Coping with Romantic Relationship Dissolution:

The Role of Social Media

by

Elzaan Cothill

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Supervisor: Ms. T. Lambert

Co-Supervisor: Prof. J.G. Howcroft
Declaration

I, Elzaan Cothill (student number: 213381397) hereby declare that the treatise for MA Psychology (Counselling) to be awarded is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another University or for another qualification.

Elzaan Cothill

In accordance with Rule G4.6.3,

4.6.3 A treatise/dissertation/thesis must be accompanied by a written declaration on the part of the candidate to the effect that it is his/her own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment to another University or for another qualification. However, material from publications by the candidate may be embodied in a treatise/dissertation/thesis.
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Abstract
Individuals utilise social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter to communicate and stay in touch with romantic partners and to maintain relationships. SNSs also play a role in connecting individuals to each other – it enables users to gain a better understanding of the self and to develop meaningful relationships with others. It is used to share personal experiences and is frequently used as a means of social support. Making use of social media can therefore also play a role in coping with relationship dissolution, both at the time of the dissolution and during the post-dissolution stages of the romantic relationship. Lazarus’ Stress and Coping Theory, as well as aspects of Social Interactionist Theory, were utilised as a theoretical framework to conceptualise coping strategies and online behaviour. The aim of the study was to create a detailed description of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. The study was a qualitative, phenomenological study and participants were obtained using purposive and snowball sampling. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were used to collect the data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Based on the findings of the researcher, social media can be both advantageous and disadvantageous in coping with relationships dissolution. Moreover, using social media in order to cope during and after relationship dissolution indicated adaptive coping in the short-term, and maladaptive coping in the long-term. This study has therefore generated an understanding of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution.

Key concepts: Coping, phenomenology, relationship dissolution, social networking sites
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Method</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research procedure.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Underpinning</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of Presentation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Relationship Dissolution</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive appraisal</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Process of Coping</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modes of coping.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping resources</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping and Relationship Dissolution</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with relationship dissolution</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post dissolution relationships</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media and Coping with Relationship Dissolution</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberspace and SNSs</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences on online behaviour.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivations for utilising SNSs</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNS use and Coping</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Relationship Dissolution and the Role of SNS</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological research</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection measures</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants and sampling</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research procedure</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional approval</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher integrity and competence</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher bias</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness of data analysis and findings</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed consent</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Foundation

The present research study aims to explore the subjective, lived experiences of participants in order to provide a rich description of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. This will generate an understanding of how social media can be utilised to aid coping behaviour for individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution. A qualitative phenomenological approach has been utilised in order to obtain the essence and meaning of participants’ subjective, lived experiences of how social media plays a role in coping with relationship dissolution.

Relevance

Interpersonal relationships form a significant part of individuals’ daily lives. According to Reis and Rusbult (2004), close relationships (such as romantic relationships) can have powerful psychological and physical effects on people’s well-being. Kamp Dush and Amato (2005) found that being in a committed romantic relationship is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being. Other benefits of being in a romantic relationship include: companionship, feelings of happiness, feeling loved, loving another individual, intimacy, self-enhancement, self-understanding, and higher levels of self-esteem (Sedikides, Oliver & Campbell, 1994). Although there are certain benefits involved in being in a romantic relationship, not all romantic relationships are reciprocal and maintained.

The termination of romantic relationships can be caused by several factors; however, the reason for a particular breakup has not necessarily been found to be associated with distress (Chung et al., 2003). Individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution, regardless of the cause, may suffer from the effects of the breakup. These effects include signs of post-traumatic stress (Chung et al. (2003), decline in life satisfaction (Oriña, Collins, Simpson, Salvatore, Haydon & Kim, 2011), and emotional and physical distress (Chung et
Although the nature of romantic relationships, causative factors associated with romantic relationship dissolution, and the effects of romantic relationship dissolution are important aspects that create the context of the present study, exploring these aspects is not the focus of the present study. The focus of the present study involves the consideration of how individuals act in response to romantic relationship dissolution. That is, what do individuals, affected by relationship dissolution, do in order to manage and cope with the distress and changes brought on by relationship dissolution? More specifically related to this study, is a consideration of how individuals make use of social media and social networking in order to cope with relationship dissolution.

In recent years, social media and using social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, have become part of many people’s daily lives (Merten & Williams, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter & Espinoza, 2008). People worldwide are involved in daily interactions with other online users of social media (Merten & Williams, 2009). Since the focus of the present research study involves how social media may be used in coping with relationship dissolution, it is important to note that previous literature indicates that it may be likely that SNSs play a significant role in coping in general, and there seems to be a link between relationship dissolution and the use of SNSs in various ways (Bevan, Pfyl & Barclay, 2012; Darvell, Walsh & White, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Marshall, 2012; Merten & Williams, 2009; Pennington, 2013; Sauti, 2012; Tong, 2013). It is therefore likely that individuals who have experienced a relationship breakup may utilise SNSs to better cope with the effects of relationship dissolution, both at the time of the breakup, and after the breakup. The present study is therefore important since it will
contribute to enhancing understanding of how social media can be utilised to aid coping behaviour for individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution.

The present study also falls within the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University’s multidisciplinary research theme of cyber-citizenship. The present study falls within the subtheme of cyber-relationships.

Research Method

Design.

Exploring the role that social media may play in relationship dissolution is done by approaching the present research study in a qualitative phenomenological manner. Exploring the essences of meanings and interpretations of the phenomenon is the focus of a qualitative researcher (Merriam, 2002; Willig, 2001). The phenomenon in question (the role of social media in relationship dissolution) involves individuals’ subjective, lived experiences and meaning-making of the role of social media in coping with the breakup. The present study utilises the specific principles of phenomenology in its design. By applying a process of outside, intuitive and critical reflection using phenomenological principles, individuals’ conscious experiences can be used to explore the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. Formalising these reflective processes of meaning making, and eliminating any objective beliefs about the phenomenon that the researcher may have, allow for a description of the true essence of experience to emerge (Garza, 2007). Obtaining a description of the essence of participants’ experience of the role of social media in coping with romantic relationship dissolution is what the present research study aims to achieve.

Data Collection

Participants needed for data collection were obtained by means of purposive and snowball sampling. Certain inclusion criteria determined the suitability of participants. Criteria included: participants must be 18 years or older, living in the Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape
area; participants must have experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship, caused by either themselves or their partner, in the last 12 months; and participants must be active in terms of following or posting feeds on SNSs. Participants of any gender, race or sexual orientation were included in the present study. The language used for the interview process was English. The participants therefore needed to be comfortable communicating in English.

Suitability of participants to the study was confirmed by asking prospective participants to fill in a biographical questionnaire with questions pertaining to inclusion criteria. Once the suitability of the participants was established, data was obtained through individual, in-depth, unstructured interviews in order to allow the participants to describe their subjective, lived experience of the phenomena being studied. After the initial, general open-ended question: ‘Please tell me about your experience of using social networking sites in order to cope with your breakup’ was asked, the researcher probed in order to elicit specific descriptions of the experiences mentioned. Furthermore, the researcher conducted the interviews using interviewing techniques such as active listening, open-ended questions related to the participant’s experience, clarifying and empathy. Data was gathered until data saturation was reached, whereby no more new or relevant information emerged from the interviews.

**Research procedure.**

After establishing the sampling procedure and inclusion criteria, the researcher advertised the requirements and inclusion criteria needed to participate in the study in a local newspaper. Individuals interested in participating in the study responded to the newspaper article by contacting the researcher. Once the inclusion criteria were verified, suitable participants were given an information letter informing the participants of the nature of the present study, confidentiality issues and other issues pertaining to the research. Thereafter, an interview date and time was established with each participant. At the outset of each interview, a biographical
questionnaire and consent form was completed by the participants. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device. Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber. The transcribed interviews were then analysed according to phenomenological principles. Specifically, the method of thematic data analysis was utilised. Upon completion of the research study, each participant will receive a summary of the findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

Various ethical principles should be employed in doing a research study, in order to enhance the ethical standing of the study (Preissle, 2008). Ethical principles that were taken into consideration in the present study include: institutional approval, maintaining researcher integrity and competence, ensuring the exclusion of researcher bias, trustworthiness of analysis and findings, informed consent, confidentiality, and ethical dissemination of results (Terre Blanch, Durrheim & Painter 2006). Furthermore, the principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and autonomy were employed (HPCSA, 2008). By adhering to these ethical principles, the research study could be conducted with a high ethical standard.

**Theoretical Underpinning**

The concept of coping, as well as the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution, will be defined and explored in detail. In this sense, utilising a theoretical framework aimed at providing a way in which to understand the concept of coping and all that it entails is appropriate. Lazarus’ (1993) Stress and Coping Theory will therefore be utilised, as this theory operationalises various aspects and functions of coping relevant to the present study. Furthermore, in order to operationalise online behaviour and the use of social media, certain contributions from Symbolic Interactionist Theory, as it pertains to online behaviour, will be utilised in providing a contextual and theoretical underpinning in this regard.
Structure of Presentation

The structure of this research treatise is as follows:

Chapter 1: The introduction to, and relevance of, the research study and process.

Chapter 2: The literature, infiltrated with explanations from the Stress and Coping Theory, encompassing coping behaviour, with specific attention to coping with relationship dissolution.

Chapter 3: The literature, infiltrated with relevant theoretical explanations, encompassing social media and how it relates to coping with relationship dissolution.

Chapter 4: A detailed discussion of the research methodology, including aspects such as research design, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5: This chapter presents and discusses the research findings.

Chapter 6: A summary of the methodology and findings that concludes the study. This chapter also includes strengths and limitations of the present study, recommendations for future research, as well as the researcher’s personal reflections.

Summary

The aims of this chapter were to 1) contextualise the present study by providing relevant background information; 2) orientate the reader to the nature of the study and to provide motivation for the relevance of this particular research study; 3) present an outline of the research process and theoretical framework; and 4) provide the structure and outline of the chapters. Chapter two involves the literature and theory that encompass coping behaviour, with specific attention to coping with relationship dissolution.
Coping with Relationship Dissolution

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the concept of coping and related factors, including psychological stress, cognitive appraisal, threat, adaptation, modes of coping, and coping resources. These factors are important in the present study, since the overarching phenomenon addressed by the research study is coping. The concept of coping is therefore defined and explored in detail in the majority of this chapter, in order to provide a rich understanding of how it may play a role in coping with relationship dissolution (discussed towards the end of this chapter). Its significance will also be of relevance in the following chapter, where the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution will be discussed. In this regard, utilising a theoretical framework aimed at providing a way in which to understand the concept of coping and all that it entails, is appropriate. Lazarus’ (1993) Stress and Coping Theory will therefore be utilised, as this theory operationalises various aspects and functions of coping relevant to the present study. This theory, in conjunction with other relevant literature on stress and coping, will be explored in this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter provides insight into more specific coping processes involved in relationship dissolution.

Coping

Coping can be defined as thoughts and actions that are aimed at alleviating or managing the effects or consequences of a situation that is appraised as stressful (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen & DeLongis, 1986). From this definition of coping, it is evident that there are several aspects to consider in the broad concept or process of coping. Firstly, there needs to be a situation in which stress is experienced. Latack, Kinicki and Prussia (1995) suggest that coping is situation-specific in that it occurs within a specific/unique context. Secondly, the stress should carry meaning in terms of a perceived threat to the individual (Lazarus, 1966). This
meaning is made sense of through the process of appraisal – a third aspect to consider.

Fourthly, when the situation is appraised as stressful, the individual needs to make use of certain strategies in order to adapt to the situation and alleviate the effects of the situation. These strategies, then, are what constitute the process of coping. These various aspects that constitute coping are discussed in more detail below.

**Stress.**

The concept of stress is broad and its meaning has evolved over time, making it difficult to define (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). It can be seen as a collective term for an area of study which includes the entire sphere of problems involving stimuli that cause stress reactions, the reactions themselves and the intervening processes. This sphere consists of physiological (such as bodily symptoms of stress, for example increased heart rate), sociological (such as cultural and environmental factors) and psychological (such as factors affecting the mind and emotions) phenomena of stress (Lazarus, 1966; Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Folkman and Lazarus (1984) refer to this sphere as “the sphere of meaning in which stress belongs” (p. 19), referring to psychological stress as the person-environment relationship constituting appraisal and threat.

Stimuli that cause stress (stressors) can be classified into three broad types. Firstly, major changes affecting large numbers of people (such as a natural disaster); secondly, major changes affecting only one or a few people (such as the death of loved one or a divorce); and thirdly, daily hassles (such as feeling lonely or having an argument with someone) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Stressors rarely occur in isolated instances. This may be as a result of the interrelatedness of various life roles in an individual’s life. It is therefore likely that, if there is one significant stressor, the individual may experience other, associated or triggered stressors as well, such as disruptions in other life areas (Pearlin, 1989).
According to Lazarus (1966), the critical issues of stress involve the internal and external forces that determine, shape and influence reactions to stress. These reactions can be seen as the influences on an individual’s behaviour that is a result of the intense and distressing experience caused by stress (Lazarus, 1966). Due to the subjective and individualised reactions to stress, psychological stress can therefore be seen as particular transactions (or relationships) between individuals and the environment that is perceived by the individual as exceeding his/her resources and threatening his/her well-being (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1993). The psychological process that intervenes between the stimulus in the environment and the individual’s response is described by Lazarus (1966) as threat. Appraisal involves the concept of perceived threat – an important factor that influences psychological stress (Lazarus, 1966).

The Stress and Coping Theory promotes this view of stress as a mutually reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment (Folkman et al., 1986). This dynamic relationship is characterised by a subjective appraisal of being taxing and exceeding the individual’s recourses. It poses a threat to the individual’s well-being. In order for this stressful relationship, the threats it poses, as well as its outcome, to be manageable, a process of mediation needs to occur, which takes places through cognitive appraisal and coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Lazarus (1993) asserts that these two mediating factors shape the reaction to stress, which is further influenced by factors within the environment and the individual.

**Threat.**

Discussing the concept of threat, Lazarus (1966) points to two important factors that are involved – threat as an anticipation of harm, and the cognitive processes by which a stressor/stimulus is interpreted as threatening.
As an anticipation of harm, a threat stimulus announces or anticipates potential harm to the individual. This is different from actual harm occurring, rather it is the anticipation of harm, triggered by a stimulus. There are also qualitative and quantitative aspects to threat. Qualitatively, the nature of the anticipated harm, as well as the harmful stimulus agent, is considered. Quantitatively, the degree of the threat is considered, such as the amount, proximity, and likelihood of the anticipated harm (Lazarus, 1966). Psychological vulnerability is also of importance when considering threat and appraisal. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), this vulnerability is determined by “the relationship between the individual’s pattern of commitments and his or her resources for warding off threats to those commitments” (p. 51). Threat is therefore also related to the importance attached to specific commitments, resulting in certain vulnerabilities to harm (which therefore poses a threat). For example, a weakened ankle poses a particular threat, or the possibility of a fall, for a ballerina (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

The anticipation of harm involves cognitive processes that underlie the interpretation of the threat as potentially harmful. These cognitive processes include primary and secondary appraisal, as well as adaptation. Collectively, these cognitive processes – discriminating between situations as threatening and nonthreatening – is called appraisal (Lazarus, 1966), and is important in further discussing the process that occurs in coping.

**Cognitive appraisal.**

Cognitive appraisal can be said to be the judgment or evaluation that is made about the meaning or future significance of a situation, with regards to its significance for well-being (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1993). This is based on the interplay between the psychological makeup of the individual perceiving the stimulus (including subjective beliefs, knowledge and vulnerabilities), and the stimulus/environment itself (which needs to be predicted and interpreted) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1966). How a situation is
made sense of and the meaning attached to the situation therefore determines the danger that is posed by the situation (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

According to the Stress and Coping Theory, cognitive appraisal and coping work together as mediating processes of the relationship between the environment and the person (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984, Lazarus, 1993). An appraisal of a stressor is influenced by specific environmental and personal conditions and therefore determines the extent and reason a particular person-environment transaction is stressful. Coping, on the other hand, is what is done or thought about in order to manage the appraised demands and emotions of the person-environment relationship (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). These cognitive appraisals can be broadly categorised into two types: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal involves that which is being threatened, whereas secondary appraisal involves coping options in the face of the perceived threat. Coping behaviour depends on both primary and secondary types of appraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Folkman et al., 1986). These two types of cognitive appraisal will be further explained below.

**Primary appraisal.**

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), there are three kinds of primary appraisal. Firstly, *irrelevant* appraisal is when there is no implication (loss or gain) for a person’s well-being upon a certain encounter with the environment. Secondly, when a situation is appraised as *benign-positive*, it holds a promise or evidence of enhancing well-being, resulting in positive emotions such as joy and happiness. These appraisals are, however, not without a possible sense of apprehension or anxiety, since there may be an associated perception that the positive state will change to a negative one (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). The third kind of primary appraisal is *stressful appraisals*. These appraisals include three further kinds of situations: harm/loss, threat and challenge. Harm or loss is when damage has been sustained by the person, and further negative implications may be anticipated (therefore threat may also
be present). Threat is when harm or loss is anticipated, and coping can therefore be anticipated or planned. Challenge, similar to threat in that it requires a coping response, is when there is a potential for growth or gain in a certain experience. Emotions such as excitement and eagerness may be associated with a challenging experience, as opposed to more negative emotions such as fear or worry associated with threat. It is possible for threat and challenge to exist simultaneously in an encounter (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984), for example when a person engages in a life-threatening adventure sports (such as deep-sea diving) that may pose as a physical threat, but is also an event that is to be overcome (challenge) in order to achieve an accomplishment.

*Secondary appraisal.*

A situation that is deemed stressful, that is the stimulus is appraised as harmful, threatening or challenging, is reacted to according to processes that try to reduce or remove the anticipated harm (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). These processes can broadly be referred to as coping, which involves the cognitive process of secondary appraisal (Lazarus, 1966). Secondary appraisal essentially evaluates the degree of threat, the characteristics of the stimulus/stressor, and the psychological structure of the individual in relation to the environment. This evaluation informs the coping strategy utilised by the individual in attempting to mediate, adapt to, or overcome the perceived threat or danger (Lazarus, 1966).

The evaluation of the appraisal stretches further in that the consequences of utilising a particular coping strategy are considered as it relates to further internal or external demands that may be present (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). If, based on new information from the environment or person, the evaluation of the appraisal results in a new appraisal, it is referred to as a *reappraisal*. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), a reappraisal follows from an earlier appraisal and may be due to cognitive coping efforts or defensive reappraisals.
These two types of cognitive appraisal – primary and secondary appraisal – enable the individual involved in the stressful situation to assess the relevance of the situation for his/her well-being (Folkman et al., 1986). This involves the process of adaptation, since how well an individual adapts to a stressful situation, is influenced by coping responses, and in turn, ultimately affects well-being.

**Adaptation.**

Although the Stress and Coping Theory involves the dynamic processes that take place in order to cope with stressful situations, the concept of coping ultimately concerns the outcomes of these processes – an individual’s well-being (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). That is, what are the adaptational outcomes that are affected by utilising coping strategies? According to Schwarzer and Schwarzer (1996), how adaptive an individual is in coping is related to their ways of coping.

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984) three areas of adaptation are of particular concern in this regard: social functioning, morale and somatic health. The relationship between these areas are not simple and do not necessarily operate in a causal manner. That is, good functioning in one area does not necessarily relate to good functioning in another area. According to Folkman et al. (1986) how one copes with any given stressful situation represents how one will cope with stressful situations in general, and may therefore indicate general, long-term adaptation in individuals. Coping processes can therefore be seen as moderately stable across contexts and can therefore have adaptational outcomes in the long-term.

**Social functioning.**

This area of adaptation involves an individual’s interpersonal relationships and social roles and the skills required to maintain these relationships/roles. Social functioning is, to a large extent, determined by how effectively an individual copes with daily living, and therefore, the
effective appraisal of a given situation in order to participate in the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). According to the Stress and Coping Theory, in this instance, effective coping will involve the utilisation of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies that occur concurrently in an adaptive way that promotes social functioning (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

**Morale.**

Appraisals of the outcome of a stressful situation – if goals were achieved and if the individual was satisfied with their performance – determine overall, long-term morale in the individual who faced the stressful situation. A sense of morale or optimism would be achieved if the stressful situation were appraised as challenging (as opposed to harmful), if negative outcomes were reappraised in a positive light and if demands were coped with effectively (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). According to Folkman et al. (1986), when an individual finds themselves in repeated uncontrollable situations, depending on the nature of psychological threat that is indicated, they may become helpless, passive in terms of coping processes, demoralised and ultimately, depressed.

**Somatic illness.**

With regards to the third area of adaption as it relates to the outcome of coping processes – somatic illness – Folkman and Lazarus (1984) assert that different coping strategies are associated with certain health outcomes. For example, there has been found to be a relationship between control of anger and hypertension. Folkman and Lazarus (1984) further suggest three ways in which coping can affect health. Firstly, coping influences the “frequency, intensity, duration, and patterning of neurochemical stress reactions” (p. 224). Secondly, by using maladaptive ways of coping, these coping responses have the potential to put the individual faced with the stressful situation at risk, since the individual may find ways to cope by using dangerous substances or engaging in harmful activities. The opposite is also
true in that coping processes that are adaptive in nature have been associated with the effective implementation of health behaviours (Lee-Bagley, DeLongis & Voorhoeve, 2004). Thirdly, maladaptive coping strategies may inhibit or impede behaviours related to health and illness (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

Stress, threat, cognitive appraisal as well as adaptation are all aspects of coping that are relevant to the present study. As will be discussed later in this chapter, relationship dissolution can be regarded as a stressful situation, and all aspects involved in coping are important in order to adapt well to the change in relationship status. However, coping involves a complex interplay between factors already mentioned, such as threat and appraisal, and others, such as context and emotional state. This interplay is depicted in a reciprocal relationship, and can be better understood as a process of coping, as opposed to a static phenomenon.

**The Process of Coping**

Coping can be referred to as an individual’s effort to alter his or her circumstances, or the way they are interpreted, in order for them to appear more favourable to the individual. It involves a process of thoughts and actions to manage situations or demands appraised as stressful, within a particular context (Lazarus, 1993). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) assert that coping cannot be separated from life-stressors experienced as a stressful situation within a certain context, and the individual’s inner emotional state, or the impact the stressful situation has on the individual (which has to do with appraisal). This alludes to the complex nature of coping as process, as opposed to a static, uni-dimensional behaviour or structure (Lazarus, 1993; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

According to the Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus, 1993), two functions of coping have been identified: dealing with the problem and regulating emotion. These have been termed problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping respectively. The former
includes strategies such as efforts to change the situation and problem-solve, whereas the latter involves avoiding the situation, self-control, seeking social support and positive reappraisal. Both problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping are used in most situations that are stressful (Folkman et al., 1986).

In contrast to this view that all coping responses can be encapsulated in these two modes of coping, Cramer (1998) suggests that a distinction be made between coping mechanisms – strategies that involve conscious, intentional efforts to manage or solve a problem situation – and defence mechanisms – processes that occur unconsciously to change the internal psychological state of an individual affected by a stressful situation. However, the Stress and Coping Theory views the second mode of coping – emotion-focussed coping – as inclusive of coping processes that are utilised without conscious awareness (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1993).

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) regards coping as having not two, but three, major types or modes. Their view is consistent with Lazarus’ (1993) in that they include responses that are aimed at changing the stressful situation (similar to problem-focussed coping) as well as responses that are aimed at controlling the meaning (or appraisal) of the stressful situation (similar to emotion-focussed coping). However, Pearlin and Schooler include a third type of coping – responses that are aimed at controlling, managing or accommodating the stress itself. This process transforms the stress into a kind of moral virtue, shaped by culture and belief, by utilising strategies such as watching television that may otherwise have various other meanings, and may not necessarily be related to the stressful situation itself (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

It is this third type of coping that Cramer (1998) warns can also easily be confused with defence mechanisms. Although the distinction between coping responses and defence mechanisms can be confusing, for the purposes of this study, Lazarus’ perspective will be
taken – that coping responses may be without full consciousness – as is consistent with the Stress and Coping Theory utilised in this study.

Folkman and Lazarus (1984) further highlight the distinction between coping functions (such as the two mentioned in Stress and Coping Theory) and coping outcomes. Coping outcomes refer to the effect a coping strategy (with a particular function) may have. The concept of coping can therefore be defined as independent of outcome, although given functions can be expected to have certain outcomes. What is of importance, in this study, are the processes and functions of coping.

