

Algorithm of Affection. How Social Media Re-Shapes the Expression of Love and Hate

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Abstract. *In a world in which the digital growth heavily transforms the way we live, our most powerful feelings, hate and love, redefine themselves, taking new shapes in the space of social media. Faced with a broader audience, the way we express our feelings changes and adapts to the new format and the new challenges which they are confronted with. This paper aims to discuss whether Gen Z, a generation that lived only in the era of smartphones and social media, is aware of the changes that digital revolution has produced in society, especially regarding the way we communicate our feelings in the social media environment.*

Keywords: *social media, love, hate, emotions.*

Introduction

While they now appear in spaces shaped by the digital revolution, the spectrum of essential human feelings that define our daily lives is continuously changing, ranging from the amplification of moments to the generation of dominant affective stereotypes. Fundamental emotions such as love and hate are redefined not only as emergent phenomena, but also as new projections in social environments and networks. As virtual spaces offer users ways to connect in an infinite number, our feelings often cross the thresholds of interpersonal relationships, transforming themselves into “public products”, consumable “commodities”, preferred by “models” and “counterexamples”, according to case studies. In my opinion, by opening up so many possibilities to connect, the virtual environment has created a topos that can amplify inner experiences. There we do not end up loving or hating more, but our manifestations intensify.

Theoretical considerations

The natural question is why does virtual space amplify intimate experiences? The answer, or at least part of the answer, mirrors the way people “reveal” themselves to each other. A love story about two people

captures their intimacy, rewritten as the story is projected into public space. In this way, the fictionalized “story” of Romeo and Juliet, with all the “disguises” of the variants in its internal creative laboratory, associated with William Shakespeare’s play, has a general-human aspect, but it is still an important reference for the symbolic imagination of the tragedy of unrequited love, because it had unprecedented public visibility - information circulates very slowly in such a world, compared to a virtual environment that we have so close to us today. Current love stories do not fundamentally differ from love stories of the past. But a very important dimension is completely different: the “story” we experience is, as such, existentially multiple — through the filter of the viewer, through the massive growth of the audience. Those around us are not just passive spectators, but are directly involved in the story, either appreciatively or through simulations of appreciation, which radically changes the norm of how the protagonists and the story itself or its development are manifested. Instead of the same recurring story, an external intervention transforms what love can be, in a completely different way than if it were manifested only on an intimate level. Because the audience in the age of social networks is one of our reality, when we know that what we do is visible in public, a certain ability is shaped in us to create a different manifestation, that of adapting our actions and emotions according to the reactions we receive. The “updates” of love gain specificity in agreement or disagreement with those who receive them, and virtual interactivity brings about fundamental changes: the public produces not only easy answers, but also material changes in the world around us. From this point of view, social networks are not only a form of passive consumption, but also an external intervention. For hate, the same public dimension is functional that intervenes and initiates major transformations in our reaction. Here, Gabriel Liiceanu discusses envy as the main inciting factor: “A person ends up hating another person either because of a lack or because of an excess of qualities that they both possess: intelligence, beauty, money, success, luck, etc.” [1] Hate is not enough, it is necessary to have the “manifestation” of the feeling, because the “manifestation” of hate is not fully connected to the hate itself. The empathic mechanism becomes rare in our world where we “exist” in the virtual environment that creates the illusion that there are no ramifications for our actions or words, and contempt for others — although not always individually or socially — is a

