facebook.

- Remember that Facebook only shows us a distorted fragment of reality. Don't obsess over it. If you really need to get some perspective about a particular post, talk calmly to your partner.

- As in "real life", trust is the key. Don't write anything that you wouldn't feel comfortable showing your partner. If possible, swap passwords when things get serious – but don't obsessively log in.

If you're still not ready for the relationship 2.0, then take a tip from Lucy and her girlfriend, who aren't friends on Facebook. "We prefer to have two separate lives online," she says. "It sounds weird when I tell people but it works for us and that's all that matters." ①