Emotion and psychological stress can therefore be said to be shaped by coping processes. These coping processes influence the relationship between the individual and the environment and how this relationship is appraised by attempting to either change the relationship (problem-focused coping), or change the way it is appraised (emotion-focused coping) (Lazarus, 1993). This process of change is dynamic, contextual and shifts between the two different forms of coping as the relationship between person and environment changes. It is also continuously mediated by cognitive appraisals and reappraisals as the relationship shifts and changes (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lee-Baggley et al., 2004). The process of coping mentioned here can last a few minutes (as in an argument), or for an extended period of time (as in the grieving process which may even last years) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

The two functions of coping, as implicated by the Stress and Coping Theory, will be further discussed, since they provide a basis for later operationalisation of coping with relationship dissolution, and how this may relate to the use of social media.

**Modes of coping.**

According to Lazarus’ (1993) Stress and Coping Theory, there are two broad functions (or modes) of coping, as mentioned previously. These modes are emotion-focused coping and
problem-focused coping. In general, emotion-focused coping is more likely to be employed when the appraisal of the stressful situation is such that nothing can be done to change the threatening environmental conditions, whereas problem-focused coping is more likely to be employed when the situation itself is appraised as being changeable or modifiable (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Similar to the emotion / problem focussed coping classification, the two modes have also been classified as approach / avoidance strategies and engagement / disengagement strategies (Ayres & Leaper, 2012). The two modes are explained in more detail below.

**Emotion-focused coping.**

Emotion-focused coping is when emotion is regulated in order to better manage a situation that is appraised as stressful and unchangeable. This is achieved by distancing oneself, avoidance, practicing self-control, seeking social support (in the form of finding a solace), positive reappraisal, private ruminating, feeling and expressing negative emotions or accepting responsibility (Lazarus, 1993). Some of these strategies, such as avoidance, distancing, selective attention and making positive comparisons are specifically geared towards lessening the emotional distress associated with the stressful situation, without necessarily altering the meaning of the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). These are also known as defensive type processes and may lead to cognitive reappraisals where the meaning of the situation is changed.

Other strategies, used less often, are specifically geared towards increasing emotional distress in the face of a stressful situation as a way of experiencing the distress more acutely in order to find relief afterwards or to mobilise themselves for action. These include strategies such as self-blame or other forms of self-punishment (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). By not objectively changing the situation, emotion-focused coping strategies can also be used in order to come up with a different view of the situation, or to change the meaning of the
situation – cognitive reappraisals (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). It is also possible, in emotion-focused coping, to employ strategies that lead to self-deception. Since this type of coping involves processes that maintain hope, or deny or refuse acknowledgment of the worst, it may happen that an individual employing these strategies unknowingly interprets the situation to distort reality (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

**Problem-focused coping.**

Problem-focused coping is when the actual problem (or the stressor) is dealt with. Similar to problem solving, this function of coping aims to generate solutions, consider costs and benefits, make the most appropriate decision and act on it. However, unlike problem solving, this form of coping involves processes that are directed externally (to influence the environment) as well as internally (to influence the person) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

Examples of problem-focused coping directed at the environment include strategies to alter environmental pressure, procedures, obstacles and resources. Examples of problem-focused coping directed at the person in order to change the situation, include cognitive shifts involved in motivation, ego involvement, behaviour, learning new skills and finding alternative ways of gratification (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Problem-focused forms of coping are context-specific, since each situation would indicate different practical solutions.

**Relationship between emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping.**

Both problem and emotion-focused coping are typically used in any given stressful encounter (Folkman et al., 1986; Gillespie, 2005). The two forms of coping can facilitate one another – in the case of an anxious public speaker regulating anxiety by giving himself comforting messages (emotion-focused coping) in order to rehearse the speech to ensure a good delivery (problem-focused coping) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). The two forms of coping can also, however, impede one another. For example, an individual who is diagnosed with an illness can get stuck in a cycle of problem-focused coping by gathering information
about the illness which in turn increases anxiety and emotional distress. This, in turn, prevents/interferes with emotion-focussed coping processes such as avoidance, which may decrease the anxiety and distress.

According to the Stress and Coping Theory, it is likely that both problem and emotion-focussed coping are typically used in any given stressful encounter (Folkman et al., 1986; Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Gillespie, 2005). However, when considering a stressful situation that extends over a longer period of time, such as the recovery from the death of a loved one or a trauma, coping with regards to these two functions may occur more sequentially as opposed to concurrently (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In this type of situation, emotion-focussed coping may occur immediately after the event (such as minimisation, avoidance or denial) and gradually gets replaced with more problem-focussed strategies (such as accommodating the limitations imposed by the event and getting on with one’s life) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

Utilising social support as a coping strategy offers both emotion-focussed coping and problem-focussed coping, depending on the type of social support. Ajrouch, Reisine, Lim, Sohn and Ismail (2010) highlight two types of social support: emotional (having someone to confide in) and instrumental (having someone to help with tangible needs such financial or childcare). Social support, whether emotional or instrumental, or both, can be seen as coping strategies and can influence the well-being of an individual in a stressful situation.

Furthermore, these two modes of coping do not offer much insight into other processes that may be involved in coping, such as personality influences. It is important, however, to consider these influences, since some research suggests that personality characteristics do have a part to play in coping processes. For example, Amirkhan, Rislingor and Swickort (1995) suggests that individuals may utilise coping strategies in stressful situations, based on the affinity they have for those particular strategies as a function of their
personality. Bouchard, Guillemette and Landry-Le’ger (2004), on the other hand, regard coping as largely situational, with individuals showing stable coping strategies across time, which may in turn suggest that coping strategies are a by-product of personality. Rasmussen, Wrosch, Scheier and Carver (2006) found that individuals who are by nature more optimistic, for example, are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies than individuals who are more pessimistic by nature. Even when problem-focused coping is not appropriate, individuals who are optimistic tend to use adaptive emotion-focused coping (such as acceptance and humour), unlike pessimistic individuals who would engage in less adaptive emotion-focused coping, such as denial and disengagement from goals.

**Adaptive versus maladaptive coping.**

Using maladaptive ways of coping will result in greater stress than using adaptive coping strategies. For example, coping strategies such as negative thoughts about the self, blame, rumination, and catastrophising may be related to emotional distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1993). The more coping strategies and responses an individual is able to employ in a given context, the more protection coping can offer against stress (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Berman and Turk (1981) assert that expressing emotion during a particularly distressing time or situation is most helpful, while engaging in social activities may be effective only once the high levels of distress have subsided.

According to Carson and Polman (2010), avoidance coping (similar to emotion-focused coping) is not just a lack of approaching the situation actively (problem-focused). Instead, it involves an active process of withdrawal from the stressful situation and social support. This type of coping can also be adaptive immediately after the stressful event (short-term), but may become maladaptive in the long-term (Carson & Polman, 2010; Seiffge-Krenke & Gutenberg, 2004).
Coping resources.

In order to better understand coping strategies, especially as it relates to secondary appraisal according to the Stress and Coping Theory, coping resources and coping goals need to also be considered. As discussed, there are various features of the environment and the person that affect secondary appraisal. But, according Folkman and Lazarus (1984), the strategies people actually employ in order to cope (whether emotion-focussed or problem-focussed) also depend on the availability of resources, and their ability to utilise these resources.

The Stress and Coping Theory views these resources as the starting point or foundation out of which the process of coping can evolve (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Coping resources can therefore be seen as antecedents of coping strategies and include the availability of personal and environmental factors in order to deal with stressors. Examples of these factors are high self-esteem, social support, high emotional intelligence and financial resources (Latack et al., 1995; Law, 2004). These resources have a direct effect on the appraisal attached to the stressor, which in turn has an indirect effect on coping strategies.

Pearlin and Schooler (1978) refer to coping resources as what is available to individuals when they develop their coping repertoire, not just what individuals do in the face of a stressful situation.

There are an infinite amount of coping resources that may be available to an individual in various different situations. Folkman and Lazarus (1984) have divided these possible resources into five categories of coping resources: 1) physical resources, which involve the health and energy of an individual; 2) psychological resources, which involve an individual’s belief system; 3) competencies, which involve problem-solving and social skills; 4) social resources, which involve social support; and 5) material resources, which involve finances and material goods (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).
Although coping resources may be considered as the antecedents of coping responses, there are certain situations where the demands of the stressful situation exceed the individual’s resources, or the individual’s distress may place limitations on their ability to deal with the situation adequately. These restrictions to coping may be due to 1) personal factors, such as cultural values and beliefs or psychological deficits in personal development, 2) environmental constraints, such as money, an institutions’ response to need and social factors, and 3) the level of threat (which would further indicate appraisal processes mentioned earlier, in a dynamic and circular manner) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

Furthermore, coping resources influence and are influenced by coping goals. Coping strategies, in turn, influence coping goals and appraisals, which again influences coping resources. The process is therefore reciprocal in nature (Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993, cited in Latack et al., 1995). Simply put, coping strategies are the cognitive and behavioural efforts employed in order to accomplish coping goals. Coping efficacy, the belief in one’s ability to successfully apply a coping strategy to deal with a stressor, is also an important factor to consider since this will influence the levels of stress an individual has, as well as the type of coping strategy used, in a stressful situation (Latack et al., 1995; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

**Coping and Relationship Dissolution**

Thus far, coping has been conceptualised in terms of how people respond to stressful situations. The Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus, 1993) serves as a theoretical grounding for the present study in that relationship dissolution can be explained as the stressful relationship between the individual and the environment. Relationship dissolution is appraised as taxing and it poses a threat to the individual’s well-being. A reaction to this stressful situation is therefore mediated by cognitive appraisal and therefore a coping option is selected in order to manage the situation. This process results in change – either change in
the romantic relationship (problem-focused coping) or change in the appraisal of the romantic relationship dissolution (emotion-focused coping).

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), and echoed by Van der Drift, Agnew and Wilson (2009), one of the most damaging and distressing life events is when a central or extensive commitment is lost. Such a loss of commitment can be seen in romantic relationship dissolution (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). The experience of romantic relationship dissolution can be a significant stressor and can result in increased levels of psychological distress and decreased levels of life satisfaction, both at the time of the event and lasting into the future. This may be especially true for the person at the receiving end of the breakup (Oriña et al., 2011; Sbarra, 2006). Relationship dissolution has also been found to be related to risk for the initial onset of Major Depressive Disorder (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). As with any stressful situation, individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution find ways to cope with this event, and adapt well after the breakup. Ways of coping with relationship dissolution will be the focus of the next section.

**Coping with relationship dissolution.**

There are various ways of coping with relationship dissolution. These coping strategies include both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Examples include keeping busy, ruminating, seeking social support, finding new relationships, turning to religion, going for counselling, expressing feelings, using mood regulation strategies, coming up with justifications for the breakup, choosing to develop a more positive view of oneself, constructing narratives or forgiveness (Chung et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2003; Gillett, Macaskill & Maltby, 2007; Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2009). The impact of the relationship dissolution is related to the use of these coping strategies. For example, Chung et al. (2003) found that escape-avoidance and planful problem-solving strategies were related to the impact of the breakup. They found that the
more depressed an individual felt after relationship dissolution, the more likely they were to utilise avoidance as a coping strategy.

Individuals who respond to relationship dissolution with avoidance or emotion-focussed strategies experience more self-blame and loss of interest in sex (Davis et al., 2003). Aggression and hostility have also been reported by those who want their partner back. Another response to relationship dissolution is preoccupation. This response is seen in initiators of the breakup, emotionally involved and anxiously attached individuals. These individuals are also more likely to seek social support, use substances, perseverate in thinking about their desire for the lost partner and start searching immediately for a replacement partner, all as attempts to cope with the distress caused by relationships dissolution (Davis et al., 2003). Among those who seek social support as a coping strategy, are individuals who perceive the impact of the breakup to be severe (Chung et al., 2003).

Forgiveness as a coping response has been linked to avoidance coping in women (Gillett et al., 2007). In the context of relationship dissolution, forgiveness differs based on whether the forgiving person was the initiator or at the receiving end of the breakup. The initiator may use forgiveness to decrease negative emotional interactions and emotions. Forgiveness for the rejected party, on the other hand, may prevent emotion-focussed coping responses such as venting or expressing negative emotions. Depending on the individual’s appraisal of emotion-focussed responses as a coping strategy, they may therefore choose not to engage in forgiving responses towards the initiator (Ysseldyk et al., 2009).

Making sense of the breakup is an important part of adjusting to the breakup (Kellas & Manusov, 2003). Positive adjustment in this way can be achieved by reflecting on the relationship in a meaningful way, as opposed to preventing or stopping oneself from thinking about it altogether, or brooding over the regretful aspects of the former relationship (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). One way of engaging in this sense-making process is by constructing
narratives to provide explanations for the breakup (Kellas & Manusov, 2003). Tashiro and Frazier (2003) also revealed that individuals tend to create an account or narrative of the breakup that would be seen as acceptable to themselves as well as their family, friends and social onlookers.

The way in which individuals appraise the stressful situation of relationship dissolution, and the strategies they employ to cope with its effects, may be related to attachment style. This may be an important consideration in the present study, since attachment has also been found to be related to social media usage.

**Attachment.**

Securely attached adults (parental bonding and adult attachment orientation) show greater resiliency to relationship loss or dissolution, and therefore less distress following a breakup. Conversely, insecurely attached adults show more distress even before the dissolution (Madey & Jilek, 2012). Individuals with insecure parental attachment can develop positive expectations for future relationships by positively reframing their negative attachment experiences. This future orientation, however, can be the cause of increased distress and decreased resilience in the face of relationship dissolution due to the high expectations placed on finding a lasting relationship (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011).

Anxiously attached individuals show more dysfunctional coping after relationship dissolution, characterised by a preoccupation with, and idealisation of, the ex-partner, feelings of betrayal, and frequent contact with the partner, even after the break (Davis et al., 2003; Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg, 2003; Pistole, 1995; Sbarra & Emery, 2005; cited in Sbarra, 2006). These individuals also have an increased likelihood to ruminate on the perceived injustice of the breakup, have unrealistic hopes of getting back together and wonder about the event and the ex-partner (Sbarra, 2006). Relationship history (with parents and significant others) and the quality of these past relationships can affect the probability of
being the relatively less committed partner in adult romantic relationships. Those with lower quality past relationships (such as with parents during toddlerhood and adolescence) are at higher risk for being the weaker link in relationships (Oriña et al., 2011).

**Post dissolution relationships.**

Although there is an assumption that all contact is broken and the relationship ends once there has been a romantic breakup, this is not necessarily the case. Some individuals remain in contact, even though the romantic relationship has been terminated. Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, and Cheng (2008) describe this interaction as post-dissolution relationship (PDR). The period after relationship dissolution where ex-partners are still in PDR can be just as distressing as the termination itself. PDR may also influence how individuals adjust to the dissolution (Kellas, et al., 2008). They may try to make sense of the breakup together, or they may need to communicate over logistics such as living arrangements and shared goods. If the ex-partners had been friends before the romantic relationship, it is more likely that they would engage in a PDR. Some PDRs are characterised by reciprocity, that is, a neutral process of each partner moving on, whereas others are characterised by unwanted and stalking behaviour of the ex-partners (Kellas, et al., 2008).

**Conclusion**

A comprehensive understanding of the process of coping and related issues is a fundamental focus of the present study. Indeed, the process of coping, informed by and grounded in Lazarus’ (1993) Stress and Coping Theory, is what gives shape to the processes and phenomena explored in the study. Concepts such as stress, threat, cognitive appraisal, adaptation, modes of coping and coping resources are seen as that which encompass the process of coping.

In understanding the concepts and processes involved in coping, its application to the more specific phenomena explored in this study – relationship dissolution and social media –
becomes possible. Already in this chapter, stress and coping was explored in relation to relationship dissolution, while consistently considering the Stress and Coping Theory as a way to conceptualise the processes involved. The nature of the coping process with regards to relationship dissolution can be seen as complex, reciprocal and dynamic, with both problem-focussed coping and emotion-focussed coping being utilised.

Utilising social media may be a single expression of this coping process as it relates to relationship dissolution. This, more specifically, involves the phenomenon in question in this study. An exploration of existing literature regarding the nature and role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution will be the focus of the following chapter. Furthermore, aspects of the Symbolic Interactionist Perspective will be explored in order to provide a relevant theoretical underpinning that will enhance the understanding of how social media may play a role in coping with relationship dissolution.
Social Media and Coping with Relationship Dissolution

Introduction

In recent years, social media and social networking have become part of many people’s daily lives. Researchers have sought to better understand how online interactions and relationships may be different from face-to-face interactions and relationships. Existing research also points to various other aspects of online behaviour, such as self-esteem and self-disclosure (Robinson, 2007). In this chapter, existing literature related to the use of social networking sites (SNSs) will be discussed. More specifically, literature pertaining to how SNSs are utilised in order to cope with relationship dissolution, will be discussed. Although there is limited research on how SNSs may assist individuals to better cope with various problems, a few related studies have described some connection between SNS usage and coping, as well as coping with romantic relationship dissolution.

With a comprehensive understanding of coping in general, and specifically with relationship dissolution (explored in the previous chapter), the findings of the research studies on SNSs and coping with relationship dissolution, discussed below, expands one’s understanding of how the use of SNSs relates to coping with relationship dissolution. Furthermore, certain contributions from Symbolic Interactionist Theory, as it pertains to online behaviour, will be utilised in providing a contextual, theoretical underpinning in order to augment the relevance of the literature, discussed below.

Specific topics covered in this chapter include: cyberspace and SNSs, the generalised audience, impression management and identity construction, influences on online behaviour, motivations for utilising SNSs, SNS use and coping, and coping with relationship dissolution and the role of SNS. The concepts of cyberspace, the generalised audience and impression management, and identity construction will be defined and discussed below, seeing as it is
important for further understanding why SNSs are used in stressful situations, and how they are used in order to cope with stressful situations such as relationship dissolution.

**Cyberspace and SNSs**

Along with issues such as online self-esteem and self-disclosure comes a unique understanding of ‘cyberspace’ as a whole and how one interacts in it and with it. Turkle (1995) suggests that cyberspace is a place where different and multiple versions of the self, reality and identity can be explored. This viewpoint is in agreement with Symbolic Interactionist Theory, which will be utilised in order to provide a theoretical framework from which to understand the use of social media. In this regard, the theory suggests that the online self consists of multiple selves in potentially numerous online sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other SNSs which individuals may use. However, the self is deconstructed in such a way that allows only parts of the self to be revealed at a time (Turkle, 1995). In essence, then, a new persona (the cyber-self) is created in order to project a new sense of self to the online community, freed from ‘offline’ social norms and expectations (Robinson, 2007; Valcheva, 2009). The cyber-self is regarded as both the subject and the object of interaction with the generalised other (Robinson, 2007) – a concept that will be explored more fully below.

**The generalised audience.**

From a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, the idea of the self is conceptualised as constructed through interaction in the social world. The idea, or sense of self, therefore, is an individual’s perception of society’s evaluation of him or her. What an individual believes is another’s perception of his or her appearance or behaviour occurs mainly as an imaginative process. An emotional response is based on what an individual would imagine to be perceived judgment from another or a generalised other (Robinson, 2007). This concept constitutes the looking-glass self, which is a process of constant and reflexive self-evaluation.
through the imagination of the other. This process is also called ‘self-ing’, whereby the self cannot be separated from the generalised (or imagined) other (Robinson, 2007). From Goffman’s (1959) perspective, this same process is seen as an interaction that creates multiple selves for multiple performances in a drama. In other words, the self seeks to convey a certain identity, through interaction, which is in agreement with the audience. A new and fitting persona is therefore constructed in light of others’ perceived expectations (Robinson, 2007).

Robinson (2007) suggests that the ‘self-ing’ process mentioned above is the same in online interactions. The newly created persona, or cyber-self, therefore becomes both the object and the subject of interaction. By perceiving another’s presence, the individual presents him or herself according to the imagined expectations of the other. The other’s reaction is also perceived, and through a process of reflexive interaction (on SNS profiles), the cyber-self is constructed (Robinson, 2007; Valcheva, 2009).

The generalised other, explored above, can be equated to what Marwick and Boyd (2010) regards as the imagined audience. The imagined audience are the people or generalised ‘others’ that are kept in mind when choosing what information, and in what style, to post on SNSs. Yet, it is impossible to know who the actual readers/viewers of the SNSs are. It is for this reason that the careful process of selection and identity construction takes place, similar to what Goffman would call impression management (Marwick & Boyd, 2010).

Impression management and identity construction.

Impression management is an important process that takes place in interpersonal interaction (Goffman, 1959). Impression management in terms of the cyber-self is significant to SNS users, since one of the things that users find most interesting on SNSs is how other people present themselves (their identity) (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009). This may
provide some insight into how individuals seeking another partner choose to present themselves after a breakup. Observing content and information about identity and impression management, which includes lurking on other SNS users’ profiles, reading their news feeds and looking at their photos, seems to predominate over actively engaging in creating impressions (posting a status or a photo for example) (Pempek et al., 2009). Utz (2010) found that a user’s profile, profile pictures of friends and number of friends influence the impression created by the user. For example, if the user’s friends appear outgoing and extraverted, the user may appear more popular (Utz, 2010). If the user has more social cues in their profile picture, and if others’ comments on their profiles are congruent with their self-presentation, they may create the impression that they are popular and socially attractive (Hong, Tandoc, Kim, Kim & Wise, 2012).

Through this process of impression management and interaction with the generalised audience on SNSs, the ‘cyber-self’ is created. On most SNSs, the user is not anonymous. Rather, the setting for identity construction is one where a ‘hoped for’ or ‘possible identity’ exists (Hum, Chamberlin, Hambright, Portwood, Schat & Bevan, 2011). In choosing how to manage the generalised audience’s impression of SNS users, users are more likely to disclose positive experiences on SNSs, in order to create a better impression of their emotional well-being (Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012; Wilson, Gosling & Graham, 2012; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Although this impression is not a false representation of the self (that is, users’ true personalities are reflected), it is usually void of negative emotional experiences and disclosures. The differences in impression management between online and offline behaviour are more pronounced on SNSs than in real life impression management (Qiu et al., 2012). However, according to Shafie, Nayan and Osman (2012), the online identity is merely a continuation of the offline identity. Shafie et al. (2012) suggest that an online identity is constructed based on what offline friends may think, social connections, culture, popularity
and the self. Text, language and photographs are used in order to promote the online identity (Shafie et al., 2012). Those who are able to express or construct an online identity that is, in fact, close to their offline identity, may be seen to be more active on SNSs, desire to actively post updates and post more personally revealing and emotional content (Seidman, 2014).

These findings are consistent with research done by Zhao et al. (2008) who found that users’ online identities were socially desirable identities that they wish to be offline, but are not able to fully embody. Online identity construction was also found to occur through indirect sources, such as through Facebook friends, photo albums and wall content, which offered an interactive showcase of identity. That is, observers of the user’s profile would include all aspects of the profile as a social product in creating an impression of the user (Zhao et al. 2008).

Online identities, as seen through a user’s profile, are constructed by information given explicitly by the user, as well as inferences made from indirect information or sources, such as wall posts, pictures and comments (Hum et al., 2011). Hum et al. (2011) suggest that users may be aware of the importance of identity construction, since profile pictures have been found to be appropriate, posed and relevant to the user. Multiple identity clues are also revealed in constructing an identity and managing impressions, since profile pictures often change and a variety of profile pictures are uploaded to choose from (Hum et al., 2011).

A user’s identity, or the cyber-self, can also be expanded by incorporating others’ interests and resources into the user’s profile. This includes the interests and resources of a romantic partner, even when termination of the relationship has taken place (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013). In the case of Facebook, even though the user is no longer friends with the ex-partner or the ex-partner’s associated friends, interests that were incorporated into the ‘self’ are enduring (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013).
These findings are significant for the present study, since factors such as impression management, the cyber-self and the imagined audience may have significant implications regarding ways in which individuals affected by romantic dissolution may use SNSs in order to portray how they are coping with the effects of the dissolution. For example, with the ex-partner in mind as the imagined audience, the individual may update their profile picture, depicting that he/she is single and happy after the breakup. This may create the impression that he/she is coping well with the breakup. In this case, by updating the profile picture, the individual would reveal an aspect of the cyber-self.

**Influences on online behaviour.**

How one constructs an online identity and manages one’s impression on SNSs is not just a matter of wanting social desirability or popularity. Nor are the processes involved influenced by social and cultural factors alone. There are various internal factors that influence how SNS users construct these identities and behave online in general. Four factors seem to be significant influencing factors, namely: personality, attachment, self-esteem and self-disclosure. Each of these four factors will be explored below.