powerful tool to validate ourselves to the point of normativity. Because we are physically aware of our “rivals” — knowing them both through the mediation of our senses and on an intuitive level — we cannot treat them as an object “empty” of humanity, and this almost completely eliminates unfiltered manifestations of sensitivity on their part, of receptivity to their needs. By contrast, in the virtual space of social networks, the human profile presented to us is simply an object of “ideology,” an object that we almost involuntarily combat, because we have the illusion that our own “ideology” will be validated for us in this way and that our identity begins in the “traces” of the identity of the Other. This mechanism of self-identification cannot exist outside the relationship with the audience of viewers. This sense of need for validation manifests itself personally, especially in a setting where fans enthusiastically applaud and demand all sorts of public “harassment”—a trope of victim-aggressor entertainment and thus one relevant to the Roman arenas where gladiatorial contests (and the associated gladiator fights) took place. The “encouragements” (likes, appreciations, even laughter) found on social media have long since pushed the boundaries beyond the comfortable realms of public confrontation and instead settled into a favored arena of interpersonal conflict. Moreover, the moment the dispute becomes a virulent polemic, it becomes intense. From arguments for and against an idea, we begin to slide into sarcasm, insults, and personal attacks. It is not surprising, however, that social networks are capable of elevating conflictual content, where algorithms in virtual networks classify comments, reactions, and distributions as signifiers of a topic that actually deserves our real interest in a domain. Such a slide, from message to sender/receiver, is immediately noticeable — the object itself is not of interest, only the conflict. The object of dispute adopts secondary status. Here, the idea of identity gives way to ideology, so that the fight against ideas is frequently a fight against an identity, with a generalized sense of online aggression that is favorable to personal “fights” and limited only to debating an issue with the parties involved. Thus, the usual types of interactive assistance common to online polemics are not reactions to participants’ responses — they are supportive mediations, with messages, and rarely, are potentially violent ideological distributions or affiliations with one of the parties. A potential taxonomy we suggest is the following:

Supportive likes. These could be in the form of likes or “hearts” indicating support for answers, arguments in favor of the side of the participants. Support is minimal. Appreciation, although generally understood, rather configures a partisanship - for what is wanted to be argued in the same message, in the same answer, but also for who delivers it, the author of the respective answer. The virtual “spectators” of a dispute are not concerned with what is said, but with the individual who made the comment. Whether it is a convincing or incoherent argument, the supportive like serves to keep the opponent in the verbal fight. So, there is a difference between validating the argument and the way of encouraging the participants - we support our participants through different amounts of likes received. Or reactions - a similar type of feedback - through comments like “correct!”, “bravo!”, “well said!”, “excellent!” etc.

Downgrading laughter (*„laughter of degradation”).* By publicly assuming the mockery of the other party, the content of the message used uses humor, irony, sarcasm, ridicule to deconstruct the position of the "adversary". It is not about valorizing the ideology/identity of the supported group; it is about devaluing the ideology/identity of the opponents. Reactions defined by comments such as "you told them right!" also fall into the same category. Or those that intensify the mockery through sarcasm and derision.

Removal from the communication process. Most "mocking comments" do not appeal to the sender or receiver, but rather to the viewers, by using the third person instead of the second person. Instead of "what a great thing you said!" or "what a great thing he said!" (second person), with probably frivolous variations, the expression "what a great thing he said" (third person) is used. Furthermore, the use of the third person in reference to the "adversary" in an online dispute represents another type of contempt, "degrading" the other in this way suggesting that the sender is more worthy and does not address the receiver; the receiver has no substance in return, so that, in fact, the receiver does not seem to be part of that communication. Furthermore, a conversation with one's own supporters potentiates the external isolation of the "enemy" in a discourse of ideological vacuity.

Devaluation reactions These are defined reactions directed at the opponents' message, which are manifested, in case of disapproval, by emoticons such as the thumbs down or middle finger raised, red X, displeased face, rolling eyes face, raised eyebrow face, disappointed face, slap face, vomiting face, etc.

The reaction of devaluation of the message transmitted by the opposing camp is often analogous to the expression found in the world in its own camp: the laughing emoji. It ironizes a supposed lack of arguments, with sarcastic laughter reflecting a form of marginalization and marking a mechanism for degrading content that does not conform to the ideology of its own camp.

