

Real-Time to FaceTime: The Trepidations of Teen Romance

Suspended like a trapeze artist performing before a crowd collectively holding its breath, teenagers are awkwardly wedged in limbo between youth and adulthood. Jilted by the joys of childhood, they cannonball into the rocky waters of puberty seemingly overnight. During this time of such mental and emotional fragility, teenagers experience many inhibitions, a product of the unique interplay between neural plasticity, hormonal swings, and environmental context. Miraculously, this generation of monosyllabic, acne-studded mammoths has shed their inhibitions at the urging of social media, and have even become forthright in one of the most dangerous, harrowing pursuits known to man: *romance*.

An onslaught of hormones and gradual molding and remolding of brain matter whiplashes many teenagers into shackles of the gripping fear of judgment, rejection, and humiliation- a feeling unknown to none, and unfortunately, largely debilitating. Rest assured that this acute sense of self-awareness is not attributed to something inherently wrong with teenagers, while other things may be, but rather, deep biological underpinnings. For example, greater peer interaction among adolescents renders them particularly receptive to peer evaluation. This age-dependent sensitivity manifests itself in connectivity between the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC) and striatum, brain regions involved in “the processing of motivational...and contextual signals to mediate context-dependent learning and behavior” (Somerville et al.). This phenomenon is perfectly exemplified by the almost reflexive act of teens visibly stiffening their muscles in the presence of the opposite sex or amalgamating into socially stratified huddles at a school dance. Similarly, functional magnetic resonance imaging has found that the peak in MPFC stimulation in response to imminent *or* perceived social evaluation was at 15.25 years of

age. Therefore, much like a breathalyzer toxicologically assesses a drunk driver's blood alcohol content, brain scans of MPFC activity can gauge one's inhibitions in social contexts.

What's more, the circuitry of the human brain is not fully wired until the early twenties, which may account for the parallel immaturity that teens exhibit in their social interactions.

Harvard Health reports, "Beginning at puberty, the brain is reshaped. Neurons (gray matter) and synapses (junctions between neurons) proliferate in the cerebral cortex and are...gradually pruned throughout adolescence." Not unlike how a bear may pack on pounds to prepare for its winter hibernation, the fatty sheath called myelin insulating nerve fibers to facilitate the transmission speed of neuronal signals thickens. Therefore, teenagers have not yet reaped the benefits of emotional learning capacities dictated by the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala that would likely ablate them of their inhibitions ("The Adolescent Brain: Beyond"). Teens' gradual brain metamorphosis is accompanied by a torrential cascade of "adrenal stress hormones, sex hormones, and growth hormone" into blood circulation, akin to a sugar high, that pique sexual interest (Lenhart, Smith, and Anderson). Paradoxically, while they are towering in physique, this discordant duet of neurological and hormonal changes dwarfs teenagers' confidence, heightens their inhibitions, and flaunts their gangliness in the pursuit of romance.

Astoundingly, a phenomenon called 'online disinhibition' relies on modern-day technology to combat inhibitions that arise from these timeless, pretty well-cemented biological processes. Online 'disinhibition' is the knockdown of psychological restraints on one's behavior, or the blinding of the watchful, scrutinizing eye of none other but one's own conscience in an online social environment (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak). This is observed through "reduced behavioral inhibitions, a lowered regard for behavioral boundaries while in cyberspace,

and...various online interpersonal behaviors which can be positive or negative.” There are numerous factors this phenomenon is attributed to, one of which is unidentifiability. Online, personal details like gender, weight, and age are unknown while offline, people are identified solely on appearance. This anonymity fosters the formation of close relationships sans discrimination. It also imparts a sense of control or empowerment over self-disclosure (the sharing of personal information) to users, which leads to more intimacy and openness.

Peer romantic relationships are like a status symbol for teens that represents their popularity and triumph over the physical as well as social and emotional growth spurts of life’s awkward stage. Facilitated by the rise of technology, social media is inextricably entwined with the manifestation of online disinhibition in millennials’ romantic ventures. For example, online zones facilitate flirting and ‘courtship’ with current and prospective significant others (Lenhart, Smith, and Anderson). Despite having their tongues tied in reality, 50% of all teens have exhibited fluency in the tongue of online communication- ‘liking’, commenting, and ‘friending’ on social media to convey their interest to a crush. This can be linked to the online disinhibition effect, as teens cite having heightened boldness over text, which manifests itself in more intimate self-disclosure.