**Personality and attachment.**

Personality has been found to be related to SNS use, in particular, Facebook. Although the findings in this regard have been somewhat contradictory, mention can be made of traits such as extraversion, introversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness. Individuals who are reportedly more extraverted participate more actively and frequently on Facebook by posting status updates and photos and belonging to a larger number of groups (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman & Gaddis, 2011; Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright & Hudiburgh, 2012; Jin, 2013). This may be owing to the fact that SNS users extend their offline personality (such as introversion or extraversion traits) into online settings (Gosling et al., 2011). Extraversion is not necessarily related to the amount of online friends an individuals has, nor would an
extraverted person use SNSs such as Facebook as an alternative to social activities (Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering & Orr, 2009). These findings contradict those of Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky (2010), which suggests that extraverts may have more online friends, but that this trait was not associated with participation in groups.

Introverted users, on the other hand, participate more passively in groups and on pages (Jin, 2013) and could be more likely to share and use personal information than extraverted users. Communication apprehension, as studied by Hammick and Lee (2014), was less present for shy people who used SNSs. This suggests that the absence of visual and auditory cues in online settings, which one would normally have in face-to-face interactions, lessens the fear of communication that shy people are often faced with. Similar to Jin’s (2013) findings, shy people are therefore likely to feel comfortable using SNSs to express themselves, without the intimidation and apprehension related to communication experienced in face-to-face settings (Hammick & Lee, 2014).

Ross et al. (2009) suggests that individuals high in the trait neuroticism may prefer posting status updates as opposed to photographs, as this would enable them to have more control over content, especially emotional and geographical content that may be seen as a threat to them. Neuroticism has also been found to predict behaviours on SNSs related to belonging and self-presentation, and individuals with high levels of neuroticism are more likely to express their ‘ideal’ or ‘hidden’ selves (Seidman, 2013). Individuals who scored high on the trait ‘open to experience’ are likely to be more sociable on Facebook (Ross et al., 2009). These individuals, as well as individuals who are generally more satisfied with their lives, and have high education and income levels, tend to use SNSs more frequently (Özguven & Mucan, 2013).

Conscientiousness has been found to be related to users having a larger number of friends, less uploading of photos and generally more frequent use of SNSs (Amichai-
Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Özguven & Mucan, 2013). This may be related to the caution with which these individuals approach SNS usage (Seidman, 2013). Low conscientiousness, on the other hand, has been found to be related more to self-presentational behaviours and motivations on SNS usage (Seidman, 2013). Moore and McElroy (2012) assert that individuals high on personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and introversion may be more remorseful of inappropriate content on SNS profiles.

Attachment has also been found to influence SNS use. For example, those with high attachment anxiety have been found to use SNSs more frequently, when experiencing negative emotions, and were more concerned with others’ perception of them on SNSs (Oldmeadow, Quinn & Kowert, 2013). SNS use for anxiously attached people may therefore be beneficial since they are able to manage impressions and self-presentation so as to increase their confidence with regards to maintaining interpersonal relationships (Oldmeadow et al., 2013). Individuals with high attachment avoidance tend to use SNSs less often, showed less openness and had less positive attitudes about Facebook in particular (Oldmeadow et al., 2013). For them, being able to set the pace of SNS interactions without physical proximity to other users, while maintaining their autonomy, could be attractive and beneficial. Securely attached individuals, on the other hand, may find SNS usage beneficial in enhancing existing offline relationships in a healthy and positive way (Oldmeadow et al., 2013).

**Self-disclosure and self-esteem.**

Self-disclosure is an integral part of forming, growing and maintaining relationships (Park, Jin & Jin, 2011). Self-disclosure in an online setting happens at a faster pace, and therefore intimacy in online relationships may progress quicker (Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). This is different from disclosing one’s identity in an offline setting (Mesch & Beker, 2010). When, under which circumstances, and the details of what identity information to disclose, are important factors to consider regarding self-disclosure (and online identity construction)
in online settings. These (online) norms for self-disclosure seem to be related to frequency of SNS usage. That is, the more frequently an individual utilises SNSs, the more likely they are to disclose personal and/or identification information online (Mesch & Beker, 2010). Individuals who use multiple SNSs, who are female, and who use a smartphone to access SNSs, may be less likely to disclose personal information online (Kisekka, Bagchi-Sen & Rao, 2013). With regards to using multiple SNSs, Kisekka et al. (2013) suggest that having to manage more than two SNSs may hinder optimal usage of one specific SNS, and users thus reduce the amount of personal information they disclose in general. Regarding gender differences, women may be more likely than men to privatise their SNS profiles. Regarding reduced self-disclosure on smartphones, this may be due to increased privacy settings and deliberate withholding of private information on smartphone social networking applications because of the risk of unwanted sharing of information between smartphone social networking applications (Kisekka et al., 2013).

Subjective online norms, as well as the perceived usefulness of self-disclosure, may lead to a positive attitude towards online self-disclosure. A positive attitude towards self-disclosure, in turn, has been found to be related to intention to disclose (Cheng & Chan, 2004). A further motivation to disclose personal information on SNSs is the need for affiliation, which is a motivating factor for relationship maintenance and intention to disclose (Park et al., 2011). Personality traits may also influence self-disclosure on SNSs. According to Hollenbaugh and Ferris (2014), individuals who are less conscientious, less agreeable, have less social cohesion and who are more open, use SNSs to draw attention and maintain relationships and therefore disclose large amounts of personal information online. Those who disclose information of a more personal and intimate nature have been found to be extraverted and use SNSs to establish a kind of virtual community. Individuals who are lower on self-esteem and neuroticism, and higher on openness, have been found to self-disclose on
a wider variety of topics (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). SNS users with lower self-esteem may also un-tag themselves more frequently from Facebook photos and may be more likely to accept friend requests from strangers to uphold a positive, public online image (Siedlecki & Tazghini, 2013). Higher self-esteem, on the other hand, is associated with a more positive view of Facebook activities such as sharing pictures and updating statuses, possibly due to the fact that individuals high in self-esteem may feel more comfortable with sharing information in a public forum (Siedlecki & Tazghini, 2013).

Sharing photographs on SNSs is a form of self-disclosure, whether it is for the purposes of finding a partner or not. In particular, the profile picture an individual chooses to use provides the viewer with some clues as to how he or she chose to construct an online identity. Mostly, users of SNSs seem to be aware of, and actively participate in, this identity construction (Hum et al., 2011). Profile pictures and other information posted online are different for those in a relationship as opposed to single individuals. Nosko, Wood and Molema (2010) found that those who are seeking a relationship are more likely to disclose personal information, opinions, views and relationship statuses, despite the risks that may be associated with doing so. Wilson et al. (2012) point out what some of these privacy risks, associated with SNS use, include: unintentionally disclosing personal information, a bad reputation, unwanted contact or harassment, being made vulnerable to stalkers, third parties misusing private data, hacking and identity theft.

Individuals in a romantic relationship have been found to demonstrate similar behaviours and preferences when it comes to SNS use (Papp, Danielewicz & Cayemberg, 2012). These individuals’ SNS use is also indicative of relationship functioning and satisfaction. For example, females’ inclusion of their partner in the profile picture suggests relationship satisfaction. Disagreements between partners of a romantic relationship as a
result of SNS use, as well as arguments that are revealed on SNSs, may be problematic for relational well-being (Papp et al., 2012).

**Motivations for utilising SNSs.**

Aside from the more intrapsychic mechanisms at play in terms of SNS users’ online behaviour, such as personality, attachment, self-disclosure and self-esteem, there are also various reasons why individuals may choose to engage in using SNS. These reasons, or motivations, are particularly evident given the success of SNSs, especially Facebook (Wilson et al., 2012). Motivations explored below include social engagement, social support, combatting loneliness, and surveillance and stalking of others.

**Social engagement.**

One of the reasons individuals are likely to join and use SNSs, is to socialise and interact with friends (Ellison et al., 2007; Hum et al., 2011; Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009). Ellison et al. (2007) found that SNS users engage socially on SNSs in order to stay connected with old friends, maintain and intensify offline relationships, and to stay informed about more distant acquaintances. In terms of interactions with friends on SNSs, it has been found that most users interact with friends with whom they already have pre-established, offline relationships (Pempek et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). SNSs can, however, also be used to make new friends (Ellison et al., 2007).

Park et al. (2009) suggest that self-status is an important motivating factor for belonging to SNS groups. Similarly, Utz, Tanis and Vermeulen (2012) found that the need for popularity, characterised by frequent editing of personal profiles in order to construct an identity that makes the individual appear popular, is a strong predictor of SNS use. This, in turn, may be predictive of social grooming (other-centred behaviours).

Wise, Alhabash and Park (2010) differentiate between two types of social interactions on Facebook: extractive and passive strategies. Using an extractive strategy involves seeking
direct social interaction with online friends, such as visiting their profile page or writing on their wall. Using a passive strategy involves seeking general, publicly available information about online friends by observing one’s online newsfeed. Social interaction strategies, such as the two mentioned above, are more common than actively engaging in impression management by editing profiles, with extractive strategies proving to be more pleasant to engage in (Wise et al., 2010). Another important motivation to utilise SNSs with regards to social interactions is to obtain social support. Social support with regards to SNS usage will be explored in some detail below.

**Social support.**

The need for social support can be fulfilled through SNSs (Nabi, Prestin & So, 2013; Wright, 2012). SNSs (similar to any type of supportive computer-mediated communication) provide users with a network of friends and acquaintances which may serve as a large network of emotional support, resulting in the potential for decreased levels of stress (Wright, 1999; Wright, 2012). Since emotional support in online settings can be complicated, due to the absence of non-verbal facial/body expressions and cues found in offline settings (Wright & Bell, 2003, cited in Wright, 2012), the perceptions of emotionally supportive messages is of importance (Wright, 2012).

The tendency of SNS users to associate with those who are perceived as similar to themselves, has been found to predict perceptions of emotional support. This may be related to the trust that is fostered between people who are perceived as socially attractive due to perceived similarities (Wright, 2012). According to Nabi et al. (2013), the number of online friends one has (such as Facebook friends) is related to perceived social support and therefore also reduced stress. This indicates that SNSs may offer social support in stressful situations, especially if there is a perception of social support due to a large number of online friends.
These findings are significant for the present study since social interaction and, more importantly, social support is an important aspect of both emotion-focussed and problem-focussed coping (Lazarus, 1993). Another motivating factor to utilise SNSs may be to overcome loneliness, explored below.

**Combating loneliness.**

When faced with loneliness, individuals may find SNSs useful in minimising loneliness. However, Wilson et al. (2012) assert that the connection between loneliness and Facebook use, for example, is not simple. According to Burke, Marlow and Lento (2009, cited in Wilson et al., 2012), direct interaction with other Facebook users (extractive social strategies) may result in decreased feelings of loneliness and increased perceptions of social gain. Passive strategies, on the other hand, may be related to increased feelings of loneliness and decreased perceptions of social gain.

Peer-related loneliness may be predictive of SNS use, since SNS use (in particular Facebook) has been found to reduce loneliness, provided the intention of using SNSs is to make new online friends (Teppers, Luyckx, Klimstra & Goossens, 2013). Self-disclosure is also related to loneliness and SNSs usage in that loneliness has been found to motivate people to disclose personal information on SNSs. Self-disclosure, in turn, may result in social support, which has been found to improve well-being and reduce stress (Wright, 2012; Lee, Noh & Koo, 2013). In contrast to this finding, Jin (2013) found that lonely individuals may be more likely to disclose information that is negative, even though they view interactions on SNSs as helpful ways of communication and self-disclosure. These individuals, ironically, experience the use of SNSs as unsatisfactory.

As a result of relationship dissolution, individuals may find themselves experiencing increased feelings of loneliness. According to Weiss (1973), a differentiation can be made between emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness is associated with
the absence of an intimate relationship or emotional attachment (such as in relationship dissolution) and social isolation is associated with the absence of a larger social network. The type of loneliness experienced by individuals affected by relationship dissolution would therefore be emotional loneliness. Engaging with one’s social networks associated with SNSs may satisfy social loneliness. Using SNSs in the case of relationship dissolution may therefore have an impact on individuals’ loneliness by either decreasing or increasing feelings of loneliness, depending on how, and with what intentions (social gain or the satisfaction of emotional loneliness), SNSs are being used. Surveillance and stalking of others, with a particular focus of this type of behaviour towards ex-partners, will be discussed below.

**Surveillance and stalking of others.**

As mentioned previously, individuals are motivated to utilise SNSs for the purposes of social interaction and social support. Social interaction can occur by using extractive strategies as well as passive strategies. Regardless of the strategy employed by users themselves, by nature of the social interactions of SNSs, it can therefore be expected that SNS users would anticipate others searching, viewing and interacting with their profiles (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006). SNSs can therefore be said to facilitate the surveillance of others’ profiles, interests and information, which would be regarded as acceptable according to online norms. Stalking behaviour would be included in this category of online behaviours (Darvell et al., 2011). Tong (2013) adds to this notion that online surveillance or stalking is common behaviour for Facebook users, although users are very reluctant to admit to this type of behaviour.

Attachment styles have been found to be significantly related to SNS surveillance and jealousy. In a study on how attachment may be associated with Facebook use, Marshall, Behanyan, Di Castro and Lee (2013) found that anxiously attached individuals displayed more frequent and intense jealousy and surveillance behaviours. Individuals high in
attachment avoidance, on the other hand, displayed less jealousy and surveillance behaviours, avoiding romantic partners’ profiles altogether. The authors assert that surveillance behaviour is not always motivated by attachment insecurity alone, since surveillance may also be a positive activity in the case of romantic partners who find it rewarding and beneficial to observe their partners’ profile (Marshall et al., 2013; Tokunaga, 2011).

Surveillance of other SNS users is also associated with jealously, especially for partners in a romantic relationship that use SNSs on a frequent basis (Marshall et al., 2013). Individuals who have experienced a romantic relationship breakup, have also been found to use surveillance and stalking behaviours to stay connected, and find information about, ex-partners. This can be done relatively anonymously and inconspicuously (Tong, 2013), and can therefore develop into obsessive, intrusive stalking behaviour (Chaulk & Jones, 2011). Even when the ex-partners are no longer ‘friends’ on SNSs such as Facebook, information about the ex-partner can still be obtained by lurking on mutual friends’ profiles (Tong, 2013).

More specifically, Tong (2013) found that when the other (ex) partner initiated the relationship breakup, there was more uncertainty experienced by the individual, resulting in more information-seeking or surveillance behaviours. Surveillance in this regard (that is, when there is significant uncertainty after the breakup) includes seeking information about new romantic connections and social activities the initiator of the breakup may be engaging in (Tong, 2013). Surveillance and information seeking behaviours may be an effective way to gather information on SNSs in order to reduce uncertainty after the breakup, especially for individuals who value privacy and who would avoid direct communication with the ex-partner. Individuals who are very private may also resist surveillance behaviours altogether (Tong, 2013).

Aspects covered in this section included various influences that affect one’s online behaviour and usage of SNSs, and well as motivations relating to why individuals may
choose to engage on SNSs. Influences on online behaviour included personality, attachment, self-disclosure and self-esteem. These influences may be important in understanding how people may use SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution as it provides insight into the influences at play regarding SNS use in general. Individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution may have certain predispositions, such as can be seen in the four influences discussed, that may make it more likely for them to make use of SNSs in the face of a stressful situation such as a breakup. Similarly, considering the factors that motivate people to use SNSs in general provides insight into possible factors that may attract individuals affected by relationship dissolution to using SNSs. These factors – social engagement, social support, combatting loneliness and surveillance of others – have all been shown to have relevance to well-being and stress levels. This is significant for the present study, since these motivating factors may be important ways of coping with relationship dissolution.

The following section explores existing literature related to the use of SNSs and coping.

**SNS use and Coping**

To the knowledge of the researcher, making use of SNSs in order to cope more effectively with a stressful situation has not been extensively researched. One study found that adolescents used SNSs to cope with the death of a loved one (Merten & Williams, 2009). Being able to interact with others as well as the deceased profile (by reading and posting texts on their profile wall), seems to provide a helpful frame of reference for the continuation of the relationship. Such online interactions, especially when adolescents were found to address the deceased directly, facilitate active coping with the death of a loved one as well as death in general terms. The online community or SNS provides unlimited availability, freedom of
speech, as well as an opportunity to visually reflect on the relationship and emotions (Merten & Williams, 2009).

In a similar study, college students experienced personal support and comfort by interacting with the Facebook profile of a deceased friend (whether by observing other interactions on the profile or by posting a message). Being able to interact with, or in some cases avoid, the profile may be indicative of how an individual who had experienced the loss of a loved one may grieve and cope with the loss (Pennington, 2013). As suggested by Folkman and Lazarus (1984), Tashiro and Frazier (2003), and Van der Drift et al. (2009), one of the most damaging and distressing life events is when a central or extensive commitment is lost, such as when a loved one passes on, but also when a romantic relationship is terminated.

Reasons for utilising SNSs have been mentioned (social engagement, social support, combatting loneliness and surveillance of others), and these motivating factors do have an effect on stress and general well-being (Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2006; Nabi et al., 2013; Park et al., 2009; Teppers et al., 2013; Tong, 2013; Wilson et al., 2012; Wise et al., 2010; Wright, 2012). However, these factors only imply their usefulness with regards to coping. The exploration of these motivating factors as coping factors was not included in the research studies. The present study is therefore significant in that it will explore the notion of utilising SNSs specifically to cope. In this sense, more concrete insights may become apparent through the study that will make the connection between SNSs and coping clearer.

Utilising SNSs in general, and its usefulness in coping with stressful situations such as the death of a loved one, have been explored thus far. The special focus of the present study, however, involves coping with relationship dissolution in particular, and not stress in general, and the role that SNSs may play in coping with this stressful situation. This focus will be explored in more detail in the following section.
Coping with Relationship Dissolution and the Role of SNS

The effects of romantic relationship dissolution and how it may be coped with in SNS settings has not been a topic of extensive research either. Only recently has a small body of research investigated related topics, whose findings are significant for the present study. The research under discussion includes studies exploring the effects of ‘unfriending’ on SNSs, partner surveillance on SNSs, and relationship conflict and termination on SNSs. These studies will be discussed in more detail below.

The effects of ‘unfriending’.

Bevan et al. (2012) described the effects of ‘unfriending’ on Facebook. Unfriending can be seen as a sudden termination of an online relationship and can be very distressing and can lead to negative emotions. This study, looking at ‘unfriending’ on Facebook as a means of terminating a relationship, found that those who had been ‘unfriended’ were likely to ruminate over the rejection of the online friend. The person being ‘unfriended’ may also have had a strong offline bond with the person who did the ‘unfriending’, and this would indicate higher levels of rumination. However, if an individual expected to no longer be online friends after a breakup, ‘unfriending’ could have a less distressing effect (Bevan et al, 2012).

It has been found that once relationship dissolution has occurred, it is likely that the affected individual may want to discontinue online interactions with the ex-partner, as well as the friends associated with the ex-partner. The unfriending process that occurs in discontinuing interactions with these individuals may provide insights into SNSs also being used as an electronic record of how a user’s relationships evolve (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013). Since some individuals choose to cut all ties with an ex-partner on SNSs during and after a breakup (Tong, 2013), it is possible that ‘unfriending’ or deleting an ex-partner off Facebook or other SNSs may be a way for the individual to engage in avoidance coping (Peña & Brody, 2014), as the ultimate act of severing ties.
According to Marshall (2012), those individuals who choose to remain connected to ex-partners on SNSs (as in they remain Facebook friends) after relationship dissolution, may still be connected to the ex-partner in offline settings. They are also likely to engage in surveillance and information-seeking behaviours related to the ex-partner and are likely to be experiencing some distress associated with the breakup. Marshall’s (2012) findings suggest that remaining in online contact with an ex-partner is negatively associated with personal growth, and may hinder the healing process needed to move on from the now terminated relationship. The individual would therefore benefit from severing ties altogether (by unfriending the ex-partner). Unfriending an ex-partner in this regard would therefore provide closure, probably for both the person doing the unfriending, as well as the ex-partner who was unfriended (Bevan, Ang & Fearn, 2014).

‘Unfriending’ is also associated with removing individuals and information from one’s profile that are no longer socially attractive (Peña & Brody, 2014). This may have implications for impression management and constructing the desired identity after relationship dissolution. For example, announcing on Facebook that the romantic relationship has ended (by changing one’s relationship status) may be a useful and positive way for the individual to inform his or her online network of friends of the change in relationship status. However, revealing this information in such a public manner may lead to public scrutiny and undesired comments from other online friends (Fox, Osborn & Warber, 2014). In a similar way, posting, or finding, new information about an ex-partner may lead to jealousy, suspicion and public scrutiny (Fox et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2013).

The public way in which this type of information is revealed and judged depicts the social and interactive nature of the experience of using SNSs. Relationship dissolution, and how this is depicted and dealt with in an online setting, therefore no longer just involves the
two individuals, but rather is influenced, and defined, by the entire interactive social experience that is associated with SNS use (Fox & Warber, 2013).

**Partner surveillance on SNSs.**

The topic of SNS surveillance and stalking has already been discussed. It is worth noting, however, that information-seeking behaviour such as surveillance and stalking may be a significant way for individuals to reduce uncertainty and find the answers they perceive they need in an effort to cope with the breakup (Darvell et al., 2011; Tong, 2013). This may be done extractively, passively or by lurking on the profiles of the ex-partner’s friends’ profiles, all while remaining relatively anonymous (Tong, 2013). Even when online surveillance does not lead to offline harassment, surveillance behaviours may do more than just reduce uncertainty about a relationship or ex-partner. It may, in fact, increase the distress associated with relationship dissolution (perhaps by discovering that the ex-partner is in a new relationship), or increase an individual’s longing for the ex-partner (by developing a renewed interest in the ex-partner by looking at pictures and status updates) (Marhsall, 2012). Ex-partner surveillance may, on the other hand, also decrease feelings of attraction and longing for the ex-partner, if exposure to his or her status updates is spontaneous and the content perceived as boring and common. Findings in this regard seem to be relatively independent of SNS users’ personality and relational styles (Marshall, 2012).

These findings may have significant bearing with regards to the present study, as it has been found to be a relatively common practice to engage in surveillance and stalking behaviours. Individuals affected by relationship dissolution may engage in such behaviours in an effort to cope with the effects of the breakup, despite its outcome on well-being (whether it is an adaptive or maladaptive way of coping).
Relationship conflict and termination on SNSs.

Social interactions on SNSs may also be a cause of relationship conflict and relationship dissolution. Being able to communicate with an ex-romantic partner, form new online relationships, enhance existing offline relationships on a SNS, and ultimately, commit virtual infidelity, could have detrimental implications for an existing offline romantic relationship. In a study by Sauti (2012), 55% to 60% of SNS users believed that their romantic relationship broke up due to SNSs.

SNSs also make terminating a relationship very easy, since, at the click of a button an individual can breakup with his or her partner (Sauti, 2012). ‘Unfriending’ or removing individuals from one’s profile may therefore function as a way to terminate a romantic relationship (Fox et al, 2014; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2012). This withdrawal strategy is similar to other strategies available to individuals who want to express their need for relationship dissolution (such as arguing, dropping hints, and explicitly ending the relationship) (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2012).

Attachment has been found to be related in this regard. Those high in attachment anxiety are likely to find communication via SNSs a more pleasant and viable way of terminating a relationship. The partners of those with anxious or ambivalent attachment may, in turn, also prefer to use SNSs to terminate the relationship, since by doing so they would avoid the emotionally-intense response from their partner (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2012). Since avoidant individuals are likely to withdraw from romantic partners in a stressful situation (such as a breakup) and are less attuned to their partners’ feelings, using SNSs to terminate the relationship may be preferable for them (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2012). The tendency to use SNSs in a romantic relationship dissolution scenario based on attachment style may give an indication of the likelihood that SNS users, affected by relationship dissolution, would utilise SNSs in order to cope with the effects of the breakup. For example, individuals who
are high in anxious or avoidant attachment may turn to SNSs to cope, rather than use direct communication tools to overcome the distress associated with relationship dissolution.

**Conclusion**

From the studies mentioned above, it is evident that utilising SNSs in order to cope with situations related to relationship dissolution is not only possible, but that it has varying effects on personal and relational well-being. Despite the negative implications associated with utilising SNSs during and after relationship dissolution, many SNS users return to SNSs after a breakup (Sauti, 2012). They may use SNSs to find a new partner or to find a place of healing and comfort after a breakup (Sauti, 2012). This contradiction in terms highlights the ambiguity and complexity of utilising SNSs. Utilising SNSs is considered as an integral and beneficial part of daily life as users construct online identities and manage online impressions. Yet, it can also result in distress and personal problems (Fox et al., 2014). The complexity and contradictory nature of the effects of utilising SNSs can also be expected to be true for individuals who have experienced a relationship breakup and are using SNSs in order to cope with the effects of the dissolution. The present study is therefore important because it will contribute to enhancing understanding of how social media can be utilised to aid coping behaviour for individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution.