Hunting for mistakes. Frequently involved here is the "hunt" for grammatical and logical errors, and the explanation reveals the strategy of putting the opponent at a disadvantage. Now it is obvious that it is not the content of the message that is of interest, but rather its form, implicitly the level of knowledge of the sender. Honestly, the message can be translated as "if you can't even write correctly, what expectations can we have of you being logical and argumentative in your speech?"

The inventory of intervention strategies in "controversies" on social networks is open, the ones discussed previously representing a small part of the strategies through which the virtual public manifests its online interactivity, often exacerbated in the sense of amplifying it towards activating hostile intervention methods, which develop "friendship" relationships with social network algorithms. Antithetically, if we talk about the agora of sentimental relationships, things are different. The reactions are fundamentally favorable, even if the motivation behind the producers of sentimental content reflects the same sources as in the case of hate: public validation of their own choices, actions, activities and, in general, the way in which participants virtually consume their sentimental story.

Case study. To demonstrate the relevance of the above theoretical considerations and to further open the debate on how we perceive love and hate as shaped by virtual space, we developed a 16-question questionnaire [2], which we distributed to young people from Generation Z. We limited the participation to this segment because it is the category of the population that, unlike those born earlier, has not lived outside the paradigm of social networks. Practically all those born after 1997 were at most teenagers at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, when the first social networks appeared and especially when the explosion of smartphones took place, which facilitated the widespread use of these networks. In other words, the participants in the questionnaire had the opportunity to own smartphones and connect to Facebook, then Instagram and later to TikTok, WhatsApp, etc.,

from the first moments of their conscious life. They did not own other types of phones (with buttons) and even less did they use fixed audio connections. For this category, social networks were a given from the very beginning, which means that their communication habits did not undergo any transformation throughout their lives, as happened to those born earlier than the first half of the 90s. Generation Z did not have to go through a behavioral change in terms of public communication; for them, things are largely similar. Keeping the previous generations in this study would have led to hybrid results on the one hand and, on the other hand, would have altered the conclusions of the research for the simple reason that, having grown up in a different communication system than the one dominated by social networks, they would have been tempted to give answers that would have been valid (also) in the absence of the social networks paradigm.

The main hypotheses of the research were the following:

1. Young people are aware that they argue more on social media than in real life, face to face, and that their perception of social media is that it fosters conflict.
2. Most of those who witness online conflicts are just observers, with interventions to defuse situations being rare. Moreover, those who encourage the aggressor are as many as those who support the victim.
3. Young people are aware that the physical absence of the other person makes a discussion degenerate into conflict much more easily.
4. Similarly, in the case of love, the physical absence of the other person at least partially eliminates the filter of shame, with social media being much more convenient for approaching someone for a romantic relationship.
5. Generation Z is aware that social media influences romantic relationships.

Presentation of results. Based on the questionnaire that was administered on Google Forms, 146 young respondents were born between 1997 and 2010, including the following: four in 2010 (2.8%), three in 2009 (2.1%), five in 2008 (3.5%), 16 in 2007 (11.1%), 34 in 2006 (23.6%), 23 in 2005 (16%), nine in 2004 (6.2%), nine in 2003 (6.3%), 13 in 2002 (9%), 12 in 2001 (8.3%), nine in 2000 (6.3%), two in 1999 (1.4%), three in 1998 (2.1%), and four in 1997 (2.7%).

Most of them are, therefore, high school students or recent graduates or are at the age of their first jobs.