However, one may find that tearing through the flesh of the sweet, tangy fruit of online disinhibition can leave a bitter aftertaste. For instance, the sense of curation that online disinhibition gives to social media users over their online personas may lead to seemingly complete abandonment of one’s true self and like cubic zirconia, its artificiality fails to go unnoticed. Correspondingly, 85% of teen social media users concur that social media mobilizes a different side of people and a simultaneous 75% believe that people are less authentic on social

media than in real life (Lenhart, Smith, and Anderson). Aziz Ansari in *Modern Romance*, a book so refreshingly candid and relatable about love in the twenty-first century that it arouses the slight suspicion that the authors have been stalking their reader's Facebook relationship status, succinctly describes the dichotomy between others' impression of you from online and your true personality as your "phone-world self" versus your "real-world self" (Ansari and Klinenberg 47).

Similarly, some teens endorse sexting, or the sharing of sexually explicit content using ephemeral social media interactions on mobile devices, and cite it as a 'confidence booster'. In fact, Ansari reports, "One third of older teens have sent a sext." (Ansari and Klinenberg 179). Sexting is extraordinarily jeopardizing for teens because given their hormonally 'jacked' bodies and the fling-like quality of their relationships, jealousy and anger after a messy breakup can cause supposedly innocent 'sexts' to shape-shift into revenge pornography, traumatic court trials, and legal paper trails.

Another issue is that online communication may espouse inhibitions. Sometimes, technology can unintentionally heighten transparency of one's feelings in a negative light instead of providing a safe haven for one to venture beyond the confines that he or she sets on his or her personality. For example, there seems to be an unspoken etiquette for the pursuit of online romance as "a cultural consensus has slowly formed in regard to texts" (Ansari and Klinenberg 57). Many tech-savvy teens avoid scrolling through someone's online profile extensively and 'liking' an old photo unless they are ready to sensationalize their feelings, as they risk unnerving the profile owner who would receive a digital notification of one's sudden interest in their profile (Lenhart, Smith, and Anderson). Also, in a clumsy do-si-do of online communication, one may ignore text messages for extended periods of time "so as not to seem too eager and to ultimately

make herself more desirable” or devote hours to crafting the perfect response (Ansari and Klinenberg 57). In turn, if one initiates a relationship via text and is met with no reply, he or she typically begins a thorough deconstruction of the content and timing of the message and like the classic breakup line, claim that the issue is with themselves, not their prospective lovers. Hence, despite two people being on the same wavelength based on mutual interest, technology serves to heighten their paranoia and fracture their communication.

Perhaps it was not so much a work of God as it was an inevitability predated by the pervasiveness of technology in society, but teenagers have shed their inhibitions in romance with the assistance of social media. However, this modern development is two-pronged, as technology can sometimes ultimately fuel more inhibitions and mania about one’s online presence than alleviate them. Despite the transition from ‘real-time to FaceTime’ and a newfound dependency on technology that may be handicapping millennials of basic face-to-face interaction, what must remain constant is being the most candid version of oneself, just like the unpixelated snapshots captured by Apple’s latest iPhones. Because civilization has managed to evolve from romance ignited by tin-can telephones strung between neighboring houses, the superseding lesson is we should not resist putting ourselves out there, because sadly, more often than not, we fall victim to our own fears.

Works Cited

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Alternate Book Cover:

MODERN ROMANCE

Aziz Ansari with Eric Klinenberg

"a perfect match"

About 1,000,000,000,000+ compatible matches

Search instead for: Real-time interactions to form lasting and meaningful connections



"Between 2005 and 2012, online dating was *the* single biggest way people met their spouses. Bigger than work, friends, and school *combined*."

Ever ignore someone's text message to avoid seeming desperate or spend hours agonizing over crafting the perfect response? Purposely avoid "liking" a special someone's latest Instagram post to heighten your desirability? Well, guess what? You're not the only one. We used to think there being plenty of fish in the sea, or rather cyberspace, is a panacea to all of our dating problems. However, learning about a series of sociological investigations across time and space may dramatically change your mindset of relationships and dating. Refreshingly candid and relatable about love in the 21st century, *Modern Romance* will arouse the slight suspicion that Ansari and Klinenberg have been stalking your Facebook relationship status.