The following chapter explores the methodology utilised in the present study. A comprehensive discussion of the methodology used will highlight the steps and processes followed to guide the unfolding of the present study.
Research Methodology

Introduction

The aim of the present research study is to explore the role that social media plays in coping with romantic relationship dissolution. A discussion of relevant literature and theories preceded the current chapter in order to create the context and relevance of this research aim. The research question is therefore: what is the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution? In order to answer this research question, and thereby gain a comprehensive understanding of how social media is utilised in order to better cope with romantic relationship dissolution, a suitable and useful methodology must be chosen (Grbich, 2013; Willig, 2001).

The methodology chosen for the present study serves as a guide for the researcher to follow in order to approach, collect and treat the data so that the research question can be successfully answered. Furthermore, the methodology of the present study is explained by critically expanding on the research design and its relevance in the research study. According to the study’s epistemological position, a qualitative phenomenological approach was used in order to obtain participants’ subjective, lived experiences of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. This depicts the phenomenological design of the present study. This chapter also carefully describes the research process that was followed: the data collection methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

Willig (2001) suggests that the research process should be approached as an adventure – a positive exploration of something new and unknown. This creative process of adventure involves methods that aim to approach a certain question, and to justify certain answers to the question. In order to answer the research question of the present study – what is the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution? – the question or research idea needs to
be transformed into a plan of action that can be carried out (Cheek, 2008). The design of the present research study provides the way for this transformation (from research idea to research plan) to take place. It therefore involves important decisions about how the research study is conceptualised, what purpose it fulfils, and how it is carried out (Cheek, 2008). In previous chapters, theoretical understandings and previous literature have highlighted the importance and relevance of the present study, which directly informs the design of the study. By noting a gap in current research on the role social media may play in relationship dissolution, the present study is significant in deepening the understanding and knowledge in this field of knowledge. Ultimately, it should provide insight into the usefulness of social media in coping with relationship dissolution.

This exploratory research question, shaped by certain theoretical understandings and related literature, would be best answered by approaching the study in a qualitative and phenomenological manner. Merriam (2002) asserted that a qualitative research approach involves the notion of meaning and interpretations being socially constructed by people in interaction with their ever-changing realities. Exploring the essences of these meanings and interpretations is therefore the focus of a qualitative researcher (Merriam, 2002, Willig, 2001). The researcher (the primary instrument of data collection and analysis) seeks to understand the nature of individuals’ experiences in a particular setting or context (Merriam, 2002). This is true of the present study, since the phenomenon in question involves individuals’ experiences and meaning-making of the role of social media in coping with the breakup. The present researcher is thus committed to exploring people’s subjective, lived experiences of the role that social media may have played in their coping with relationship dissolution. This commitment influences all other aspects of the research design (Cheek, 2008).
Even though all qualitative research involves the understanding of certain phenomena within certain contexts, the present study utilises the specific methods and techniques of phenomenology in its design. The essence and structure of experience and meaning are therefore important aspects of the present research study. The next section expands upon the concept of phenomenology and how the phenomenological approach is utilised in the present research design.

**Phenomenological research.**

Phenomenology involves the viewpoint that knowledge is based on reality as it is consciously interpreted. In order to increase knowledge about a certain phenomenon, the essence of people’s conscious, pre-reflective experiences about the phenomenon is therefore the object of interpretation (Adams & van Manen, 2008; Grbich, 2013). For Mortari (2008), “Phenomenology is a return to phenomena, that is, to everything that appears in the manner of its appearing” (p. 4). In this sense, people’s experiences of certain phenomena – how the phenomena are intentionally and consciously seen, heard, understood, and intuitively experienced, define the meaning of the phenomena to the individuals who experienced it (Garza, 2007; Grbich, 2013). How this relates to research, and therefore also to the present study, is that by applying a process of outside, intuitive and critical reflection through phenomenological principles, individuals’ conscious experiences can be disengaged from a global reality and concentrated on as objects of study. This disengaged consciousness can then be used for a specific purpose (in this case to explore the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution) which will result in evidence obtained about the essence of the phenomenon. The essence of a phenomenon is determined by both content and meaning of an experience, expressed and understood in language (in this case, text). This involves visual as well as emotional responses about an experience that make meaning possible. Meaning in this sense may also be concealed and may therefore need to be
experienced intuitively (Grbich, 2013). By formalising these reflective processes of meaning making, and by eliminating any objective beliefs about the phenomenon that the researcher may have, a description of the true essence of the structures of experience can emerge (Garza, 2007). Obtaining this phenomenological description of the true essence of individuals’ experience of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution, is what the present research study aims to achieve.

Several forms of phenomenology have been considered by the present researcher in order to establish the design of the research study. Principles of transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and heuristic phenomenology all played a role in guiding the researcher to allow the true essence of the phenomenon to emerge.

**Transcendental phenomenology.**

This form of Husserlian phenomenology involves, in particular, structures of consciousness, intentionality and essences regarding subjective experiences of phenomena. These experiences, essences, or meanings, are described as they are through processes of intuition and self-reflection (Moustakas 1994). Processes that inform these constitutions include epoch, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Each of these processes will be discussed briefly below.

**Epoche.**

Epoche involves suspending existing ideas and theories (Grbich, 2013). The researcher therefore puts aside pre-existing theories, knowledge, beliefs and assumptions about the phenomenon in question in order to take in the subjective experience of the other afresh (Lin, 2013; Walsh, 2012). This is also referred to as bracketing (Gearing, 2008) and is a process that involves ‘bracketing’ or suspending personal experience and knowledge in order to observe phenomena in an unfiltered manner. By engaging in the elimination of filters of
personal beliefs and scientific knowledge, the researcher is free of judgments and biases that may impede the interpretation of the individuals’ experiences (Mortari, 2008). The researcher can therefore be attentive to information and experiences provided by intuition only, and thereby accurately describe the phenomenon. This way of understanding and interpreting information may be unnatural and difficult, and the researcher cannot ever be fully freed of her own presuppositions entirely. However, suspending one’s ideas and theories in order to obtain a description of the essence and meaning of the individuals’ conscious experiences, can be achieved through phenomenological reduction.

*Phenomenological reduction.*

In order to connect at the consciousness level, phenomenological reduction becomes essential. Reduction, by means of bracketing (or epoche described above), allows the researcher to experience the essence of an individual’s lived experience (Adams & van Manen, 2008). Here the researcher observes the subject with her own conscious apprehension of the individuals’ reflection of experience (Walsh, 2012). Reflections of experience therefore need to be reduced, or bracketed, in order bring into focus aspects of meaning related to the phenomenon being observed. In this way the core of the phenomenon is revealed (Lin, 2013). This is done by reflecting on the individual’s experience (by means of observing language and text) with careful attentiveness (Adams & van Manen, 2008). Both external (to do with the phenomenon itself) and internal (to do with the researcher) processes are observed and reflected upon reflexively in order to describe exactly what is seen by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

*Imaginative variation.*

Through imaginative variation, the essences of the phenomenon can be identified intuitively and consistently by the researcher through various perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). In this sense, the underlying factors related to the experience of the phenomenon can be discovered.
(Lin, 2013). In the case of the present study, this method relates to the stages of data analysis, where the data (comprised of individuals’ subjective experiences in the form of transcribed interviews) is read and re-read, coded and ultimately, structural themes are derived. By using imagination, the researcher is therefore able to come up with descriptions for the essences and meanings of participants’ experiences (Grbich, 2013).

**Synthesis.**

By integrating the texture and structure of the parts, themed according to meaning, the essence of the phenomenon is able to be synthesised into a whole (Grbich, 2013). Taken together, by means of reduction and imaginative variation, the ultimate truth about the essence of the phenomenon emerges. This process is depicted in the final stages of thematic analysis employed in the present research study. When the essences and meanings of individual participants’ experiences emerge, it can be integrated into holistic and synthesised findings about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

In the present study the four processes described above, according to the transcendental phenomenological approach, were utilised in guiding the researcher to transform the raw data from the interviews, to a description of the essence of the phenomenon in the form of findings. A detailed description of the data analysis process, based on these basic phenomenological principles, is provided in the data analysis section. Principles from the existential stream of phenomenology were also utilised in allowing the research design to unfold.

**Existential phenomenology.**

This stream of phenomenology is attributed to the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Moustakas (Grbich, 2013). As opposed to transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology sees consciousness as linked to human existence (and not a separate entity) (Grbich, 2013). In particular, consciousness involves an individual’s body, freedom of action
and choices. The focus is therefore on the context within which individuals exist, and
esses are seen as part and parcel of an individual’s experience and being (Grbich, 2013).
Although free choice is left to the individual, individuals are also able to respond to others,
allowing people to be interconnected. This interconnection highlights the possibility of
phenomenological reduction. However, the researcher is not able to bracket her own
experience completely, since the researcher’s experience of existence also allows her to
experience other aspects and conceptualise essences within herself (which would be
counterproductive in the reduction process). This makes the process of phenomenological
research one that is rooted in reality, of which the researcher is a part of and cannot be
completely abstracted from. Garza (2007) also emphasises the importance of
phenomenological researchers acknowledging their role and epistemological presumptions in
the interpretation of findings. Since all knowledge is relational and contextual, this aspect of
phenomenology is seen as its strength and enhances the interpretive nature of the research
process.

With regards to the present research study, the researcher therefore used parts of the
analysed interviews that depict the participants’ experiences, in order to substantiate the
interpretations of the themes that emerged as the essences of the phenomenon. The
interpretative approach in phenomenological research therefore becomes significant. This
also relates to the hermeneutic stream of phenomenology.

**Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology.**

This stream of phenomenology is based on the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, van
Manen, and Giorgi (Grbich, 2012), and takes the influence of the researcher a step further,
and regards the researcher as instrumental in interpreting the research data. This
interpretation process can occur either from an objective stance or by the researcher
interacting with the data (in this case, the text of the interviews). What is of importance,
however, is the integration of interpreted parts into a whole, while remaining true to one’s own subjective existence. Bracketing is therefore not fully possible, and recognition of the researcher’s reflections, experiences, assumptions and views are important in the interpretation process (Adams & van Manen, 2008). The present researcher remained aware of these principles and sought to adhere as closely and transparently to the participants’ experiences and structures of essences as possible. The researcher’s opinion does, however, play an important role in the interpretation process. Issues pertaining to researcher bias, pre-conceived ideas and trustworthiness are discussed under ethical considerations later in this chapter.

**Heuristic phenomenology.**

Similar to the data analysis method employed in the present study, principles of heuristic phenomenology depict the data analysis process as involving the researcher becoming immersed in the data set in order to explicate core themes. In this sense, the researcher is regarded as having her own experiences in the world (Moustakas, 1994). This shifts the focus to the meaning, essence and experience of the researcher as co-researcher of the phenomenon. Six phases expressed under heuristic phenomenological data analysis include: engagement (which involves self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and examination of the internal reference frames that are formed); immersion (which involves the researcher becoming totally involved in the world of the data and experiences); incubation (which involves intense concentration on knowledge expansion through understanding); illumination (which involves an active process of knowledge expansion and breakthrough); explication (construction and depiction of core themes); and creative emphasis (integrating and creatively expressing patterns and relationships of the essences of experiences).
The method of thematic data analysis, used in the present research study, follows a similar process as the six phases of heuristic phenomenological data analysis, and allows for the incorporation and essence of phenomenology to guide the process of analysis.

In adhering to the principles of phenomenology, outlined above, the present research study follows a phenomenological design. The present study incorporates aspects from all four forms of phenomenology – transcendental, existential, hermeneutic, and heuristic phenomenology – to guide the process of research from conceptualising the research problem as a phenomenon under question, to the data analysis process where meaning, consciousness and essence of experiences (of both the researcher and the participants) followed a phenomenological approach. Data collection methods are discussed in the following section.

**Data Collection**

Following the principles of phenomenology discussed above, various methods were employed in order to discover and understand the phenomenon of the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. These methods include data collection measures, participants and sampling, the research setting and the research procedure. These aspects of the present research study will be described in more detail below.

**Data collection measures.**

In all forms of qualitative research (including the phenomenological design of the present study) Merriam (2002) regards the researcher as the primary and ideal instrument for data collection and analysis. This is because the researcher is able to be actively involved in the reflexive process of understanding and reflecting on the meaning of participants’ experiences. As will be explored under the ethical considerations section, the researcher as primary data collector also has certain disadvantages and pre-conceived ideas with which she enters the data collection and analysis process. Bearing this role of the researcher and the phenomenological principles relevant to this study in mind, the present researcher collected
data by means of in-depth, unstructured interviews. Since the researcher is interested in the subjectivity of participants’ experiences, data was obtained through individual, in-depth, unstructured interviews in order to allow the participants to describe their subjective, lived experience of the phenomena being studied (Englander, 2012). This is in line with the phenomenological nature of the study.

A single, open-ended question, ‘Please tell me about your experience of using social networking sites in order to cope with your breakup’, was asked at the beginning of the interview. No further structuring of the interview was pre-prepared. This way of conducting the interview allows the participants to choose how they would like to direct and construct their descriptions of the experience of the phenomenon. There are therefore no presumptions on the part of the researcher about what kinds of descriptions could be anticipated. After the initial open-ended question, the researcher probed in order to elicit specific descriptions of the experiences mentioned (Roulston, 2008). Furthermore, the researcher conducted the interviews using interviewing techniques such as listening, open-ended questions related to the participant’s experience, clarifying and empathy (Terre Blanch et al., 2006). The role and bias of the researcher was taken into consideration, so as not to influence the interview process. Data was gathered until data saturation was reached, whereby no more new or relevant information emerged from the interviews (Saumure & Given, 2008).

The interviews allowed the participants to describe their experiences of the phenomenon using words and language. Words are therefore very important in qualitative research, as it is the way in which the researcher is able to understand these descriptions (Firmin, 2008). The researcher therefore audio-recorded the interviews. According to Firmin (2008) this allows the researcher to think freely and creatively in attending to the interview process without having to take many notes, and it allows for analysis of the data in the form
of transcribed text. By having the exact words of the participants, it ensures the integrity of
the data.

**Participants and sampling.**

In order to collect the data via interviews, participants had to be obtained to take part in the
present study. Since a specific phenomenon is being studied, participants were obtained by
means of purposive sampling. This sampling depends on the availability and willingness of
the participants, as well as the participants being typical of the population researched, that is,
those who make use of social media in order to cope with relationship dissolution (Terre
Blanch et al., 2006). In order to achieve this, the researcher advertised the requirements and
inclusion criteria needed to participate in the study in a local newspaper. Although using
purposive sampling to obtain the first three participants ensured the suitability of the
participants, this sample size was insufficient to reach data saturation. The researcher
therefore also made use of snowball sampling, where the sample of participants obtained
through the advertisement could gradually increase through the contacts and references of the
initial participants (Terre Blanch et al., 2006). One participant was obtained using snowball
sampling. The advantage of using this sampling method is that it is possible to include
participants where no formal lists or clusters of suitable participants exist (Terre Blanch et al.,
2006).

In terms of sampling size in qualitative research, Englander (2012) regards the
question of the number of participants necessary in a qualitative study as irrelevant.
Englander (2012) suggests that, in contrast to quantitative research, a large sample size is not
necessarily a prerequisite for being able to generalise findings to the population. Instead,
obtaining in-depth knowledge rooted in phenomenology and based on participants’
experience, is the aim of qualitative research. Data saturation, instead of quantity of
participants, therefore is important in the present study. Due to the in-depth nature of the
The present researcher was satisfied that data saturation had been reached after interviewing four participants. The findings are therefore transferable to other, similar contexts.

The inclusion criteria for the present study stipulated that: participants must be 18 years or older, living in the Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape area; participants must have experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship, caused by either themselves or their partner, in the last 12 months (ensuring that their experience is relatively recent); and participants must be active in terms of following or posting feeds on SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram BBM and/or WhatsApp. In order to establish that participants were indeed active on these social networking sites, their activity must have been as frequent as once a week to several times each day. Participants of any gender, race or sexual orientation were included in the present study. The language used for the interview process was English. The participants therefore needed to be comfortable communicating in English.

The suitability of participants for the study was confirmed by asking prospective participants to complete a biographical questionnaire with questions pertaining to inclusion criteria (see Appendix A). Agreement to participate in the study and the abovementioned criteria was obtained by means of a written consent form. The consent form also served to fulfil ethical obligations (see Appendix B). In addition to the consent form, an information letter was provided to the participants at the outset of the interview, informing the participants of the nature of the present study, confidentiality issues, and other issues pertaining to the research (see Appendix C).

**Setting.**

A quiet, safe and confidential space was used in order to conduct the interviews. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device to ensure the accurate capturing of data. The venue for interviewing therefore needed to be conducive for the recording of the
interviews. Once conducted, the interviews were transcribed verbatim so that the written data could be analysed. As per ethical requirements, the data will be stored at the university for six years.

**Research procedure.**

Once the sampling procedure and inclusion criteria were established according to the research aim, sampling of participants could begin. The present researcher advertised the requirements and inclusion criteria needed to participate in the study in a local newspaper. Prospective participants could therefore contact the researcher in order to participate in the study. In order to establish the suitability of the participants, the researcher double-checked the inclusion criteria in the initial telephonic contact with the prospective participants. Thereafter, suitable participants were provided with an electronic copy (sent via email) of the information letter in order for them to be fully informed of the nature of the present study, confidentiality issues, and other issues pertaining to the research. Upon agreement, an interview date and time was established with each participant. At each interview, the participant was given a biographical questionnaire (to confirm that the participant met the inclusion criteria and to provide biographical information) and consent form to complete. Once all the relevant information was discussed, participants had an opportunity to ask any questions about the research study. Thereafter, written consent was given and the interview could proceed.

Each interview was recorded using an audio recording device. Interview length ranged from 65 minutes to 89 minutes. The average length of time per interview was 79 minutes, with all four interviews spanning 5 hours and 16 minutes in total. After the interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber. The transcribed interviews, in the form of written text, could then be analysed according to the phenomenological principles alluded to earlier in this chapter. Specifically, the method of thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was utilised.
Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method utilised in order to identify, analyse and report themes within data (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using this method of analysis produces a rich, detailed and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the present research study, the phenomenon that was focussed upon was the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution, and the aim of data analysis was to provide rich descriptions of the participants’ subjective, lived experiences of this phenomenon.

Due to the flexible nature of thematic analysis, it is important to consider the type of analysis one would want to do, as well as the claims one would want to make regarding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this regard, the present study adhered to phenomenological principles (discussed at the beginning of this chapter) throughout the data analysis process. With regards to phenomena that is under-researched, or when the participants’ responses to the interview question are not yet known (as is the case in the present study), Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that thematic analysis can be used effectively. In this sense, thematic analysis provides a rich thematic description of the entire data set (all interview data) so as to reveal predominant themes across the data set (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These themes should be an accurate reflection of the content of all data and was identified using an inductive approach. This ‘bottom-up’ approach ensures that themes are linked to the actual data and are not driven by the researcher’s biased interest and/or preconceptions.

Another important consideration to be made when using thematic analysis, is the level at which themes will be identified. In the present study, themes were identified at a semantic level. At this level, the researcher is interested in the meaning of what the participants say, their actual experience. This allows a process of description to take place that stays within the bounds of the participants’ experiences. The meanings and experiences can then be patterned according to themes, and linked to previous literature and theory, which forms part of the
researcher’s interpretation process. However, inferences are not made beyond that which the participants described as being part of their experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis is a recursive process of constantly moving backward and forward between the data set, coded extracts and the analysed data. The analysis also involves writing and jotting down ideas throughout the phases of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There are six phases in thematic analysis. The first phase involves becoming familiar with the data (after it has been transcribed). This was done by reading and re-reading the data while annotating any initial ideas that the researcher had. The second phase involves generating the initial codes. The researcher coded interesting features of the data in a systematic way across the entire data set. Data, relevant to each code, was then collated. Thirdly, the researcher collated the different codes into potential themes or patterns (Aronson, 1994). All data, relevant to each potential theme, was collated. The fourth phase in thematic analysis involves reviewing these themes. Here the researcher checked if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts as well as the data set. In this way, a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis was generated. Once this was done, the researcher could clearly define and name the various themes. This comprises the fifth phase of analysis. During this phase, there was an ongoing analysis in order to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall theme or story of the analysis as a whole. The final phase of analysis involves producing a report of the analysis. Vivid and compelling extract examples were selected and finally analysed, and the analysis was related back to the research question and literature (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In line with principles of phenomenological epoche, reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis, the researcher was aware of potential preconceived ideas, biases and other ethical considerations throughout the data collection and analysis processes. These ethical considerations are discussed below.
Ethical Considerations

Various ethical principles should be employed in doing a research study in order to enhance the ethical standing of the study (Preissle, 2008). Ethical principles that were taken into consideration in the present study include: institutional approval, maintaining researcher integrity and competence, ensuring the exclusion of researcher bias, trustworthiness of analysis and findings, informed consent, confidentiality, and ethical dissemination of results (Terre Blanch et al., 2006). Furthermore, the principles of non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and autonomy were employed (HPCSA, 2008). Each of these principles is described in more detail below.

Institutional approval.

The proposal of the present research study was presented to the Psychology Department of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). Once approved by the department, an application to the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Technology and Innovations (FRTI) and Ethics (Human) Committee was made to ensure the study does not breach any ethical codes or guidelines. Only once ethical approval was given, could the researcher commence with the data collection procedure.

Researcher integrity and competence.

As previously mentioned, the researcher plays an integral role in data collection and analysis. Therefore, the researcher takes responsibility to conduct the research study with integrity and competence. In this sense, Watts (2008) points to the reflective and introspective processes that are necessary on the part of the researcher to maintain this integrity and competence. A keen awareness of the researcher’s own personality, values, prejudices and preconceived ideas, and how these interact with the research process, is necessary and important as these have the potential of impacting the research findings (Watts, 2008). As expressed in phenomenological reduction, the researcher, aware of her own experience, needs to remain
faithful to the descriptions of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon in question.

According to Mortari (2008), this requires respect and humility on the part of the researcher. In the present study, the researcher sought to respect every detail of what participants described and what the researcher observed. However, since it is impossible for the researcher to observe all communicative nuances, and the context of the researcher remains a reality, a disposition of humility becomes necessary as the researcher continues to question and reflect on all information observed in her conscious awareness (Mortari, 2008). It was the intention of the present researcher to apply integrity, competence, respect and humility in conducting the present research study in the most responsible manner possible.

**Researcher bias.**

Due to the interpretive nature of the present study, the researcher does not deny her existence altogether. Although bracketing is an essential feature of the phenomenological approach, doing so completely is not possible. There is therefore a possibility of bias that may be as a result of the researcher imposing her own agenda onto the research process. Even decisions regarding the research design, method and sampling procedures may introduce researcher bias (Ogden, 2008). The present researcher therefore contained the possibility for bias by being acutely self-aware of personal values, assumptions and pre-conceived ideas, as well as by constantly and reflexively analysing data critically and remaining open to alternative interpretations of data. By utilising an independent research psychologist to analyse the data and verify themes and findings, the present researcher ensured that researcher bias did not impact the findings of the present study.

**Trustworthiness of data analysis and findings.**

The role of the researcher and methods to ensure quality and trustworthiness were taken into consideration. This allows scientific rigour to be applied in qualitative research such as the present study (Given & Saumure, 2008). Guba and Lincoln’s constructs, in ensuring
trustworthiness in qualitative research, were employed in order to realise this consideration. These constructs include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

**Credibility.**

Credibility in qualitative research involves the accurate and rich description of the phenomenon being researched (Jensen, 2008). It was therefore the present researcher’s goal to ensure a harmonious link between the participants’ descriptions of their experiences and the researcher’s interpretations of the meaning of the phenomenon. Issues of data collection and methodology are also important in this regard, as the methodological decisions need to ensure a valid and credible outcome of the research (Jensen, 2008). Given the phenomenological nature of the present study, the research design and methods employed were therefore appropriate and lend themselves to enhanced credibility of the present study.

To further ensure credibility of the data analysis and research findings, an independent research psychologist simultaneously analysed the transcriptions according the same method of data analysis. Once the analyses were completed, the present researcher and independent research psychologist consulted on their findings to ensure the integrity of the results obtained from the data analysis, thereby providing an accurate depiction of the essence of the phenomenon.