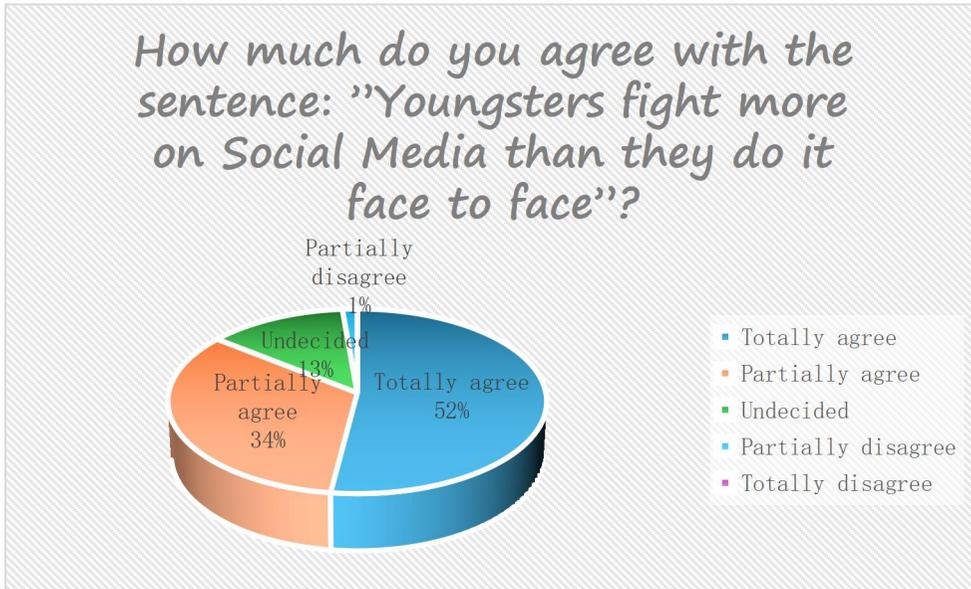


Figure 1.

In the first question in the sample (see Figure 1), respondents had to answer the question “Do young people argue more on social media than they do face to face?” More than half of the participants (75, representing a percentage of 52.1%) were in the **total agreement** with this, while a considerable proportion of participants (49 respondents - 34%) were **partially agree**. Together, these two categories indicating agreement constitute an overwhelming percentage (> 86%). Since the third most indicated response (**so and so**, the response of those undecided or unable to make a clear assessment) represented 12.5% of the options, it becomes clear that very few respondents are **in disagreement** with this statement. While only two (1.4%) expressed partial disagreement, none of the young people who completed the questionnaire opted for the position of total disagreement. The results indicated that young people from Generation Z are perfectly aware that the social media space is one that predisposes more than offline life to arguments, for reasons not inventoried here, thus confirming the first working hypothesis of this study.

How much do you think Social Media encourages conflicts?

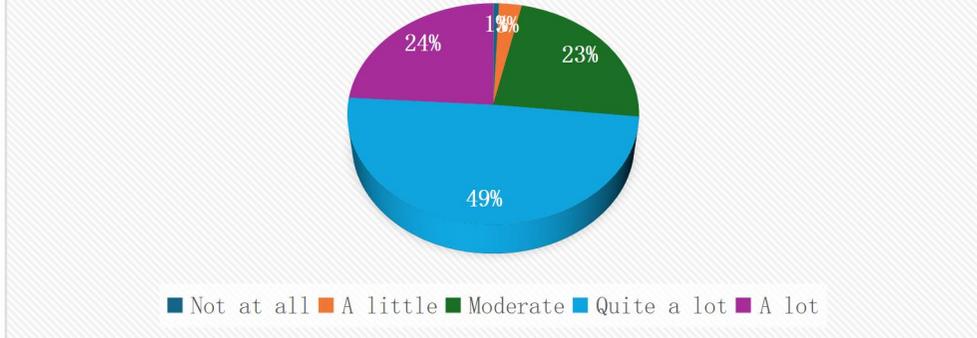


Figure 2.

The second answer (see Figure 2) reinforces the hypothesis proposed in the first answer with a slight variability. Only five answers, more than three percent, suggest that conflicts are not prioritized at all on social networks, while almost 95% agree that social networks promote, to some extent, dissension on social networks partly through algorithms, while about half of the survey participants agree that the virtual space is structured in such a way that it has quite strong preferences towards disputes. Moreover, almost a quarter of the participants (35, or 24.3%) specifically appreciated that this happens mostly, choosing the answer in this way. Thus, their idea supports that the network space is built around algorithms that generate more conflict - and more disputes - than in real life, and that such a strategy is implemented in practice, but most of the time people are prone to escalate the heated debates in which they engage, the polarization being largely attributed to the algorithms.

Have you ever witnessed /
participated / been involved in a
situation on hate speech or online
harassment?

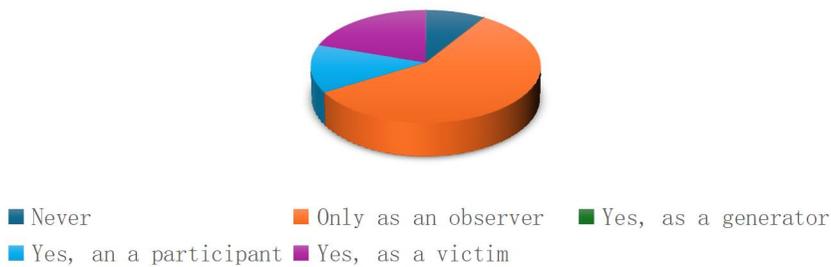


Figure 3.

Respondents were most often involved in at least one instance where hatred materialized, as indicated by the results of the third question (see figure 3), while only nine percent reported never having seen conflicts online. The remaining over 90 percent witnessed, generated, encouraged conflicts or tried to smooth them over. One in five says they have been a victim of a conflict situation and almost 14% say they have been actively involved in conflicts. None created (or do not recognize) any conflict, and most of the young people who completed the questionnaire admitted their passivity, emphasizing that they were only observers.

In case you have participated / assisted, your reaction was:

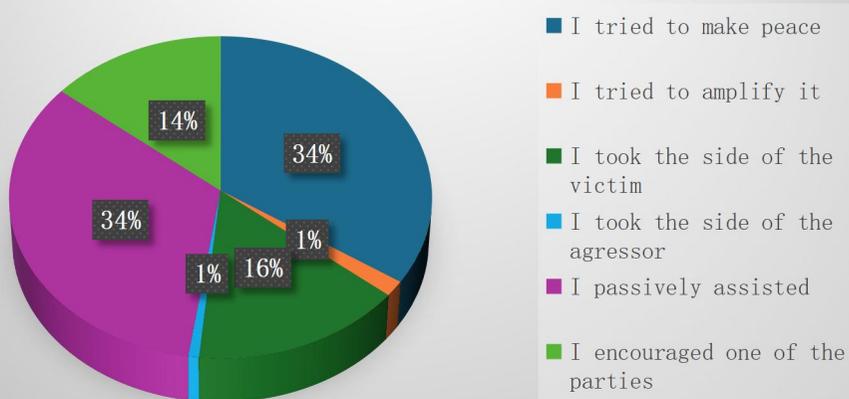


Figure 4.

The responses to this question regarding involvement in online bullying situations should be correlated with those in the subsequent question (see Figure 4), which attempted to explain how those who witnessed the above-mentioned situation reacted. This represents a large, albeit approximate, percentage of those who tried to defuse the situation, most likely the largest of those available for responses, which were rated the same as those who said they watched passively, approximately 33-34%. Very few responses say they exacerbated the conflict or supported the aggressor at the expense of the victims, while 16% of participants offered a helping hand to the victim, slightly more than the number who said they encouraged one of the participants.

How much do you agree with this sentence: " People are more aggressive on Social Media than in real life?"

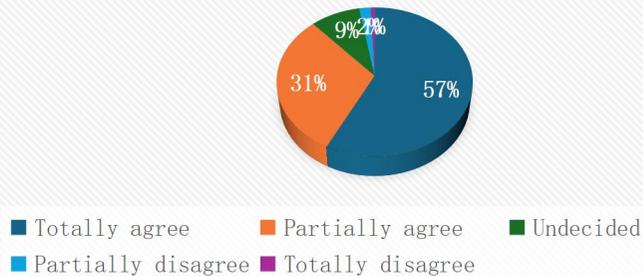


Figure 5.