**Transferability.**

Transferability involves applying the research findings of a particular study to similar contexts outside of the confines of that particular study (Jensen, 2008). Due to the small sample sizes of qualitative research (as in the present study), the quantitative notion of generalisability is not appropriate. Instead, when a study is transferable, it can be applied, or transferred, to other, similar, contexts and situations (Jensen, 2008). By providing rich descriptions of the context, findings and methodology of a research study, the reader will be
able to see the applicability of the study’s transferability. In the present study, it is likely that findings can be transferred to other individuals who utilise social media and are experiencing relationship dissolution, since that is the context of the participants in the present research study. Since the present study utilised purposive sampling to obtain these participants, it is made clear to whom the present study’s findings can be applied.

**Dependability.**

Similar to the principle of transferability, dependability seeks to protect the study against haphazard subjectivity that cannot be repeated in future studies. In this sense, the present researcher employed a thorough and appropriate research design, data collection and analysis methods, and interpretation of data. Furthermore, the present researcher verified the data analysis and findings with an independent research psychologist who simultaneously analysed the data using the same method of data analysis. The present researcher provided a rich and transparent description of all procedures and methodological issues pertaining to the research study. The researcher also acknowledges a reflexive process of analysis and interpretation which embraces the role of the researcher as integral in the interpretation process. These strategies, according to Jensen (2008) ensure the dependability of a qualitative research study.

**Confirmability.**

In order to further confirm that the research study is not due to the subjective predisposition of the present researcher, it was necessary to verify the accuracy and truthfulness of the meaning of the findings and the study as a whole. This must be done in order to ensure that the findings of the research study can be built on and expanded in the future. The present researcher therefore endeavoured to understand the phenomenon of the role that social media plays in individuals who are coping with relationship dissolution from the perspective of the participants themselves, and the meaning they attributed to the phenomenon. The researcher
adhered to the purpose of the study, following the research design without introducing research bias. The principle of confirmability does not deny that each researcher may bring her own perspective to the research findings (Jensen, 2008). However, bias must not be introduced so as to change the meaning of the participants’ experiences. Methods employed to make the research study confirmable are similar to methods employed to make the research study dependable. Firstly, the present researcher was transparent about the research design and methods used. Secondly, data analysis was conducted according to the method of thematic data analysis, and no claims were made by the present researcher without confirming it by what participants’ described. Thirdly, an independent research psychologist was employed to review the codes and themes in order to verify the researcher’s findings.

**Informed consent.**

According to Terre Blanch et al. (2006), informed consent involves providing participants with the appropriate information about the study, participants’ competence in understanding the information, voluntariness of participants and freedom to withdraw at any point during the study, and formalising the consent by having it in written form. These aspects of informed consent were addressed in the present study by providing each participant with a comprehensive information letter that informed the participants of the nature of the study, their involvement, issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and dissemination of the findings. This information was provided in person by the present researcher and participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the above-mentioned information. After establishing that the participants were able to understand their role in the research process, it was also explained to them that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that it was their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. The consent form further highlighted issues of volunteerism, risk and benefits, confidentiality, the aim of the study, the procedure, and access to findings. As
stipulated in the consent form, there were no foreseeable risks associated with participating in the present study.

Confidentiality.
Confidentiality is one of the most established principles in research ethics and involves respecting participants’ dignity and privacy (Ogden, 2008). Confidentiality in research is important since it protects participants from embarrassment, harm or stigma. It also enhances the quality and validity of the data (Ogden, 2008). In order to achieve this in the present study, the researcher was committed to not disclose any information about the present study in such a way that the identities of the participants would be revealed. This includes coded extracts present in the findings. None of the coded extracts are connected in any way to the identities of the participants. Identification information (in the biographical questionnaire) is also stored separately and securely from the data that was analysed to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality was assured to each participant in both the information given and by means of signing the consent form.

Ethical dissemination of results.
The results and findings of the present study will be submitted and published in the form of a treatise and made available to the NMMU South Campus Library. This is a requirement for the fulfilment of the degree of Magister Artium (Counselling Psychology). The results will be made available to participants via email and/or personal feedback. A research article will also be written.

Non-maleficence.
The principle of non-maleficence informs the researcher of her duty to prevent and avoid harm to research participants. This includes physical, emotional and psychological injury or harm (Ogden, 2008). In the present study, confidentiality provided a way to achieve non-maleficence, since it protected the participants from embarrassment and identification. There
were no foreseeable risks involved in the present study, as agreed upon in the signing of the consent form. Approval from the institution’s human ethics committee verified that participants would not be harmed in any manner.

**Beneficence.**

Not only should a research study be non-maleficent, there should be benefits associated with the research study (Terre Blanch et al., 2006). Although participants in the present study did not receive any incentive to participate, participants were made aware of the benefits of the research study. The direct benefit of the present research study is enhanced knowledge on the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. By increasing knowledge of the present phenomenon, individuals would be better informed on the usefulness of utilising social media in order to better cope with relationship dissolution.

**Justice.**

To ensure that participants were treated fairly and equally, the principle of justice was applied to all stages of the research study (Terre Blanch et al., 2006). Participants in the present study were not selected purely based on the researcher’s convenience and subjective needs. Participants were selected based on their suitability to participate in the present study. This ensured that the study would be trustworthy and beneficial to both the community at large, as well as the participants themselves. Once participants agreed to participate voluntarily in the present study, they were asked to sign a consent form that further highlighted the ethical and responsible manner in which they would be treated.

**Autonomy.**

Issues of autonomy in research relates to confidentiality and the protection of participants’ privacy. This further involves respect for the dignity of participants. These aspects were discussed in detail under the confidentiality section discussed above.
Ethical principles discussed above were adhered to by the present researcher so as to ensure that the research study was conducted in a highly ethical manner. The present research study is therefore trustworthy, and took into consideration institutional approval, researcher integrity and competence, and researcher bias. Furthermore, ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and autonomy were employed in order to protect the participants of the present study from any harm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, a comprehensive explanation of the design and methods used in the present study was given. Based on the methodology employed in the present study, the research question – what is the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution? – can therefore be answered. Being qualitative in nature, the present research study employed a phenomenological design in order to successfully describe the essence of the phenomenon in question. Specifically, phenomenological methods and techniques were used to capture the essence and structure of experience and meaning of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. These methods and techniques were discussed by explaining the research design, the data collection process and the method of data analysis.

As a constant guide, the researcher employed various ethical principles to ensure an ethically conducted research study. The trustworthiness of the research findings could also be ensured, as will be depicted in the following chapter.
Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model of thematic analysis was utilised in order to identify, analyse and report on the themes evident in the data. A rich and detailed description of the themes, as it relates to how social media may be used in order to cope with relationship dissolution, therefore becomes possible. Previous literature (as discussed in chapter three) alluded to the usefulness and detriments of social media as a platform for coping responses, but, to the knowledge of the researcher, no study has specifically addressed the issue of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution in particular. The present study, therefore, provides important insights into this phenomenon, both to further understand it, and to provide recommendations for future research.

As this is a qualitative study, participants’ subjective, lived experiences of the phenomenon (using social media in order to cope with relationship dissolution), are of importance in the findings and discussion of the study. It is also important to consider the biographical information of the participants.

Biographical description of the participants.

Four participants were obtained who met all the necessary inclusion criteria, and who participated in the study. Three were obtained using purposive sampling (by means of a newspaper advertisement that they responded to) and one participant was obtained through snowball sampling. Two participants were male and two participants were female. The participants’ ages ranged from 23 to 33, and they represented both white and coloured ethnic groups. Participants utilised social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and BBM, with Facebook being the site most frequently referred to.

Taking into account the individual biographical information of the participants, and the fact that each individual had a unique experience of the breakup and the use of social
media, the data was collected and analysed. The researcher asked a single, open-ended question at the beginning of each interview, “Please tell me about your experience of using social media in coping with the relationship breakup.” This allowed for an unstructured, in-depth interview to take place, which resulted in data collection and analysis processes, in order to reveal certain themes and categories across the data set. A comprehensive discussion of these themes and categories follows.

**Themes and categories.**

Findings, in the form of themes and categories, represent the most pertinent aspects of how participants experienced the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. Themes became evident through the coding process based on the frequency of repeated information across the data set, depicted in codes. Although there are several themes that surfaced across the entire data set, it is important to consider that the present study is explorative in nature and the sample size was relatively small (only four participants). Therefore, important additional information emerged that can be seen as relevant and significant to the present study, and important inferences can be made on a more latent level. These additional findings also serve as possible avenues for future research, and will also be discussed under the recommendations section in the next chapter.

Overall, the findings depict four main themes, with sub-themes, categories and sub-categories subsumed under each theme. The four main themes (presented in table format in Appendix D) include: 1) advantages of social media use, 2) disadvantages of social media use, 3) the role of personality in social media behaviour, and 4) phases of the breakup. A discussion of the findings will follow.

**Findings and Discussion**

The discussion below seeks to interpret and describe the findings that were based on the participants’ experience of using social media in coping with relationship dissolution.
Participants utilised various social media tools, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and BBM, and relevant themes emerged across all social media tools. Since Facebook was the site most frequently referred to by the participants, certain specific themes related to Facebook use in particular. These themes are integrated in the discussion and the reader will be guided with regards to specific themes related to Facebook use. The discussion also incorporates relevant literature and linkages to theory in order to create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon that is being explored. Each main theme will be discussed under a separate main heading.

**Advantages of social media use.**

Regarding social media use in general, participants found that there may be certain advantages to using social media to cope with relationship dissolution. These aspects were found to be particularly helpful in the short-term. Many of the advantages pertain largely to Facebook use specifically, and these aspects will be discussed under a separate heading. The two sub-themes that emerged as advantages to using social media in coping with relationship dissolution therefore include the fact that: 1) social media could be helpful in the short-term, and 2) there are positive effects of using Facebook in particular.

**Could be helpful in the short-term.**

Findings of the present study reveal that social media may be helpful in coping with relationship dissolution. One helpful aspect of social media use seemed to emerge from the participants’ experiences that using social media in general may be helpful in the short-term. After her romantic relationship breakup, one participant found it helpful to use social media in order to “fill [her] time”, especially since she had more time on her hands now that she was no longer in a relationship.
Participant 2 (P2): “It was something that I could fill my time with... because like time felt like it was going by really slowly... especially in the beginning, so it just filled a bit of a gap I suppose”

Using social media as an activity to fill the time could also be seen as a distraction, or avoidance, technique. By going onto SNSs, using either extractive or passive strategies, it might offer temporary relief from boredom and loneliness. This use of social media after relationship dissolution may serve to fill the time with something other than thinking about or dealing with the breakup. It is possibly a way in which the user can avoid dealing with the effects of the breakup – by filling the time. Avoidance strategies, according to the Stress and Coping Theory, are considered emotion-focussed coping strategies (Lazarus, 1993). The short-term benefit would therefore involve an attempt to alleviate the distress (in this case, loneliness or boredom) associated with the stressful situation (the breakup) (Lazarus, 1993).

Similarly, another participant found using social media helpful after the breakup, because, by posting positive images of herself, she was able to feel better about herself. This can also be regarded as an emotion-focussed coping strategy, since she made an attempt to alleviate the distress associated with the breakup by positively reappraising the meaning associated with her profile, by posting positive images of herself. In her words, however, she believed that in doing so, it is only beneficial in the short-term, since one does not actually deal with the breakup properly.

Participant 3 (P3): “I think it’s a short-term coping mechanism... it helps you to cope now or whatever... it’s like ‘okay cool I feel better about me.’”

This finding is consistent with research that suggests that emotion-focussed coping (including avoidance coping) can be adaptive immediately after the stressful event (short-term), but may become maladaptive in the long-term (Carson & Polman, 2010; Seiffge-Krenke & Gutenberg, 2004). As previously mentioned, these findings also have implications for long-
term social media use – that it may not be beneficial to use social media in the long-term when coping with relationship dissolution.

Based on the experience of another participant in the present study, it may be possible that even problem-focussed coping strategies related to social media use after relationship dissolution can be beneficial (only) in the short-term. Although only this one participant commented on this experience, further exploration may result in similar findings. He believed that during the initial stages of the breakup (immediately afterwards), it was helpful to try and approach his ex-partner in order to talk to her, even though he knew that it may not be possible in ‘real life’. This participant attempted to alter the actual situation – by trying to renegotiate the breakup by talking to the ex-partner.

Participant 4 (P4): “It’s definitely a way of sort of coping with the initial breakup because you sort of want to talk to them but you can’t talk to them… because you know there’s no real point in it. So talking to Facebook is sort of like you talking to her…”

This finding may have significance for future research, as a better understanding of how helpful problem-focussed coping strategies are by using social media after relationship dissolution, in the short-term, would be beneficial.

**Positive effects of using Facebook.**

To a large extent, all participants referred mostly to the use of Facebook during and after relationship dissolution. This section aims to highlight findings specifically related to Facebook use. In particular, participants found Facebook to have certain positive effects in terms of coping with relationship dissolution. These included that Facebook use can: enhance offline relationships, allow one to know what is happening in others’ lives, provide a sense of connectedness, be a distraction tool, be an emotional outlet, enhance well-being, be a source of comfort and inspiration, and possibly serve as a reminder that the relationship was not negative. Each of these positive effects will be discussed below.
Enhance offline relationships.

Participants believe that engaging on Facebook enhances existing, offline relationships. One participant said,

Participant 1 (P1): “If you do meet someone like obviously outside, going out or whatever or to friends and then you add them… Like I’ve added one or two people on Facebook…. you just get to know who they are… Facebook… the photos and you see how they are so it does in a way help you get to know the person.”

In referring to a friend going through a similar situation to her, another participant commented:

P3: “Maybe what it did do was kind of grow us closer a little bit. Because we were going through the same experience although and I guess the reason I knew a lot of what she is going through was because I had seen it on Facebook.”

A third participant observed that connecting with old friends on Facebook helped to enhance their relationship, since by reconnecting on Facebook, they were able to have meaningful conversations on Skype, which enhanced their offline relationships.

P4: “The one mate was at the time overseas in, I can’t remember where and the other one was in Cape Town. And I saw the one guy’s status that was overseas and I just thought like, ’ja dude missing you and whatever’…um was chatting to him and we actually got skyping with a 3-way Skype. And then we just chatted and like I told… them we broke-up and it’s been really shitty whatever… and then they were like… ‘hang in there’ kind of thing. And it’s just like knowing that I had that support was – that helped me directly.”

Facebook allowed the participant(s) to connect with others, which enhanced their offline relationships. This, in turn, may have aided their coping with relationship dissolution, since the result of the enhanced relationships was ultimately social support. Participants found that
the social support offered by the offline relationships had a direct impact on their coping with relationship dissolution, since it allowed them to connect with new people (possibly indicating moving on from the breakup) and allowed them to find solace in talking to friends about the breakup. These reasons relate to previous findings on coping with relationship dissolution and social engagement and support. For example, Ellison et al. (2007), Hum et al. (2011) and Park et al. (2007) found that individuals are likely to join and use SNSs to socialise and interact with friends. In particular, they may want to stay connected with old friends, maintain and intensify offline relationships, and to stay informed about more distant acquaintances (Ellison et al., 2007).

Social support is another important need that may be fulfilled by engaging on SNSs, according to Nabi et al. (2013) and Wright (2012). Sharing an experience such as relationship dissolution with someone who is going through a similar situation can also result in perceptions of social and emotional support (Wright, 2012). This finding is supported by findings in the present study, where participants felt supported when they were able share the experience with someone else. Finding the other person going through a similar situation was a direct result of a passive Facebook strategy. According to Wright (2012), the support perceived in this instance may be related to the trust that is fostered between people who are perceived as socially attractive due to perceived similarities.

It is possible that the participants in the present study perceived the impact of the breakup as severe, since it has been found that, among those who seek social support as a coping strategy, are individuals who perceive the impact of a breakup to be severe (Chung et al., 2003). According to the Stress and Coping Theory, social engagement and social support is related to coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). More specifically, social support used to seek solace, can be regarded as an emotion-focussed coping strategy (Chung et al., 2003). According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), social support is also regarded as an important
coping resource, from which the individual’s coping process can evolve since it has a direct effect on the appraisal attached to the situation (in this case relationship dissolution).

Related to social support and using Facebook to enhance offline relationships, one participant found that using Facebook was a helpful tool to get in touch with a religious leader. This was purely to obtain the religious leader’s contact details so that further offline support could be sought.

For the participants in the present study, the coping resource of social support became available as a direct result of ‘seeing’ friends on Facebook and learning what is happening in their lives. Knowing what is happening in others’ lives is therefore an important positive effect Facebook may have on individuals affected by relationship dissolution.

Knowing what is happening in others’ lives.

Surveillance behaviours on SNSs can be expected by SNS users. Looking at others’ profiles is considered an online norm, especially on Facebook (Darvell et al., 2011; Tong, 2013). It can therefore be expected that Facebook would facilitate being able to see and know what is happening in other Facebook users’ lives. This was a prominent theme that emerged in the present study.

P1: “Usually you would probably go visit a friend or something, talk to them about it. But some people are so busy nowadays that... you can post it and stuff on Facebook”

P2: “Lots of my friends have gone out of town and I can still see what they’re doing on Facebook. Like with the photos or whatever that they post. So it’s nice to kind of like close the gap where like I can’t go and see them because they not in town.”

P4: “I just went on to see what people are up to in their lives that aren’t – um like people who are overseas friends or friends that were – like I was at school with and they’ve moved away, but just seeing how they’re doing.”
As noted by the participants, being able to see what is happening in others’ lives was a positive experience. It afforded them the opportunity to feel connected to what friends were doing, even when friends are busy or reside elsewhere. Given Nabi et al.’s (2013) findings that the public nature of Facebook use is related to perceived social support and may reduce distress, seeing what others are doing with their lives may even aid in coping with relationship dissolution. This would involve the emotion-focussed coping strategy of emotional social support, as noted by Ajrouch et al. (2010), and may also be related to the sense of social connectedness that Facebook seems to offer.

Sense of connectedness.

Participants indicated that Facebook offered a sense of connectedness. Although it can also lead to negative effects, such as promoting a false sense of connection (discussed under the disadvantages of social media use), Facebook nonetheless offers a unique connection, even after a romantic relationship has been terminated. Two participants’ comments highlight this point.

P2: "So Facebook was just one thing that I could do and it kind of gives the illusion of social contact I suppose... which is what I was wanting."

P3: "Even if he wasn’t contacting me there was still this like sense of contact."

Previous literature regarding this finding is polarised. Marshall et al. (2012) suggests that remaining in online contact with an ex-partner may be negatively associated with personal growth, and may hinder the healing process needed to move on from the now terminated relationship. Furthermore, seeing the ex-partner on Facebook, which in this case fostered a sense of connectedness, may also increase an individual’s longing for the ex-partner (by developing a renewed interest in the ex-partner by looking at pictures and status updates) (Marshall, 2012). After a romantic relationship breakup, an individual may miss the ex-partner or may be interested in knowing what the ex-partner is doing with his or her life.
There is therefore a longing to be with, or have more information about, the ex-partner. By seeing the ex-partner on Facebook (through surveillance behaviours), it increases that longing even more, which is exactly what the individual may crave, thereby resulting in a sense of satisfaction and connection with the ex-partner. Although this connection is seen as a positive aspect of Facebook use, participants also revealed that a sense of connectedness due to social media use may be detrimental to coping with relationship dissolution. This negative aspect will be discussed later in this chapter.

Longing for a connection with the ex-partner, and satisfying this longing by perceiving as though there is a ‘sense’ or an ‘illusion’ of connection, may be part of a reappraisal process, using emotion-focussed coping strategies. When the individual experiences a longing for the ex-partner, they may engage in emotion-focussed strategies such as ex-partner surveillance that provide them with informative messages about the ex-partner, which satisfies their longing and may in turn cause them to feel better.

Another way that participants found Facebook to offer helpful emotion-focussed coping strategies, was to use it as a distraction tool.

*Distraction.*

Avoidance coping can be a strategy used in order to distance oneself from the reality of a stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). In the present study, participants found it helpful to utilise Facebook to busy themselves, so as to avoid boredom and loneliness, or to keep their minds from thinking about the ex-partner or the breakup. Facebook therefore served as a distraction tool, by offering something else to do.

P1: “It gives me something to do.”

P2: “It was something that I could fill my time with... normally I would see my boyfriend a lot, so then when we broke up then I had a lot of free time, and I didn’t really know what to do with myself so thought, ‘okay let’s see what’s happening on Facebook’.”
Keeping busy and coming up with mood regulation strategies, such as using Facebook as a distraction tool, are emotion-focussed coping strategies employed by individuals coping with relationship dissolution in general (Chung et al., 2003; Gillett et al., 2007; Kellas & Manusov, 2003; Ysseldyk et al., 2009). It can therefore be concluded that Facebook serves as an emotion-focussed coping strategy when used as a distraction in order to distance oneself from the reality of relationship dissolution.

**Emotional outlet.**

On the one hand, Facebook may be helpful as a distraction tool for those going through relationship dissolution. It offers something to do other than think about the ex-partner or the breakup. In other words, it allows the user to engage in avoidance strategies by offering an alternative activity. On the other hand, the findings of the present study may also highlight Facebook’s usefulness in engaging in approach-type activities. That is, instead of avoiding the stressful situation of the breakup, Facebook users may actively use this social media tool as an emotional outlet for negative emotions experienced as a result of the relationship dissolution, and as a way to indirectly address the ex-partner. Participants’ subjective experiences show this type of Facebook use.

P3: “It’s a kind of an avenue... an outlet to release some of that emotion, even if it’s negative emotion.”

P4: “I don’t know I think maybe going on and actually thinking about her and actually talking to her helped with me coping because... I think it’s actually that’s – I think it’s
a pattern where like the moment me and a girl breakup I would go on Facebook type of thing... send statuses like ‘I miss you’... not directly to her but just as a status."

P4: "A way to express yourself because it’s pretty much like talking to someone."

Although still considered emotion-focussed coping strategies by Lazarus (1993) and Chung et al. (2003), expressing emotion and indirectly communicating with the ex-partner as a way to lower the distress and loneliness associated with the breakup may therefore be helpful, especially in the short-term. This finding is consistent with Berman and Turk’s (1981) findings that assert that expressing emotion during a particularly distressing time or situation is most helpful as an emotion-focussed coping strategy.

*Positive Facebook image enhances well-being.*

Posting positive images of oneself may also be associated with enhancing well-being. The notion that managing one’s online image to be more positive is an adaptive way of coping with a breakup will be discussed in more detail in the next section. Related to Facebook use, one participant’s comment contextualises her experience as a positive effect of using Facebook.

P3: “Like I think it is a way of coping. I think, you know when you feel, when you feel good about yourself then, kind of it helps you to, you know then it’s easier to deal with stuff than if you’re feeling all miserable and sorry for yourself. So if you are like ja I’m feeling good so I’m going to post a good picture of myself or whatever like it does help to um, feel better about yourself [okay] rather than be like oh poor me, you know?”

As an example of emotion-focussed coping, it can be seen that impression management of the user’s online profile of this nature (portraying a positive image) may be specifically geared towards lessening the emotional distress associated with the breakup, without altering the meaning of the breakup (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Instead, the participant positively
reappraised the meaning associated with her profile, by posting positive images of herself. This, in turn, had a positive emotional effect on her well-being, which makes this type of coping adaptive. It is important to note that this was not a consistent finding from all the participants. However, it is the opinion of the researcher that it is possible that other individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution may also benefit in this way.

*A source of comfort and inspiration, observing quotes and others in similar situations.*

According to Sauti (2012), many SNS users return to SNSs after a breakup. Among other potential reasons, they may use SNSs to find a place of healing and comfort after a breakup. Findings of the present study augment this notion by Sauti (2012). Participants experienced Facebook in particular as a source of comfort and inspiration, especially as a result of seeing others going through similar, stressful situations and reading inspirational quotes that offer hope and comfort. Several comments from the participants provide insight into how they find this aspect of Facebook beneficial.

P1: “Where positive quotes... you know it doesn’t necessarily have to be their quotes but like there are positive quotes that people put on Facebook... You know like, if anyone’s going through a tough time they put positive quotes and you look at it and you think, ‘oh okay, you know, I’ve gone through such a situation,’ and ja... that helped me cope.”

P1: “Well the quote makes you think... it makes you think how true... that’s what I went through in life... It just makes you feel better.”

P3: “It does help you to see that other people are in the same boat as you are almost.”

P4: “That’s also what I use for Facebook... I mean a lot of people put on inspirational quotes or just sayings that you can look through and are inspirational... Um, or just sort of knowing that somebody else is going through something just like you.”
P4: “It makes you sort of understand that you’re not the only person that is going through something so you should be less hard on yourself.”

P4: “I think that quote that sort of helped me get through it teaches you to be more relaxed about a situation and let time take its course.”