As it stands, a staggering 88.3% of the people in the questionnaire (see figure 5) would agree (57.5% agree) or partly agree (30.8% agree) with the statement "people are more aggressive on social media than in real life". Indeed, only four of the young respondents disagreed (totally or partly) with the sentence in this question, while the "undecided" (so and so) represent a minority of less than ten percent. The findings validate that the participants in the questionnaire seem to maintain a certain degree of consistency in the answers they were able to provide, which is surprising, since several of the questions were trying to identify essentially the same thing, even if there are subtle nuances from one question to another.

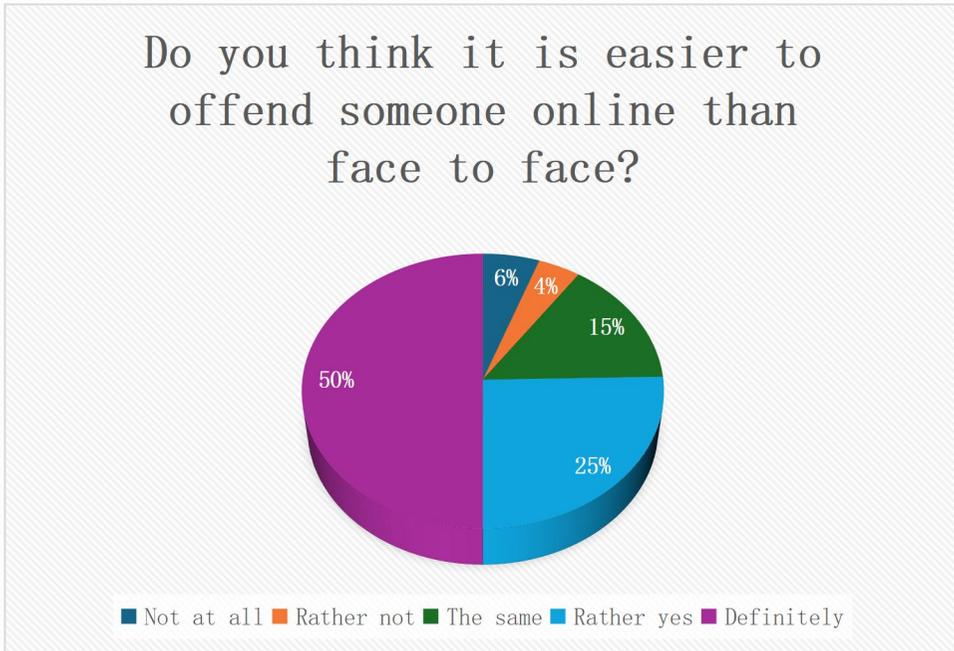


Figure 6.