These comments depict a positive effect that Facebook had on the participants – helping them cope with the romantic relationship breakup. It is likely that other Facebook users who experience relationship dissolution may find going through their newsfeed helpful as they may see other people going through similar situations and posting positive quotes that serve as a source of inspiration and comfort, which results in adaptive coping.

*Serves as a reminder that not everything was negative.*

In a similar vein, one participant valued all his personal information on his Facebook profile (such as photos and status updates) as it offered a sense of hope and positivity. This information included personal information about his ex-partner.

P1: “It’s like I don’t want to get rid of the stuff, I mean maybe there is some hope there that, you know, that it did work out or it could have worked out.”

This information was not repeated by other participants, but it may have relevance for coping behaviour facilitated by Facebook. This participant’s experience may suggest that positive memories associated with an invested, long-term relationship, may offer solace in the face of the termination of the relationship. It may serve as a reminder that not everything about the relationship was negative, and may therefore serve to help the individual move on and cope effectively.

Viewing one’s Facebook profile in this way can be seen as a process of cognitive reappraisal. The participant observed his profile content, attempting to attach new meaning to the former romantic relationship – that it was not all negative. According to the Stress and Coping Theory, reappraisals such as this are considered emotion-focussed coping strategies,
as they are attempts to alleviate the distress associated with the breakup, by attaching new meanings to the situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Future research investigating how personal information on a Facebook profile after relationship dissolution may assist coping, will be beneficial in clarifying the transferability of this finding.

Based on the above-mentioned findings, it is evident that individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution may find utilising Facebook helpful. Facebook use resulted in various positive effects, including enhancement of offline relationships, knowledge of what is happening in others’ lives, provision of a sense of connectedness, distraction, an emotional outlet, enhanced sense of well-being, a source of comfort and inspiration, and possibly offer hope. Various negative effects from using Facebook also emerged as themes. These negative effects, as well as disadvantages associated with social media use, will be in the following section.

**Disadvantages of social media use.**

The previous section highlighted the advantages of social media use. In particular, social media may have short-term benefits, and there are various positive effects associated with Facebook use. Although these findings depict the benefits, or advantages, of using social media when coping with relationship dissolution, participants also found that there were certain aspects that were not helpful in the period during and after relationship dissolution. Social media has been associated with negative outcomes, such as offline harassment, cyber-bullying, and various risk factors (Wilson et al., 2012). The fact that participants experienced using social media as unhelpful, adds to the understanding that certain disadvantages are associated with social media use, especially with regards to coping with relationship dissolution.

As was found with the advantages of using social media, some of the disadvantages of social media use pertain largely to Facebook use in particular. These aspects will be
discussed under a separate heading. Four sub-themes therefore emerged as reasons for the perception of social media being disadvantageous in coping with relationship dissolution. These include the fact that social media: 1) interferes with moving on and letting go, 2) may have a potential for destruction, 3) may not be a helpful coping tool in the long-term after a breakup, and 3) Facebook use, in particular, is associated with negative effects. Each of these sub-themes, including related categories and sub-categories will be discussed in order to create a deeper understanding of how social media may be unhelpful in coping with relationship dissolution.

**Interferes with moving on and letting go.**

All the participants agreed that using social media interfered with being able to move on after the breakup. Two categories seemed to be important in this regard. Firstly, participants’ behaviour on SNSs was characterised by surveillance or ‘stalking’ of the ex-partners’ social media profiles. It is the opinion of the present researcher that this behaviour may be triggered by curiosity or interest in the ex-partner, and/or the fact that they were missing the ex-partner. There also seemed to be a significant change in online behaviour after the breakup. Secondly, engaging on SNSs after relationship dissolution, by displaying these specific behaviours, led to certain negative emotions that interfered with getting over the ex-partner.

**Behaviour.**

*Stalking behaviour by looking at ex-partner’s profile.*

Stalking behaviour, according to Darvell et al. (2011) can be expected from SNSs users. It is regarded as acceptable online behaviour, according to online norms. It can also be expected of users who have experienced relationship dissolution to engage in stalking or surveillance behaviour of their ex-partner’s profile (Tong, 2013). The findings of the present study augment these findings, as participants revealed that they did engage in stalking behaviour of the ex-partner’s profile. This is depicted by the following quotes:
P1: “If I don’t have messages I go to her and I check. That’s just I don’t know I guess human nature to... I wouldn’t actually message her you know I was just looking at her status.”

P2: “I would then just go on and look. But I wouldn’t – ja it was just to like look through stuff. Like it wasn’t really to share...I decided like let’s see what he is doing with his life.”

P2: "I haven’t moved on yet. So I’m still interested to see what’s happening."

P3: "Um, if I had seen - so let’s say like a photo had come up and he was - he’s gone away for the weekend or whatever then I would go to all his photos and see what he’s been doing for the weekend.”

P4: “I just found myself going on a – on her BBM profile picture or statuses on WhatsApp and Facebook to see how she is doing and all that.”

Stalking behaviour of this nature, as can be seen by the words used by the participants, can be likened to the passive strategies, or lurking behaviour mentioned by Tong (2013). These passive strategies may serve the purpose of finding answers about wondering what the ex-partner is doing with their lives and how they are doing (Darvell et al., 2011). There are also two other reasons for lurking on the ex-partner’s profile, as expressed by the participants in the present study. These include curiosity or interest, and missing the ex-partner.

Stalking behaviour triggered by curiosity/interest and missing the ex-partner.

Two motivating factors were identified by the participants to express what triggered their stalking behaviour of their ex-partner’s profile. Firstly, the majority of participants agreed that there was an element of curiosity and interest involved in wanting to look at the ex-partner’s online profile. This is depicted by the following perceptions:

P1: “I don’t know just out of curiosity I guess. Just to see what she is up to... I think it’s more just curiosity you know.”
P2: “It will just be because I’m interested to see what’s going on now... more because of interest than because I don’t have anything else to do... I am looking to satisfy my curiosity I suppose.”

P4: “I think um I was curious to find out what she was happy about.”

Secondly, one participant mentioned that he would go onto his ex-partner’s profile because he felt that something is missing and therefore wanted to know what was happening in the ex-partner’s life.

P1: “Like you know something is missing or you’re not doing the same thing. You know you want to know what’s happening in the other person’s life.”

It is the present researcher’s opinion that it is likely that longing for the ex-partner, or feeling as though there is something missing, might encourage stalking behaviour on SNSs.

Furthermore, it is also possible that this may be related to the uncertainty reduction that Tong (2013) suggests individuals may engage in, especially since finding information of the ex-partner on their profile might serve to fill the void left behind after the breakup.

The findings of the present study further suggests that the behaviours mentioned (stalking of the ex-partner’s profile), and the associated triggers of this behaviour (curiosity/interest and missing the ex-partner) may be different from participants’ usual online behaviour, before the relationship breakup. This change in behaviour is explored in the section below.

Change in behaviour based on the perception that the ex-partner can see SNS profile.

Based on the work of Goffman (1959) regarding Symbolic Interactionist Theory, Robinson (2007) explores the process of self-ing, where the online self cannot be separated from the imagined audience. By means of impression management, a SNS user therefore constructs a new online identity that is in line with the imagined expectations the user perceives someone else to have when looking at their profile (Robinson, 2007). It is the present researcher’s
opinion that, after the termination of a romantic relationship, it is likely that the SNS user might perceive the ex-partner to look at their online profile. The ex-partner may also be perceived to have certain expectations of the user’s profile. The user therefore, in a reflexive process, may manage their online profile in such a way that they would meet the expectations of the imagined ex-partner’s observations of the user. This concept also emerged out of the participants’ descriptions of their experience of using SNSs. They imagined that their ex-partners could see their profile, and adjusted their online behaviour accordingly. This was done by either indirectly communicating with the ex-partner, or as a way of getting the ex-partner’s attention.

P1: “So maybe subconsciously I do have to, you know, [get her attention] yes maybe... it might be more like also see if she sees it maybe she wants to know what’s going on, or so if she still cares I guess.”

P2: “Like I will update my WhatsApp more than I update my Facebook. Because I suppose I know that he can see what’s happening on my WhatsApp...well just I change it more frequently because I kind of want him to directly see that.”

P2: “Because if I would want anyone to see what my status is, I would want him to see it.”

P3: “I knew that he was following me on Instagram, so I think that probably did change my behaviour a little bit because I was a bit more aware of like what I post he can see so... my behaviour did change knowing that he had access to whatever I was posting.”

P1: “And then posting status and I can’t remember actually what they were. I know it was indirectly related to her. Maybe tried to say something to her... see if I could get her attention.”

As can be seen by the participants’ comments, it is evident that there is an element of perceiving the ex-partner when engaging on SNSs. This results in a change of behaviour in
terms of the extractive strategies mentioned by Tong (2013). These strategies, in the present study, would include posting status updates and changing profile pictures to get the attention of the ex-partner, or to try and communicate with them (by hoping they would see the status update). It is important to note that this process may happen subconsciously for SNS users, as suggested by one participant’s comment, or with an awareness of getting the ex-partner’s attention, as can be seen in the comment about Instagram:

P3: “I knew that he was following me on Instagram, so I think that probably did change my behaviour a little bit because I was a bit more aware of like what I post he can see so... my behaviour did change knowing that he had access to whatever I was posting...”

Related to the impression management that SNS users may engage in in order to attract the ex-partner’s attention is the fact that users mostly seek to create a positive impression. This can be done by posting pictures and status updates that portray a positive and happy image of the self. Similar to Hum et al.’s (2011) finding that SNSs users seem to be aware of the way in which they construct their online identity, participants in the present study had some awareness of constructing a positive online identity, as can be seen by their comments.

P1: “... Just to let them know that I’m doing alright and coping.”

P1: "You just want your friends to know you’re happy at the moment and things are going well"

P3: "I want them to know, you know, like that I’m okay and, you know I don’t want them to know that like I’m not coping or whatever."

P3: "I’m doing this because I want him to see or I want him to, or I want him to know that he is missing out or, you know like that I’m having fun or whatever."

P3: "Social media is like you’re seeing someone else’s best of real.”
Finding that participants are inclined to portray a ‘best of real’ profile or online identity, especially since they perceive that their ex-partners maybe at the receiving end of their profile, is similar to Hum et al.’s (2011) finding that SNS users construct a ‘hoped for’ or ‘possible identity’. In the same light, this finding also augments Qiu et al. (2012), Wilson et al. (2012) and Zhao et al.’s (2008) findings that users are more likely to disclose positive experiences on their SNSs, in order to create a good impression of their emotional well-being.

Although it can be agreed that, like Qiu et al. (2012) suggests, a positive online profile may be void of negative emotional experiences and disclosures, it is the opinion of the present researcher that the present study demonstrates that the positive online identity may be incongruent with the offline identity. This finding is in contrast to Shafie et al.’s (2012) suggestion that the online identity is a continuation of the offline identity. Instead, it is likely that, in the case of SNS users who have experienced relationship dissolution, users portray an image of themselves that may not be true in real life. This may be because they wish to portray to their ex-partners (as the imagined audience) that they are doing well and coping with the breakup, even though this might not be the case. This finding is more consistent with research done by Zhao et al. (2008), who found that users’ online identities were socially desirable identities that they wish to be offline, but are not able to fully embody.

As suggested by one participant, this way of managing one’s online impression, may in fact be an adaptive way coping with the breakup. This aspect was also highlighted as a positive effect of utilising Facebook.

P3: “Like I think it is a way of coping. I think, you know when you feel, when you feel good about yourself then, kind of it helps you to, you know then it’s easier to deal with stuff than if you’re feeling all miserable and sorry for yourself. So if you are like ja I’m feeling good so I’m going to post a good picture of myself or whatever like it does
help to um, feel better about yourself [okay] rather than be like oh poor me, you know?"

This is a good example of emotion-focussed coping, according to Lazarus’ (1993) Stress and Coping Theory. Impression management of the user’s online profile of this nature (portraying a positive image) may be specifically geared towards lessening the emotional distress associated with the breakup, without altering the meaning of the breakup (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Instead, the participant positively reappraised the meaning associated with her profile, by posting positive images of herself. This, in turn, had a positive emotional effect on her well-being, which makes this type of coping adaptive.

Although this reflects only some aspects of the participant’s experience, it is the opinion of the present researcher that it is a significant finding that may suggest that engaging in positive reappraisal of the situation and of the online self, by constructing a positive online identity, may aid the coping process in terms of relationship dissolution. In this case, the participant had the ex-partner in mind when constructing this positive profile. According to the present researcher, this may also have an impact on the positive effect. It is therefore possible that only when the ex-partner is perceived to see the newly constructed positive profile, will the user be able to engage in the reappraisal process.

Online behaviour that participants engaged in, associated triggers of the behaviour, as well as changes in behaviour after the breakup (because of the perceived presence of the ex-partner), had certain negative emotional effects on the participants. Since the positive emotional result of depicting a positive profile has already been discussed, the other (negative) emotional effects will be further discussed below.

**Negative emotional effects of online behaviour.**

Marshall (2012) asserts that engaging in ex-partner surveillance or stalking on SNSs may lead to decreased feelings of attraction and longing for the ex-partner. This involves the sense
of connectedness associated with Facebook use (alluded to earlier in this chapter) that satisfies the longing for the ex-partner. However, engaging in ex-partner surveillance or stalking on SNSs may also lead to increased distress and longing for the ex-partner (Marshall, 2012). Findings from the present study reveal that online stalking behaviour of an ex-partner after a breakup may lead to increased levels of distress. Generally, participants expressed that engaging in ex-partner surveillance on SNSs was not helpful, especially since it did not help them cope and prevented them from letting go. This was illuminated by four specific comments related to online ex-partner surveillance in particular:

P1: “Seeing her with regards to that – I wouldn’t say that helps me cope.”

P2: “So it’s not helping me cope it’s making it worse”

P2: “It didn’t let me let go quite as readily as I could of if it wasn’t there.”

P3: “Social media just exaggerates everything because… it’s impossible to have a clean break with someone if you’re still in contact with them with their social media.”

More specifically, participants revealed that negative emotions resulting from looking at ex-partner’s SNS profiles included sadness, hurt, frustration, false hope, increased loneliness and being scared.

With regards to feeling sad, one participant mentioned that seeing the ex-partner doing well makes him sad. This may have been related to perceiving that while they were together, he was not the one who was able to make her happy. Now that she is doing well, it has led to feelings of sadness. He said:

P1: “It just makes me more – I mean it makes you sad to see if she is doing well.”

Similarly, another participant expressed feeling hurt when he saw his ex-partner happy. His comment,

P4: “I just saw like um, pictures I’ve loaded or statuses of just her being happy again and I was like it hurts”
depicts this well. It is possible that this participant’s feeling of hurt is also associated with not being able to make the ex-partner happy, based on the context of the statements made. Another participant expressed her hurt at seeing the ex-partner happy, by saying,

P3: “That was harsh because it was like huh, okay, well you’re having fun. Or like - or the worst was like when you - when I’d see him with like another girl.”

Here the hurt evidently originated from seeing the ex-partner moving on, having fun and being with another girl. This may imply that the participant felt left out and jealous by seeing those photos on social media. This finding relates to literature suggesting that surveillance of SNS users (in this case, the ex-partner) is associated with jealousy (Marshall et al., 2013).

Frustration was another negative emotion experienced by looking at the ex-partner’s online profile. One participant said,

P2: "That’s frustrating because I want to see something new... because then you can see what – it’s more to see as opposed to there just being one photo all the time. Like it’s a lot more satisfaction seeing a whole bunch of photos than just seeing one.”

This example indicates that the frustration, in this case, was related to wanting to see novel information about the ex-partner, and when it was not to be found, it led to feelings of frustration. Tong (2013) suggests that individuals who have experienced a romantic relationship breakup have been found to use surveillance and stalking behaviours to find information about ex-partners.

Viewing ex-partners’ profiles resulted in a sense of false hope, or false connection for participants. One comment that best depicts this finding is:

P2: “Um, it’s preventing – it’s given me a little bit of something to hold onto.”

The hope that social media offers by providing the user with information about the ex-partner is disadvantageous. It is hypothesised that this prevents the user from moving on as it
provides a sense of connection and something to hold onto, even though the relationship has been terminated.

Similar to Wilson et al.’s (2012) finding that the relationship between social media (Facebook in particular) and loneliness is quite complex, the present study found that loneliness was both reduced and exacerbated by social media use. On the positive side, social media reduced loneliness by providing the user with distractions (i.e. looking at other individuals’ profiles). This may be associated with a decrease in social loneliness, by perceiving SNSs contacts as part of a broader social network (Weiss, 1973). On the negative side, social media seemed to exacerbate loneliness. One participant, in particular, found this to be true.

P2: “Then you kind of exacerbate your loneliness by not seeing real people by rather choosing to see them on social media.”

For this participant, engaging in ex-partner surveillance behaviours prevented her from seeing ‘real’ people, who, in her opinion, would have reduced her loneliness after the breakup. It is possible that her ‘choosing to see them on social media’ is related to Burke et al.’s (2009, cited in Wilson et al., 2012) finding that passive strategies, such as ex-partner surveillance, may be related to increased feelings of loneliness. Related to the distinction between social loneliness and emotional loneliness (Weiss, 1973), using these strategies may reduce social loneliness, but it may not satisfy the emotional loneliness experienced by individuals affected by relationship dissolution.

Lastly, one participant felt scared of seeing his ex-partner on social media, as this may result in all the negative feelings, associated with the breakup, returning.

P4: “I was scared of seeing her and then feelings come back.”

This affirms the notion presented by the other findings of the present study related to negative emotions, that social media use, in particular surveillance behaviours, results in various
negative emotions. This may lead to increased distress. It would therefore be maladaptive in the sense that, since there is a decrease in well-being, it is not necessarily a helpful way of coping.

Effects of the behaviours SNS users engage in after relationship dissolution can therefore be seen to be mostly negative. Disparate and individualised negative behaviours may result from ex-partner surveillance on SNSs. The findings of the present study suggest that there is an association between surveillance behaviour and negative emotions. It is the opinion of the present researcher that the reasons for engaging in ex-partner surveillance may seem to be appropriate, emotion-focussed coping strategies. For example, looking at an ex-partner’s profile to glean information may serve as a way to come up with different views about the breakup, such as concluding that the ex-partner has a new romantic partner, or that the ex-partner is experiencing happiness that the SNS user was not able to provide. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), these re-appraisals would be considered emotion-focussed coping strategies, since they serve to change the meaning of the situation. It is also possible for these types of re-appraisals or interpretations to involve processes that maintain hope and lead to self-deception (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). This can be seen in one participant’s experience of social media resulting in her holding onto false hope.

Making use of social media, by engaging in the surveillance behaviours discussed above, may therefore be emotion-focussed strategies of coping with relationship dissolution. However, given the negative emotions that were experienced by all participants in the present study, specific to each person’s individual experience and situation, it is the opinion of the researcher that it is likely that coping in this way would be maladaptive. Maladaptive coping, according to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), is characterised by poor morale, social functioning and/or somatic health. Participants experienced poor morale by experiencing negative
emotions, impeded social functioning, and by being prevented from seeking support from ‘real’ people.

More than the likelihood that social media usage may lead to negative emotions and maladaptive coping, using social media may also have a destructive potential, in that there are certain other risks that emerged out of the findings of the present research study.

**Destructive potential.**

With regards to social media in general, one participant commented on the destructive potential related to the public nature of social media usage. Although this finding reflects only some aspects of participants’ experiences, it is the opinion of the present researcher that it is still a significant consideration. Fox et al. (2014) suggest that revealing information, such as changing one’s relationship status after a romantic relationship breakup, may lead to public scrutiny and undesired comments from other online friends. Revealing such information to the public depicts the social and interactive nature of using SNSs. Relationship dissolution, therefore, is influenced and defined by the entire interactive social experience that is associated with SNS use (Fox & Warber, 2013).

For one participant in the present study, this realisation was not seen as positive. Her comments below reveal the danger and potentially destructive outcome of using social media, especially given its public nature.

P3: "Um, so whereas you’re still coping with things like you would have without social media but now you’ve got a much larger audience almost that you’re doing it in front of. And, like I think that can be quite dangerous... it’s bad enough for me to deal with my own pain... to deal with it on social media where it is like magnified by however many times is just not something that I want to do...”

P3: “... You know anything you say is just, you know you’re not just talking to one friend so it’s like exaggerated...”
Given the severe distress that relationship dissolution causes in general (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), echoed by this participant, it would aggravate the distress by disclosing one’s information and feelings on SNSs. In general, the other participants concurred that the potential public scrutiny that may be inevitable when posting negative information (such as may be associated with a breakup) is not something that is desirable. These findings are contradictory in relationship to findings by Nabi et al. (2013), who suggest that the public nature of social media (Facebook in particular) is related to perceived social support and may therefore reduce distress. It is the present researcher’s opinion that perhaps the perception of social support is of importance in this regard, and not just the reality of many online friends.

*Not helpful in the long-term.*

Another aspect that depicts social media as unhelpful is that the participants’ experience of social media, in relation to coping with relationship dissolution, is that it might not be helpful in the long-run. Certain aspects of social media were found to assist the coping process, including the fact that, in some specific instances, participants found social media use helpful in the short term. These positive aspects were discussed in a previous section. Long-term use of social media in the face of relationship dissolution may, however, not be a helpful way of coping. According to the participants, this is what their experiences revealed:

P3: "I think it’s a short-term coping mechanism… Okay so I think it helps you to cope now or whatever, but like that’s not really going to help you cope in the long run. In other words like, you know… it’s like, ‘okay cool, I feel better about me’, um, but it doesn’t – you’re not actually dealing with the fact that it is over."

P4: “It’s definitely a way of sort of coping with the initial breakup because you sort of want to talk to them but you can’t talk to them… but then after a while like drop them off Facebook… so maybe it’s a pattern, maybe that is my way of working through it.”
This finding reveals that, while social media may offer short-term coping options, it is not likely to be helpful in the long-term.

**Negative effects of using Facebook.**

Although Facebook has been found to have positive effects regarding coping with relationship dissolution, several negative effects are also implicated in the present study. These negative effects include that Facebook may: make it more difficult to move on after the breakup, not an appropriate forum for self-disclosure due to its public nature, increase loneliness, restrict offline social contact, result in a skewed perception of others’ or ex-partners’ lives, and may not be an adequate coping mechanism. It is important to note that most of these negative effects have also been addressed as positive effects. The reader will be guided in terms of the overlap between themes, and the contradictory nature of these effects.

**More difficult to move on.**

Facebook may be preventing individuals from moving on after relationship dissolution. This was the experience of participants in the present study. One participant found that after the breakup, he needed some time apart from the ex-partner, but using Facebook made this very difficult as many online reminders (such as photos and status updates) reminded him of the ex-partner.

P1: “You know just giving yourself sometime apart from each other... it’s very difficult to do that with Facebook... because you get reminded.”

P1: “... if you go out with someone else or friends or somewhere you go out and then you’re on Facebook and you see a post, you’re automatically sad, by you know seeing your ex.”

Similarly, another participant also believed that seeing her ex-partner on Facebook prevented her from moving on.
P1: “You can’t move on if you’re still seeing them or wanting to see them on Facebook, thinking about him, thinking what he is going to think when he sees my photo. Like if it wasn’t there, I wouldn’t be thinking about him that much, I would just get on with life.”

This participant noted that she perceives her ex-partner to be able to see her photos, and how that infiltrated her thoughts when using Facebook. Therefore, it is likely that not only does seeing the ex-partner on Facebook make it difficult to move on, but so does perceiving the ex-partner to see the individual’s photos and updates.

Another difficulty with moving on is the possibility of seeing other friends getting engaged when they post the news on Facebook. This may have a negative effect on the individual. Since the individual knows that getting engaged is no longer a reality with the former partner, the individual may perceive an increase in distress over the breakup, preventing them to move on. This difficulty was depicted clearly with the following words:

P2: “Maybe just like seeing all my friends getting engaged... throwing salt in my wounds here.”

Thinking about the ex-partner as a result of Facebook use was also expressed by another participant. He believed that Facebook increases the frequency one would think about an ex-partner, implying that not using Facebook, or at least seeing the ex-partner, would make moving on easier, since you do not have to think about them all the time.

P4: “Facebook allows you to think about someone more than you would if it wasn’t there. That’s the way I feel because you’re subjected to their picture, how and what they thinking about, what they doing, so you’re going to think about them the whole time... if you’re on Facebook a lot you’re going to think about them a lot.”

Another participant’s experience was similar in that she believed that Facebook makes it impossible to have a clean break from the ex-partner.
P3: “Facebook just kind of exaggerates... everything because... it’s impossible to have a clean break with someone if you’re still in contact with them with their social media... because they’re there all the time, especially if they are also like an active user, you know they’re there all the time, they’re in your feed, you see what’s going on, you know they’re going out for the weekend or here the weekend, you know you left me feeling out of it.”

The comments by the participants clearly illustrate the negative effects associated with ex-partner surveillance on Facebook. All participants believed that seeing their ex-partners on Facebook made it difficult to move on and have a clean break. This finding is consistent with previous findings in this regard. According to Marshall (2012), individuals who choose to remain connected to ex-partners on Facebook after relationship dissolution may be likely to engage in surveillance and information-seeking behaviours related to the ex-partner and are likely to be experiencing some distress associated with the breakup. This finding suggests that remaining in online contact with an ex-partner is negatively associated with personal growth, and may hinder the healing process needed to move on from the now terminated relationship.

Tong (2013) asserts that even when the individual is no longer Facebook friends with the ex-partner, information about the ex-partner can still be obtained by lurking on mutual friends’ profiles.

P4: “It’s only if I see her or one of her friends on Facebook... then I automatically think of her... if I’d seen one of her friends update a status then I would probably go to hers and just see what’s she’s been up to or whatever.”

This comment, as well as Tong’s (2013) findings, suggests that even when individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution are no longer Facebook friends with their ex-partner, Facebook still makes it difficult to move on, since there are ways and means of
gaining access to the ex-partner’s profile or personal information. Furthermore, finding that ex-partner surveillance, made possible on Facebook, impedes moving on after relationship dissolution, may be related to the short-term benefit of using avoidance strategies suggested by Carson and Polman (2010). That is, withdrawal from the stressful situation, by not engaging in ex-partner surveillance on Facebook, may therefore be a more helpful coping strategy, even if if it just employed in the short-term.

The negative effect associated with ex-partner surveillance and information-seeking behaviours on Facebook is a finding of the present study. However, the present study also suggests that there may be some benefits to this same behaviour. These benefits, discussed earlier, include the fact that online surveillance behaviour may improve offline relationships and social support, may foster a sense of connectedness with the ex-partner and others, may offer helpful distraction tools, and may offer hope that the former relationship was not entirely negative. It is the opinion of the present researcher that Facebook use, in terms of engaging in surveillance and stalking behaviour, therefore has both positive and negative implications for individuals coping with relationship dissolution.

Public platform is not for self-disclosure.

The public nature of SNSs (as explained by Fox et al. (2013) has been alluded to in a previous finding of the present study – that SNS usage in general may have a destructive potential. In a similar way, participants found that Facebook use was negative in that the public nature of the platform lends itself to creating a certain impression of the Facebook user. A positive online impression, according to Qiu et al. (2012), Wilson et al. (2012) and Zhao et al. (2008), seems to be of importance to SNS users, since users are more likely to disclose positive experiences on SNSs. Therefore disclosing negative information on Facebook, such as information regarding relationship dissolution, may result in a negative impression. This, according to the participants in the present study, suggests that Facebook is
not to be used to deal with relationship dissolution publically, but can rather be used for
surveillance or attempting to create a positive impression, despite the distress associated with
the breakup that is present in reality.

P1: “It can cause a perception of yourself to people... if for like example someone posts...
all the time, people are going to see them as feeling very needy, I would think, that a
person wants a lot of attention if they post all the time...”

P1: “I just removed it from my wall... so no one can see what happened.”

P2: “I would then just go on and look... but I wouldn’t... it was just to like look through
stuff.... like it wasn’t really to share.”

P3: “I think the way to deal with stuff is not like – like you can’t deal with stuff properly
on a public forum”

P3: “I didn’t want to kind of share that pain with everyone which is why I did it privately
so that people wouldn’t see.”

P3: “You have to realise that, like so whatever you’re posting on Facebook is seen by,
you know 800 people, or however many friends you have... you are publically telling
everyone... and that does have repercussions on the way that people think of you and
your public image.”

One participant in particular also referred to disclosing information about her relationship in
the form of the relationship status function on Facebook. Changing the relationship status, for
her, was difficult as this would be seen by the public. It is interesting to note that changing
the relationship status was seen as positive when it served the function of announcing to the
imagined Facebook audience that the user was in a relationship, whereas, announcing that the
user was no longer in a relationship, was seen as negative.

P3: “So when we... started going out I made my relationship status public, but then when
we stopped I had to... where it doesn’t end up getting on anyone’s newsfeeds or
whatever... I didn’t want everyone like asking a whole bunch of questions yet. I wasn’t keen... I wasn’t ready to kind of talk to people about that.”

“It’s hard because it’s like... admitting that it’s over and it’s... weird because it’s just... you’re just taking something off Facebook but it’s like, it really is going like, ‘okay, I’m closing this book now’ and it took me a while. ”

Although potentially a significant moment of closure and admitting that the relationship is over, changing her relationship status on Facebook was not an easy thing to do. It is therefore possible that other Facebook users that have experienced a breakup may find it difficult to make such an announcement, given the potential public scrutiny associated with it. According to the present researcher, privately changing the relationship status would therefore be more favourable, since there is less of a risk that a negative impression would be created.

Dealing with matters related to relationship dissolution privately on Facebook (by not disclosing negative personal information) may be associated with the emotion-focussed mode of coping. Private rumination and avoidance strategies, such as not wanting others to see the reality of the distress caused by relationship dissolution, and using Facebook in a more private manner, are examples of emotion-focussed coping strategies (Lazarus, 1993).

Findings discussed in this section also relate to participants’ experience of seeing others’ positive online profiles, resulting in skewed perceptions of others’ and/or ex-partners’ lives.

*Skewed perception of others’ or ex-partners’ lives; profiles tend to be more positive.*

Based on Robinson’s (2007) application of the Symbolic Interactionist theory, the notion of the imagined audience and how it determines the way in which SNS users manage their online impression in order to construct a positive, ‘best of real’ profile, seemed to be a significant finding in the present study. It has already been referred to under the section dealing with unhelpful aspects of social media use in general, as well as in the section above.

Specifically related to the negative effects associated with Facebook, participants in the
present study suggested that the positive impression Facebook users create results in a skewed perception of the ex-partners lives.

P1: “It’s always the good times that are posted on Facebook.”

P3: “You’re seeing stuff which you wouldn’t be seeing in real life if I can put it that way... you can read into stuff incorrectly, it gives you skew perceptions of what’s actually happening in someone else’s life.”

P3: “You immediately assume something whereas that might not be the case at all... so I just think that it has the... an opportunity to kind of create a lot of confusion or hurt or whatever because people can misread stuff so easily on social media.”

P3: “Social media is like you’re seeing someone else’s best of real.”

This kind of skewed perception may lead to confusion or hurt, especially for Facebook users who have experienced a romantic relationship breakup. It can lead to seeing a positive image of an ex-partner, where that image might not be the reality. Seeing the ex-partner as doing well and coping with the breakup has already been linked to feelings of sadness, hurt, and a barrier to resolution. It is therefore possible that Facebook use, especially surveillance behaviours aimed at looking at the ex-partner, may result in having a skewed perception of the ex-partner or others, which is regarded as a negative effect, resulting in confusion and hurt.

Another potential negative effect associated with Facebook use after relationship dissolution, is the fact that using Facebook may have the potential to increase loneliness.

Increased loneliness.

Just like social media use in general was associated with increased loneliness, Facebook in particular was also found by one participant to increase feelings of loneliness.

P2: “The fact that I had this free time now to be able to go on Facebook reminds me of the fact that I was lonely... because I didn’t have my boyfriend with me then.”
P2: “... going on Facebook didn’t make me feel less lonely.”

As in the previous discussion of loneliness and social media use, this participant’s experience of Facebook can be related to Burke et al.’s (2009, cited in Wilson et al., 2012) finding that passive strategies, such as ex-partner surveillance may be related to increased feelings of loneliness. Increasing use of Facebook since the breakup may have enhanced emotional loneliness by reminding her of the fact that she is single. More consistent findings in future research may be helpful in better understanding how Facebook use after relationship dissolution may be related to increased loneliness.

Another negative effect associated with using Facebook after relationship dissolution is that it may restrict offline social contact.

Restricts offline social contact.

As much as Facebook use may enhance offline relationships, it also has the potential to restrict offline social contact.

P1: “Instead of phoning your parents or your sister to cope... you will post it on Facebook... actually go visit family and your friends... that’s where your support comes from.”

P2: “If Facebook wasn’t there maybe then it would have forced me to like go and spend time with my friends or something... which would probably been better, because I was just sitting by myself... and just being sad and lonely.”

P2: “But then on the other side it was almost like an easier way out of trying to connect with people... I thought that the connection that I was going to have would be nice and then it was just an illusion.”

P2: “It’s contributing to not having the real thing... so it’s actually a bad thing... stronger connection I think that you can have with a person, a real person, as opposed to... just like seeing a message on Facebook.”
P3: “… it does maybe give a bit of a... maybe a false sense of hope in a way…”

Whereas emotional social support (emotion-focussed coping strategy) would have been helpful in dealing with relationship dissolution (Ajrouch et al., 2010; Chung et al., 2003), Facebook seems to prevent individuals from seeking this social support. Although social media in general may aid individuals in sourcing social support, it can also stand in the way of obtaining social support that is perceived as helpful. A possible reason for this is the illusion, or sense, of contact that Facebook seems to provide. Again, this sense of contact was previously associated with a positive outcome, since it may satisfy a longing for this contact with the ‘ex-partner after relationship dissolution. However, it is evident that this sense of contact can be just an illusion, offering false hope and impeding contact with ‘real’ people who potentially could provide social support.

_Inadequate coping mechanism._

Although specific positive effects of Facebook use have been highlighted that may have indirect helpful implications for coping with relationship dissolution, Facebook use was generally not regarded as a good mechanism for coping with relationship dissolution. This was highlighted by several participants’ quotes.

P1: “Facebook more for me was not a coping mechanism.”

P2: “... slowing down the coping as opposed to speeding up or whatever... because um, like it didn’t let me let go quite as readily as I could have if it wasn’t there.”

P3: “… don’t think it helps for you to see what’s happening in someone else’s life. The person you have just ended your relationship with… it’s a terrible tool to use…”

Given the disadvantages associated with social media use, and the negative effects associated with Facebook use in particular, both as a result of the present study and previous literature, it is likely that social media use, including Facebook use, is not a helpful way to cope with
relationship dissolution. This is especially true in coping with relationship dissolution in the short-term.

The following section deals with personality and attachment styles, and how these aspects may be related to social media use and coping with relationship dissolution.

**The role of personality in social media behaviour.**

The present study did not specifically set out to investigate how personality and attachment styles influence online behaviour with regards to coping with relationship dissolution. However, based on the participants’ experiences of using social media to cope with relationship dissolution, personality and attachment styles seemed to be an important factor in terms of the way individuals utilise social media in general. It is the opinion of the present researcher that personality and attachment issues may therefore have implications for the way in which individuals may be inclined to use social media in order to cope with relationship dissolution. Informed by a more latent approach, two aspects emerged during the data analysis process. Firstly, that dealing with a breakup, in general, may be based on personality and attachment style, and secondly, that SNS users’ personality may influence online behaviour. Taken together, these two aspects may provide important insights into how personality and attachment may influence individuals’ coping with relationship dissolution by engaging on social networks.

**Dealing with breakup is based on personality and attachment style.**

Participants in the present study made a few comments related to personality and attachment style in dealing with romantic relationship breakups in general. For example, one participant revealed his way of finding support in difficult situations in general.

P1: “I prefer to cope by myself... I feel like I don’t need help to go through things like that...”

P1: “... a very, very private person... no look I am pretty reserved.”
Coping by oneself may be based on the affinity one may have for this particular strategy, as a function of their personality – possibly characterised by introversion in this case (Amlrkhan et al., 1995). It may also be indicative of avoiding help and not wanting to receive help in stressful situations, which may be related to an insecure attachment style. Securely attached adults show greater resiliency to relationship loss or dissolution (Madey & Jilek, 2012). By not needing help, this participant may also show resiliency and a secure attachment style, which would have informed this type of coping. More information is required to make inferences about the participant’s personality and attachment style. However, given his comment of “no look I am pretty reserved”, it is possible that his ‘reserved’, or introverted personality, may influence the way in which he copes with stressful situations in general, but possibly also how he deals with his recent breakup.

Another participant also provided helpful insights into the way that she deals with breakups in general, based on her personality style.

P3: “... even now I see the glass half full... even when I’m broken up with someone like I find it hard to get over them until I’ve kind of met someone else because I’m still kind of seeing the good in them and... I sometimes wish I was like ‘he’s such an absolute jerk and I just wish I could have nothing to do with him.’ But like I’m just not like that unfortunately...”

Literature on attachment and romantic relationships suggests that anxiously attached individuals may desire dependence on others, and commitment in relationships. Love expressed and received in these relationships may be a neurotic form of love (Feeney & Noller, 1990). The above-mentioned participant’s statement may allude to this type of attachment style, especially given that she admits to needing another partner before completely moving on from the previous relationship. The ‘glass half full’ type of personality alluded to in the quote may relate to Gilbert and Sifers’ (2011) assertion that positive
reframing of negative attachment experiences and positive expectations for future relationships may be related to an insecure attachment style. Although these inferences may provide insights consistent with previous literature, it is important to note that these inferences were made at a latent level, and findings in this regard are not saturated or measured by the present study.

How personality characteristics relates to online behaviour, alluded to by the present study’s participants’ experiences, is discussed next.

**Users’ personality influences online behaviour.**

Not only can personality and attachment influence coping behaviour in general, but it may influence social media usage as well. Participants in the present study revealed their experience of how this may be the case. One comment by a participant depicted this belief very well.

P3: “So I do think a lot of it has to do with the kind of person you are and your personality... and how you’re generally in life – how you deal with your emotions and whatever. But I do think that how you deal with your emotions and personality and stuff kind of has a lot to do with how you react on Facebook.”

One participant mentioned how their personality traits of being “soft”, “reserved”, and reluctant to share feelings, influences his behaviour on SNSs.

P1: “I’m very soft like that... I can’t just block anybody.”

P1: “*For me personally I wouldn’t have done that, I would have kept that to myself.*”

P1: “I’m not that kind of person who likes to share my feelings... I don’t like really change my status.”

P1: “*No look I am pretty reserved, so... so that’s why I am not the social media type.*”

Two other participants shared this view.
P2: “I’m not the kind of person who goes and writes like a diary entry kind of thing on Facebook and like bare my soul hey... I was never like sharing feelings really on Facebook - always like that.”

P3: “I don’t really like talking about my feelings and stuff.”

From these comments it can be concluded that, based on the findings of the present study, offline personality may determine online behaviour and identity construction. Gosling et al. (2011) suggests that SNS users extend their offline personality (such as introversion or extraversion traits) into online settings. The finding of the present study that shy or introverted individuals do not like to share their feelings in online settings contradicts Hammick and Lee’s (2014) finding that introverted users may experience less communication apprehension due to the absence of visual and auditory cues in online settings which lessens the fear of communication that shy people are often faced with in offline settings.

In terms of attachment and social media use, some participants in the present study reported that their online behaviour changed during and after relationship dissolution. Participants started using SNSs more frequently, and impression management and the way one’s online profile is portrayed is of importance. Participants also reported engaging in surveillance behaviours. These factors may be associated with an anxious attachment style. Oldmeadow et al. (2013) found that those with high attachment anxiety have been found to use SNSs more frequently, when experiencing negative emotions, and were more concerned with others’ perception of them on SNSs. Marshall et al. (2013) found that anxiously attached individuals displayed more frequent and intense jealousy and surveillance behaviours. Oldmeadow et al. (2013) therefore suggests that SNS use for anxiously attached people may therefore be beneficial since they are able to manage impressions and self-presentation so as to increase their confidence with regards to maintaining interpersonal
relationships. It is possible that this may even apply to those individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution.

Participants who avoided sharing their feelings online, avoided using SNSs in general and those who had negative views about Facebook as a coping mechanism, may be associated with an avoidant attachment style. Oldmeadow et al. (2013) and Marshall et al. (2013) suggest that individuals with high attachment avoidance tend to use SNSs less often, showed less openness, had less positive attitudes about Facebook in particular and, displayed less jealousy and surveillance behaviours. Because these individuals are able to set the pace of SNS interactions without physical proximity to other users, while maintaining their autonomy, could be attractive and beneficial SNS factors to consider.

Participants in the present study, however, may also be associated with secure attachment styles, since Oldmeadow et al. (2013) suggest that securely attached individuals may find SNS usage beneficial in enhancing existing offline relationship in a healthy and positive way, which was a general findings according to the present study.

These findings are somewhat contradictory and are made on uncertain grounds. It does, however, provide tentative insights into the fact that personality and attachment may be involved in the way individuals use SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution. Future research, exploring personality and attachment, as well as SNS use after relationship dissolution, in particular, would be valuable in bringing more consistent findings to the fore.

**Phases of the breakup.**

Although it was not the aim of the present research study to explore the role of social media in coping during the various stages of relationship dissolution, findings do reveal the likelihood that this may be the case. Participants in the present study seemed to go through different stages of using social media. A possible explanation for this may be that relationship dissolution, as experienced by the participants, occurred in separate stages and social media
use may therefore be an expression, or a reflection, of these stages that occurred naturally during the romantic relationship breakup. Three separate, yet interconnected phases seemed to emerge during the data analysis process: the initial phase involving the illusion of contact, phase two involving severing ties and reaching closure, and phase three involving portraying a positive online image. Quotes and discussions of some of the information comprising the three phases have already been alluded to previously in this chapter, resulting in a fair amount of overlap and repetition in the discussion below. The reader may at times be directed to earlier findings for a more comprehensive discussion around a certain point.

**Initial phase – illusion of contact.**

As a helpful aspect of social media use in general, a finding of the present study is that engaging on SNSs after relationship dissolution may be beneficial in the short-term. A discussion around the short-term usefulness of social media for individuals experiencing relationship dissolution was discussed under the second theme – helpful aspects of social media use in general. This may be related to the initial phase of using social media during relationship dissolution, depicted by participants’ awareness of the sense of contact with the ex-partner that they could maintain by being on SNSs.

P1: “It might be more like also see if she sees it... maybe she wants to know what’s going on, or see if she still cares I guess.”

P2: “So Facebook was just one thing that I could do and it kind of gives the illusion of social contact I suppose... which is what I was wanting... but it’s still an illusion of a connection because it’s not the real person... it’s not as strong a connection.”

P3: “Because you’ve kind of cut contact... that’s the one platform, or that’s the one kind of avenue that you know there is still some contact... this like sense of contact.”

P3: “There is still... this one connection... so I think you almost fool yourself into thinking I’m not actually contacting him... but it’s an indirect... he can still see
what’s going on but I’m not contacting him actually... you still want to be like, ‘hey, I’m still around, don’t forget about me’, kind of thing.”

P4: “I know it was indirectly related to her... maybe tried to say something to her, see if I could get her attention.”

P4: “You’re typing something but subconsciously you’re telling yourself ‘don’t worry, you’re not saying it to her’, but you actually are... I was hoping that she would like... direct message saying um ‘saw your status, missing you’.”

P4: “It’s definitely a way of sort of coping with the initial breakup because you sort of want to talk to them but you can’t talk to them.”

The sense of contact can be seen to be as a result of both passive and extractive strategies. Individuals may use surveillance behaviours to see the ex-partner, or they may actively post pictures or status updates, as a direct or indirect means of communicating with the ex-partner. Both of these strategies result in feeling connected, albeit a false sense of connection, to the ex-partner. The online sense of connection seems particularly appealing since termination of the relationship has been established and offline contact has technically been cut.

Desiring the sense of connection with the ex-partner and wanting to communicate directly or indirectly with the ex-partner by posting pictures or statuses specifically with the ex-partner in mind, could be related to Knapp and Vangelisti’s (2000, cited in Buchanan, 2001) staircase Model of Interaction Stages in Relationships. According to the authors, the last stage that occurs when relationships come apart – the terminating stage – involves three further components. These three components include direct or indirect messages regarding relationship dissolution, a summary statement, and messages that imply what future relationships may be like.

The initial phase suggested by the findings of the present study relates to the first component of this stage: direct or indirect messages regarding the breakup. Although the
relationship has been officially terminated (by direct, offline communication) it is possible that the sense of connection that SNSs afford, make negotiating this fact possible. SNSs is regarded as the only platform for influencing the ex-partner to change their mind about the breakup. By managing one’s online impression by posting pictures and statuses on one’s online profile, specifically with the ex-partner in mind as the imagined audience, the individual is sending out indirect messages to the ex-partner about the breakup.

As will be seen in the next phase, this way of getting the ex-partner’s attention and seeking to communicate with them, is short lived, and eventually some sense of closure is reached through certain online behaviours.

**Phase two – severing ties and reaching closure.**

For participants in the present study, after some time of trying to reach the ex-partner by means of direct and indirect messages on social media, they decided to create some distance between themselves and the ex-partner. This may not necessarily have been a static process, progressing from phase one to phase two. Instead, the two phases may have occurred concurrently. However, at one point, it was necessary to cut contact with the ex-partner. This was done by untagging oneself and the ex-partner from photographs on Facebook, and by deleting or removing oneself or the ex-partner from social networks. It is the opinion of the present researcher that these strategies may have assisted a sense of closure. One participant found this closure by considering the positive effects of social media.

**Untagging photographs.**

One way of severing ties with the ex-partner on SNSs is by untagging oneself or the ex-partner from the photos on one’s Facebook profile. This would remove the name of the individual from the photo, eliminating the association of the person’s name with the photo. Only one participant reported untagging himself and his ex-partner from photos on Facebook.
P1: “So for like me I have to go into my whole profile and sort of untag and remove things that we were in together or whatever... because you obviously don’t want to be reminded of that all the time.”

Even though the photos themselves weren’t deleted, the act of removing evidence that the individual and the ex-partner were a couple seemed to assist in not being reminded all the time. This may be seen as emotion-focussed coping, in the form of avoidance. Untagging the ex-partner or oneself may also be related to managing the social desirability of one’s profile, and severing ties with the ex-partner. This will be discussed in more detail below.

**Deleting or removing partner from SNSs.**

Deleting, removing or unfriending are all terms used to depict the act of cutting ties with someone on social networks. This was something all the participants did in one way or another. Their comments reveal how and why they chose to engage in this type of online behaviour.

P1: “I did obviously remove her.”

P2: “I think I blocked him off Facebook in the beginning so that even if I searched for him I wouldn’t find him.”

P3: “So it was much easier to have like a clean break... I think it was part of the process of kind of finalising it... I wouldn’t say it kind of gave me complete closure or whatever but I think it was kind of part of the process of kind of dealing with it and saying okay this is now over.”

P4: “It gave me closure like knowing that it’s time for me to do my own thing... it’s time for me to forget about her or move on at least – at least try.”

P4: “I decided that the best thing for me was to go on and delete her... so then I wouldn’t think about her... because for me if I don’t see you or talk to you... you start socially going further from my mind.”
P4: “It was like a weight lifted off my shoulder.”

P4: “But finally deleting of Facebook pretty much said then cut all ties with you... this is the last straw.”

It can be seen that deleting the ex-partner off SNSs was helpful in various ways: it prevented individuals from finding and stalking the ex-partner on social media, it resulted in a clean break that brought finality and closure to the breakup, it depicted the time that moving on became possible, it resulted in fewer thoughts about the ex-partner, it felt like a weight had been lifted, and resolution had been achieved. These findings relate to previous literature regarding deleting friends and ex-partners on SNSs (Facebook in particular). Carpenter and Spottswood (2013) found that once relationship dissolution has occurred, it is likely that the affected individuals may want to discontinue online interactions with the ex-partner, as well as the friends associated with the ex-partner. By deleting the ex-partner off SNSs, the individual may be engaging in avoidance coping strategies. This is consistent with Tong’s (2013) and Peña and Brody’s (2014) findings that since some individuals choose to cut all ties with an ex-partner on SNSs during and after a breakup, it is possible that ‘unfriending’ or deleting an ex-partner off Facebook or other SNSs may be a way for the individual to engage in avoidance coping as the ultimate act of severing ties. The participants’ comments of deleting his ex-partner off Facebook being “the last straw” or “this is now over” depict this is as the ultimate act of severing ties.

Marshall (2012) suggests that remaining in online contact with an ex-partner is negatively associated with personal growth, and may hinder the healing process needed to move on from the now terminated relationship. The individual would therefore benefit from severing ties altogether (by unfriending the ex-partner). Unfriending an ex-partner in this regard would therefore provide closure, probably for both the person doing the unfriending, as well as the ex-partner who was unfriended (Bevan et al., 2014).
The participants in the present study emulated this process of promoting personal growth and moving on by deleting the ex-partners. Based on this, and previous findings, it can therefore be said that cutting online ties with the ex-partner would be a beneficial and adaptive way of coping with relationship dissolution. It seems to be a necessary step in the process of using social media to cope with relationships dissolution.