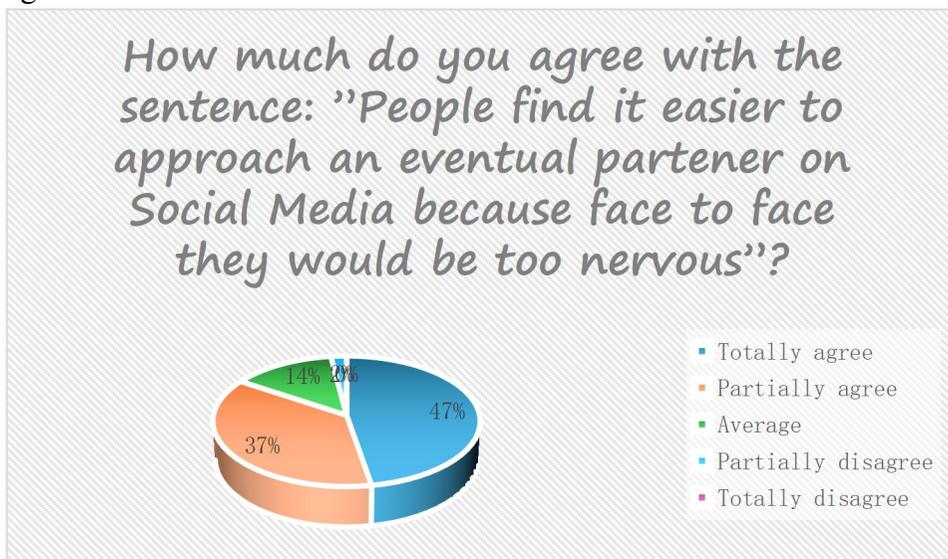


Figure 7.

There is also consistency between the two questions that are about how courage is perceived online versus courage in a direct relationship. 50% of respondents expressed complete agreement with two statements regarding the two concepts: love and hate ("It is easier for people to insult someone

online than face to face” and “It is easier to approach a partner on social media than face to face because of how nervous the person would be face to face”). Both questions draw attention to an implicit level of courage when it comes to expressing strong emotions in public. In other words, both hate and love need to be expressed publicly, and the virtual space seems to support them. In both circumstances, in love and in hate, online distance has effects: people are bolder both in reacting to insults and in declaring their love. The empathy filter disappears in the phenomenon of hate, the shame filter disappears in that of love.

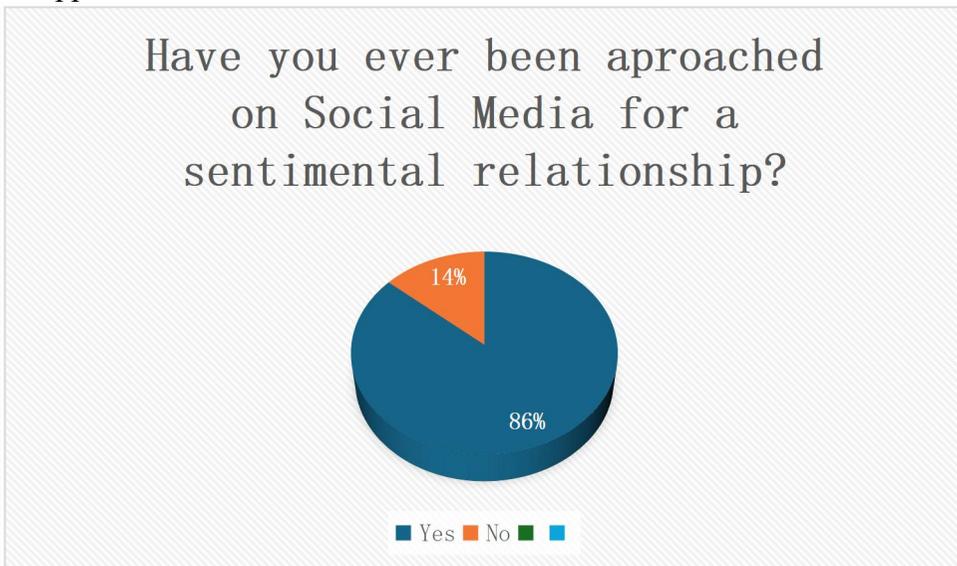


Figure 8.

Social media dating is widespread today, for the reasons explained above. 52.1% of respondents admitted to having made advances through messages themselves, a more pronounced aspect visible in the question of whether they had been approached (Figure 8). A large percentage, more than 86%, said yes; only 13% said that this had not happened to them. It suggests a clear indication that Generation Z is starting to embrace digital romantic relationships at least in the first part. Both in a confrontational situation and before moving on to a potential romantic story where physical presence seems to be in direct contact with the other party, inhibitions appear and communication filters should be added. So, in real life, in the case of love, this is bad, but in the case of conflict, this is good. By implication, the opposite seems to be true in the online context, as the absence of inhibitions leads to negative consequences in the manifestation of hate, but benefits

from positive consequences in the manifestation of love. That is, the real space makes it impossible for them to argue, but also to publicly communicate their feelings, and the online space encourages them to both argue and declare their love. Nothing good happens without the involvement of a negative aspect.

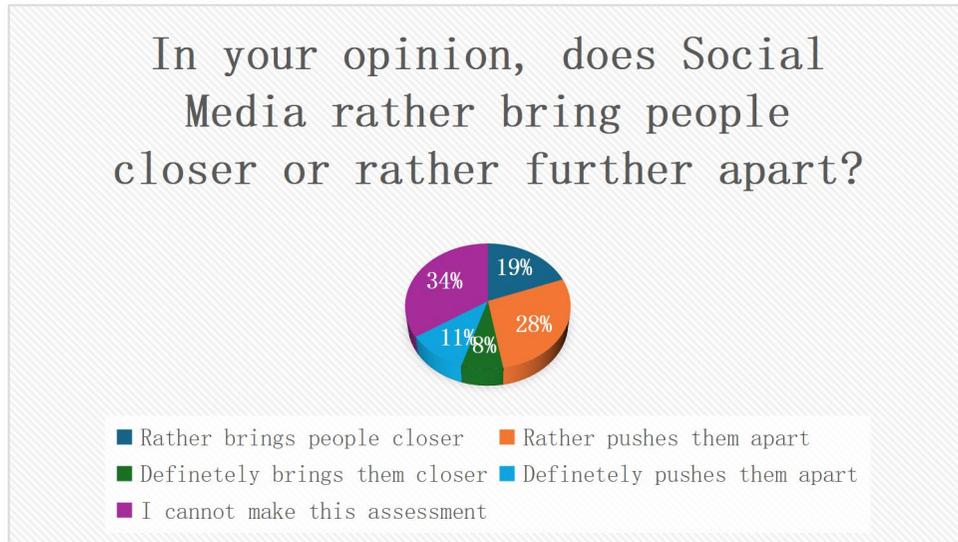


Figure 9.

Opinions are divided when it comes to assessing the impact of social media on users' social behavior. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to comment on their general feelings or whether social media generally brings people closer or further apart (Figure 9). The largest sample of 34% (the highest percentage) chose the answer "I cannot make this assessment", while almost 20% were moderately favorable, selecting the answer "rather yes", and 7.5% were categorically favorable to the statement, indicating the answer "definitely yes". A slightly larger number, however, disagreed with the statement, believing that social media **rather remove** people (28%) or **it definitely keeps them away**(11%). Overall, survey participants are likely to agree that social media has a negative impact on interpersonal relationships and, despite the apparent advantages of digital socialization, individuals should maintain a measure of face-to-face contact.

Conclusions. While the virtual space of social networks amplifies human experiences (the latter, in essence, denuding isolation, loneliness, experiences not shared with others), love and hate assume new forms of

expression in online culture, so that their forms of expressivity in the digital environment increase. People will not “argue” less often and will not “declare” their love for each other, expressions of feelings being amplified with the adoption of digital platforms. The idea that the development of technology that leads either to increased relationships between people or to the opposite of socialization cannot be accepted - is a currently provocative perspective in the field of communication sciences. In the final questions of this study, participants acknowledged that, whether online or not, it is very easy nowadays for people to become insecure, even if we are closer or further from each other. “These days, whether you’re online or offline, it’s very easy for people to become unsure about if we are closer together or further apart,” says researcher Sherry Turkle, a fact that proved to be true among survey participants. Regardless of our perception of human relationships, it’s undeniable that virtual space, especially social media, greatly amplifies emotions. While social media greatly influences this inner-psychological shift, we are often the loneliest; yet the virtual “fiction” we’ve tried to maintain reflects the idea that there is a community attached to us (that we can access whenever we want), without the constraints of physical distance. We are, instead, components of parts; the presence of physical distances is transformed into virtual interactions, and so our interactions (albeit amplified by them) are still simulated.