*Positive effects of social media aids in closure.*

Another way of finding closure after relationship dissolution, for one participant, was by looking at his and his ex-partner’s online profiles and remembering the relationship in a positive light. This helped to bring hope that there were also good elements to the former relationship.

P1: “*Knowing that there is a positive message... knowing... that it’s not all doom and gloom... helped me cope in closure of the whole thing and you know it wasn’t all doom and gloom and wasn’t all bad and stuff like that and we had our good times and there would be happy times.*”

This participant’s experience alludes to the possibility that looking at the record of photos and statuses presented on an online profile offers hope and closure, almost like a photo album of good memories. This would also depict emotion-focussed coping, but instead of avoidance of the ex-partner’s profile and photos, there may be a reappraisal of the former relationship. This positive reframing of the relationship may in turn offer hope and closure.

This phase of cutting ties with the ex-partner and finding closure after a romantic relationship seemed to be an important part of the process of coping with relationship dissolution for the participants in the present study. By untagging or deleting the ex-partner, and/or by positively reframing the former relationship, individuals may be able to find closure about the breakup, and therefore cope in a more adaptive manner. This phase relates to the second component of the terminating phase, described by Knapp and Vangelisti’s
(2000, cited in Buchanan, 2001) as a summary statement. The summary statement involves finding closure and realising that the relationship is officially over. The individual is now ready to move to the last component of the terminating phase - messages that imply what future relationships may be like.

**Phase three – portray positive online image.**

Online impression management and portraying a positive online image have been discussed previously in this chapter. The reader may refer to previous sections dealing with the portrayal of a positive online image for detailed discussions. Of importance in this section is how participants may have viewed an online image positively, and for the purposes of looking ahead toward future relationships. Two categories will be explored below: the best of real image, and social media as a relationship screening tool.

**Best of real image.**

Portraying a positive online image has already been associated with having the ex-partner in mind, and with feeling good about oneself. Relevant comments by participants of the present study are repeated here.

P1: “It’s nice to share because I mean you doing alright and things are going okay... you just want your friends to know you’re happy at the moment and things are going well.”

P3: “Social media is like you’re seeing someone else’s best of real... I think it is a way of coping. I think, you know when you feel... good about yourself then, kind of it helps you to, you know then it’s easier to deal with stuff than if you’re feeling all miserable and sorry for yourself.”

Portraying this positive image also involves being socially attractive to one’s entire network of online friends. Zhoa et al. (2008) suggests that observers of a SNS user’s profile include all aspects of the profile as a social product in creating an impression of the user. Being aware of
the impression that is created (Hum et al., 2011) individuals affected by relationship dissolution might then carefully construct their profile to create an impression that other users would also find positive and attractive. One participant alluded to this being part of his process of managing his online identity.

_Social media as a relationship screening tool._

One participant mentioned that he may lurk on new, offline friends’ Facebook profiles in order to “get to know them”. He also reported being aware of others looking at his profile as a way to get more information about him. He regards this type of behaviour as “human nature”, a finding consistent with Lampe et al. (2006), who suggests that surveillance behaviour of this kind can be expected, and is in line with online norms of behaviour.

His comment suggests that Facebook may therefore be used to inform new friends or potential romantic partners of who the individual is, and similarly, the individual may look at new friends or potential romantic partners as a way to get to know them better.

P1: “If you do meet someone like obviously outside, going out or whatever or to friends and then you add them... like I’ve added one or two people on Facebook... you just get to know who they are... you see how they are so it does in a way help you get to know the person, what they’re like... without having to have long conversations about.”

Literature and findings of the present study regarding surveillance behaviours and online impression management suggest that it is possible that SNSs may enhance offline relationships. It is hypothesised that it is therefore likely that this participant’s experience of using Facebook in order to ‘screen’ new potential friends of romantic partners may be transferable to other Facebook users who have been through a romantic relationship breakup. This finding links with the last component of Knapp and Vangelisti’s (2000, cited in Buchanan, 2001) Staircase Model of Interaction Stages in Relationships – messages that
imply what future relationships may be like. In this stage, individuals may begin to reveal signs and behaviours so as to engage with people that may become romantic partners in the future. By creating a positive online impression, and by engaging in surveillance of others’ online profiles (and expecting others to do the same), an individual may be giving out messages that imply the possibility of future relationships.

From the above-mentioned findings related to the three different phases, it can be seen that it is possible that a staged approach is followed in using social media to cope with relationship dissolution.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings of the present research study have been discussed according to the key aspects related to participants’ experiences of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. Findings are structured according to themes, subthemes, categories and sub-categories. The main themes include 1) advantages of social media use, 2) disadvantages of social media use, 3) the role of personality in social media behaviour, and 4) phases of the breakup.

With regards to social media use, participants found that there may be certain advantages to using social media to cope with relationship dissolution. These aspects were found to be particularly helpful in the short-term. Participants found Facebook, in particular, to have certain positive effects in terms of coping with relationship dissolution. These included that Facebook use can: enhance offline relationships, allow one to know what is happening in others’ lives, provide a sense of connectedness, be a distraction tool, be an emotional outlet, enhance well-being, be a source of comfort and inspiration, and possibly offer hope.

Participants also found that there were certain aspects that were not helpful in using social media during and after relationship dissolution. For example, using social media may
interfere with being able to move on after the breakup. This may be due to the ex-partner surveillance SNS users engage in as this type of behaviour, triggered by curiosity, interest or missing the ex-partner, leads to several negative emotions. Negative emotions experienced by the participants of the present study include sadness, hurt, frustration, false hope, increased loneliness and being scared. These behaviours are related to Lazarus’ (1993) emotion-focussed coping strategies; however, since they lead to negative effects, this type of coping me be maladaptive.

After a romantic relationship breakup, it is possible that a change in online behaviour may occur. This relates to having the ex-partner in mind as the imagined audience and involves impression management of one’s online profile. This is also related to emotion-focussed coping and the reappraisal of the meaning associated with a user’s profile. Using social media as a public platform does not seem to be helpful in coping with relationship dissolution since the potential public scrutiny that may be inevitable when posting negative information (such as may be associated with a breakup) may have the potential to be destructive. Long-term use of social media in the face of relationship dissolution may also not be helpful in coping with relationship dissolution. While social media may offer short-term coping options, it is not likely to be helpful in the long-term.

With regards to Facebook use in particular, several negative effects were highlighted. These negative effects include that Facebook may: make it more difficult to move on after the breakup, not serve as an appropriate forum for self-disclosure due to its public nature, increase loneliness, restrict offline social contact, result in a skewed perception of others’ or ex-partners’ lives, and may not be an adequate coping mechanism.

Tentative insights into the fact that personality and attachment may be involved in the way individuals use SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution, were made. For example, it was found that dealing with the romantic relationship breakup may be based on personality
and attachment style. An individual’s offline personality may also influence online behaviour as online behaviour becomes an extension of offline behaviour in the contexts of SNSs.

Coping with relationship dissolution, and the role that social media may play in this regard, seems to occur as a three-phase process. These interconnected phases are: the initial phase involving the illusion of contact, phase two involving severing ties and reaching closure, and phase three involving portraying a positive online image.

**Conclusion**

Findings of the present study were discussed and explicated by following the final step of the data analysis process where the analysis was related back to the research question (what is the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution?) and relevant literature (Aronson, 1994). This was achieved by integrating the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomenon of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution with relevant literature, theory, and the present researcher’s opinion.

Throughout the discussion of the different themes, mention was made of positive and negative, advantageous and disadvantageous aspects related to the role social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. This highlights the fact that many polarities exist regarding the role that social media may play. SNS use is both complex and ambiguous, leading to both positive and negative effects on well-being. In particular, using social media to cope with relationship dissolution may be more related to emotion-focused coping strategies. These strategies may, in turn, be more adaptive in the short-term, but result in maladaptive coping in the long-term. Given the exploratory nature of the present study, various tentative suggestions (based on findings of the present study) were made by the present researcher. These could be explored in more detail in future research studies.

The following, and final chapter, will conclude the study by providing a summary of the present study, limitations and recommendations for future research.
Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

Introduction

Chapter six concludes the present research study by providing a summary of the methodology used and the findings of the study. Furthermore, strengths and limitations are discussed in order to give an overview of the positive aspects that were emulated by the present study. Certain challenges and shortcomings that were faced during the study are discussed under the limitations section. The implications of the findings of the present study also reveal possible avenues for future research, which is discussed as recommendations for future research. Lastly, the present researcher’s personal reflections of the research process are included.

Summary of Methodology

The aim of the present research study was to explore the role that social media plays in coping with romantic relationship dissolution. By critically exploring existing literature and theory, this study aimed to fill the gap of understanding what role social media may play in coping with relationship dissolution. To the present researcher’s best knowledge, no other research study has explored this phenomenon specifically. The research question that creates the aim for the present study is therefore: what is the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution? In order to answer this research question, and thereby gain a comprehensive understanding of how social media is utilised in order to better cope with romantic relationship dissolution, a qualitative approach was chosen. In particular, a phenomenological design was employed in order to approach, collect and treat the data so that participants’ subjective, lived experiences of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution could be described.

Phenomenology involves the notion that knowledge is based on reality as it is consciously interpreted. People’s experiences of certain phenomena – how the phenomena is intentionally and consciously seen, heard, understood and intuitively experienced – therefore
define the meaning of the phenomena. In terms of the present study, a process of outside, intuitive and critical reflection using phenomenological principles was applied so that individuals’ conscious experiences could be disengaged from a global reality and concentrated on as objects of study. This disengaged consciousness could then be used to explore the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. This resulted in the findings obtained about the essence of the phenomenon, which was translated into rich descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon. Several forms of phenomenology were considered in order to establish the design of the research study. Principles of transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and heuristic phenomenology all played a role in guiding the researcher to allow the true essence of the phenomenon to emerge. The phenomenological design of the present study allowed the researcher to employ the processes of epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis in interpreting the research findings. The role of the researcher was also kept in mind during the interpretation and integration processes. Thematic data analysis, rooted in principles of phenomenology, was used to categorise the data into codes and themes, which ultimately allowed for a synthesis in descriptions about the essence of meaning of the phenomenon in question.

Participants were obtained using purposive and snowball sampling in order to select participants who met the inclusion criteria. Once suitable participants were identified, appropriate information could be provided and a suitable interview date and time were established. Participants were asked to complete a biographical questionnaire and sign a consent form. Unstructured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. After the completion of the face-to-face interviews, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, which provided the data (in the form of text) for analysis. An independent research psychologist simultaneously analysed the data according to the same
method of analysis – thematic data analysis. From the data analysis process, verified by the independent research psychologist, the essence of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution could be described. Upon completion of the present study, participants will receive feedback regarding the research process, findings and outcome of the study.

Summary of Findings

The findings of the present research study were discussed according to the key aspects related to participants’ subjective, lived experiences of the phenomenon of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. Findings were structured according to themes, subthemes, categories and sub-categories and were linked to relevant theory and literature. The main themes include 1) advantages of social media use, 2) disadvantages of social media use, 3) the role of personality in social media behaviour, and 4) phases of the breakup.

Participants revealed that social media may be helpful in coping with relationship dissolution. In particular it may offer short-term coping options for individuals coping with relationship dissolution. For example, social media can be used to fill the time, provide temporary relief from boredom and loneliness, and allow the individual to portray themselves in a more positive light. The short-term benefits would therefore involve an attempt to alleviate the distress associated with the stressful situation (the breakup). Certain positive effects were associated with Facebook use in particular. These included that Facebook use can: enhance offline relationships, allow one to know what is happening in others’ lives, provide a sense of connectedness, be a distraction tool, be an emotional outlet, enhance well-being, be a source of comfort and inspiration, and possibly offer hope.

In contrast, participants also found that there were aspects associated with social media use that were not helpful in coping with relationship dissolution. Firstly, social media may interfere with being able to move on after the breakup, resulting in negative emotions
and a change in online behaviour. Secondly, using social media as a public platform may have the potential to be destructive. Thirdly, although certain short-term benefits have been indicated, long-term use of social media in the face of relationship dissolution may not be helpful in coping with relationship dissolution. Fourthly, negative effects were associated with Facebook use in particular. These negative effects included that Facebook may: make it more difficult to move on after the breakup, not be an appropriate forum for self-disclosure due to its public nature, increase loneliness, restrict offline social contact, result in a skewed perception of others’ or ex-partners’ lives, and may not be an adequate coping mechanism. These disadvantages are related to Lazarus’ (1993) emotion-focused coping strategies and reappraisal of meaning.

Tentative insights into the fact that personality and attachment may be involved in the way individuals use SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution, were made. It was found that dealing with the romantic relationship breakup may be based on personality and attachment style. An individual’s offline personality may also influence online behaviour as online behaviour becomes an extension of offline behaviour in the contexts of SNSs. Coping with relationship dissolution, and the role that social media may play in this regard, seemed to occur as a three-phase process. These interconnected phases were: the initial phase involving the illusion of contact, phase two involving severing ties and reaching closure, and phase three involving portraying a positive online image.

Throughout the discussion of the different themes, mention was made of positive and negative, advantageous and disadvantageous aspects related to the role social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. This highlights the fact that the role that social media may play is complex and ambiguous, leading to both positive and negative effects on well-being. In particular, using social media to cope with relationship dissolution may be more
related to emotion-focussed coping strategies. These strategies may, in turn, be more adaptive in the short-term, but result in maladaptive coping in the long-term.

**Strengths of the Present Study**

Upon reflection of the resent research study, certain strengths seem evident in terms of the design and outcomes of the study. Firstly, a clear research design was implicated by the nature and aim of the study. Being an exploratory study that sought to describe individuals’ subjective, lived experiences of the phenomenon of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution, the chosen design proved appropriate and successful in answering the research question. The phenomenological design allowed for the essences and structures of meaning to emerge, while accommodating for the voice of the researcher (as primary instrument in the data collection and analysis processes) to come through in the interpretations of the findings. Although the nature and approach of this study is qualitative, the phenomenological design tailored the methods and techniques used in order to allow the participants’ conscious, pre-reflective experiences of the phenomenon to become the objects of study. The result of this phenomenological process was wonderfully rich and deep descriptions of the essence of individuals’ experience, indicating that the goal of the present research study was successfully reached.

Secondly, the interview style, together with the interviewing skills of the researcher, allowed for an open and unstructured exploration of the phenomenon. Not being bound by prepared questions that would lead the participants to give answers according to the researcher’s agenda was helpful in creating an atmosphere that was conducive to the exploratory and phenomenological nature of the present study. Recording the interviews also enabled the researcher to attend fully to the descriptions that the participants provided. The aim was to obtain participants’ subjective, lived experiences of their conscious, pre-reflective
experiences. Having audio-recorded, in-depth, unstructured interviews was therefore an effective way to collect data to analyse the phenomenon.

A third strength of the present research study lies in its capacity to link powerfully to relevant theory and previous literature. The researcher endeavoured to consistently link findings to the Stress and Coping Theory, aspects of Symbolic Interactionist theory, and previous literature. The way in which theory and literature confirmed, and at times contradicted, findings of the present study resulted in a critical and scientifically sound discussion and description of the phenomenon in question.

**Limitations of the Present Study**

Even though several strengths were evident in the present research study, certain limitations can also be identified. Firstly, as is appropriate for qualitative phenomenological studies, only a small and purposive sample of participants was selected. The rich descriptions obtained from these few (four) participants fulfilled the goal of phenomenological research of understanding the essence of participants’ subjective, lived experience. However, since the sample was so small, and the data obtained was of a subjective, phenomenological nature, the sample of participants may therefore be an inadequate representation of the wider population of people who may use SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution. This would imply that the findings of the present study are not easily generalisable. However, the aim in qualitative research is not necessarily to generalise the findings. Rather, transferability is of importance since future studies of the same nature should be applicable in similar contexts. The transferability of the present study is discussed in chapter four. Contextual information – such as age, race, gender and socio-economic status – of the participants has not been addressed in the present study. This may have implications for the transferability of the present study.

Secondly, because individuals use various coping strategies in dealing with a stressful event such as relationship dissolution, the effectiveness of using SNSs in isolation in order to
cope with this phenomenon may not have been explicitly established. Other coping strategies, used alongside SNSs, have not been taken into consideration in the present study, and may therefore result in a possible limitation to the study. However, this was not a focus of the present study, as the focus was on obtaining an understanding and description of the essence of the role of SNSs specifically, in coping with relationship dissolution.

Thirdly, in qualitative research it is possible for the personal biases of the researcher to influence the methodology and interpretation of findings. As in all qualitative studies, this may be a limitation in the present study as well. In order to prevent researcher bias, the present researcher was committed to employ ethical principles throughout the research process, discussed in chapter four. Importantly regarding the findings of the present study, an independent research psychologist was employed to verify themes and findings according to the same data analysis procedure. This eliminated the possibility of researcher bias affecting the outcomes of the study.

Lastly, since the interview method used – unstructured, in-depth interviews – results in the participants providing rich, subjective descriptions of their personal experience, it can be expected that all interviews would take on a slightly different ‘flavour’. Although data collection was conducted until data saturation had been reached, there may therefore be some variability with regards to the depth and length of certain responses. This may result in a limitation of the present study, since the nature of each interview would naturally be characterised by personal differences in experiences, creating a variety of different responses within each identified theme.

Certain findings and outcomes of the present research study highlight possible avenues for future research. These recommendations are discussed.
Recommendations for Future Research

The present research study is qualitative in nature, offering rich descriptions of the phenomenon of the role of the social media in coping with relationship dissolution, according to the phenomenological approach. To the knowledge of the present researcher there are only a few related research studies regarding the phenomenon in question, and none of the same specificity as the present study. The present research study thus also serves as an exploration into related avenues of research. These avenues are related to previous literature that was explored in chapters two and three, as well as the findings of the present study. Throughout the discussion of the findings in chapter five, the present researcher highlighted some tentative findings as recommendations for future research studies. Further exploration into these avenues would broaden the understanding of the role and use of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. Recommendations for future research topics, discussed below, include: utilisation of problem-focussed coping strategies related to SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution, reappraisal of personal information on Facebook, the role of personality and attachment in utilising SNSs to cope with relationship dissolution, and the utilisation of SNSs as a screening tool for new partners after relationship dissolution.

Based on the findings related to the role of social media in offering emotion-focussed coping strategies, it emerged that it may be possible that problem-focussed coping strategies can be beneficial in terms of social media use and coping with relationship dissolution. This was indicated only in the short term, where it may be helpful to actively use social media to approach the ex-partner in order to alter the situation of the breakup. Since this finding did not apply to all the participants in the present study, future research will allow for a better understanding of how helpful problem-focussed coping strategies are in using social media after relationship dissolution.
Seeing SNS profiles as a source of positive memories associated with a long-term relationship, may offer solace in the face of the termination of the relationship. It may serve as a reminder that not everything about the relationship was negative, and may therefore serve to help the individual move on and cope effectively. Viewing one’s online profile in this way can be seen as a process of cognitive reappraisal. In the present study, this finding was related specifically to one participant’s experience of Facebook use. Future research investigating how personal information on a Facebook profile after relationship dissolution may assist coping, will therefore be beneficial in clarifying if positive reappraisal processes regarding Facebook profiles aid in coping with relationship dissolution.

Findings regarding personality and attachment in terms of social media and relationship dissolution are contradictory and are made tentatively in the present study. Future research exploring personality and attachment, as well as SNS use after relationship dissolution in particular, would be valuable in bringing more consistent findings to the fore. This may provide greater insight into the benefits and detriments involved for individuals with certain attachment styles and personality characteristics in using social media to cope with relationship dissolution.

Based on the finding of the present study that Facebook may be used in order to ‘screen’ new potential friends or romantic partners, it is possible that other individuals who have experienced relationship dissolution may also find this aspect of Facebook useful. However, more research is required in order to better understand if this is the case. Future research relating to how Facebook and SNSs in general may assist in screening for new partners after relationship dissolution will augment and solidify this tentative finding.

It is evident, based on the tentative findings of the present researcher, that the present research study elicits exciting new avenues for future research studies to explore. Gaining this knowledge would help create a better understanding of the role that social media plays in
coping with relationship dissolution in general, but also specifically as it relates to the areas of recommendations made by the present researcher.

**Personal Reflections**

Upon reflection of the research process at the close of the present research study, I, the researcher, realise that not only did this study bring about valuable findings and insights about a particular phenomenon, it also allowed me to learn valuable lessons along the way. At the outset, I did not realise fully the personal investment that will be required to see the research process through. I also did not realise the gift it would be to me to immerse myself honestly and deeply into the process. This research project did cost me a little in terms of time, energy, and trying to maintain a balanced lifestyle. However, the gains seem so much greater compared to the small sacrifices made in order see the study to fruition. I am proud of the work I managed to produce, not because of any excellence of my own, but because it is truly mine, it is truly unique, and it is truly valuable.

One aspect of the research process that meant a great deal to me was the interview process. I felt immensely privileged to be the primary instrument in the data collection process. I was privy to the participants’ lived experiences. Having this wealth of knowledge and insight to now make sense of according to phenomenological principles was very exciting and daunting. What if I am irresponsible in analysing the data? What if I misunderstood the meaning of what they said? What if I project my own understanding and bias onto the study? These, and many more, ‘what ifs’ meant that I was able tread carefully so as to be responsible, understanding and non-bias. But it also depicts my own doubts and insecurities about being able to analyse the data successfully.

Through the interview process I also learned what may be meant by exploring a phenomenon by understanding the meaning and essence of participants’ *pre-reflective* experiences – an aspect specific to the phenomenological approach. I had anticipated that the
participants would have a good sense of the role that social media plays in their coping with relationship dissolution. However, it seemed only the opposite. After asking the initial opening question at the outset of each interview, I soon realised that the participants had not necessarily thought of this before. They had very little awareness of how they had been utilising social media as a coping strategy in dealing with relationship dissolution. This made the interviews very interesting and though-provoking, for me and the participants. Seeing individuals being enlightened by becoming more aware of their own behaviour and meaning of experiences was really rewarding and exciting. In this sense, the interview process took the participants from a state of pre-reflection to a state of active reflection about a phenomenon that they experience daily.

Certain unexpected obstacles and challenges during the research process enabled me to learn patience, flexibility and perseverance. For example, accessing participants was more difficult than anticipated, and therefore resulted in a prolonged amount of time spent on this phase of the data collection procedure. This meant having to be flexible and work more efficiently during other phases of the research process, in order to stay within my time frame. Having set certain goals for myself in order to stay within the time frame and to work according to deadlines, often meant practicing perseverance. In hindsight I am very grateful for pushing myself to reach the deadlines, but at the time it required a great deal of self-discipline and motivation. Being able to persevere in this way taught me that I am capable of far more than what I had thought.

Much like the findings of the present study, my experience of the entire research process is characterised by ambiguity and complexity. On the one hand there were many difficult moments and challenges, and at times I felt desperate to see the end. On the other hand, however, the process brought much joy, fulfilment and personal reward. So, it can be
concluded that the process, from my personal perspective, was both difficult and enriching at the same time.

Conducting a study on coping behaviour proved to have the added benefit of providing me with the necessary insight in order to employ helpful and adaptive coping mechanisms in order to overcome those aspects of the study that were difficult and challenging. This allows me to reflect on the process with fondness and to truly regard it as a wonderful adventure.

**Conclusion**

The current chapter provided a summary of the key elements of the present study in order to bring the study to a close. The methodology used clarified the way in which the findings of the study were produced. Based on the integration of findings with relevant literature and theory, several recommendations could be made that may further enhance knowledge in this field of research.

As was the goal of the present research study, the information gained through the study elicited an understanding of the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. The essences and structures of meaning of participants’ subjective, lived experiences could therefore be understood and depicted through rich descriptions of the phenomenon. Through this process of exploration and interpretation, the study also highlights the importance of future research that will further enhance the understanding of the phenomenon. The researcher’s personal reflections of the journey she embarked on in order to conduct the present research study provide insights into the personal investments made by the researcher in immersing herself in the research process, as well as the personal learnings obtained as a result of conducting the research.
References


Utz, S. (2010). Show me your friends and I will tell you what type of person you are: How one’s profile, number of friends, and type of friends influence impression formation on social network sites. Computer-Mediated Communication, 15, 314–335.


Appendix A

Biographical Questionnaire

Age: ........

Email address: ............................................................................................................

Home Language: (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Afrikaans

English

Xhosa

Other: ...........

Do you live in the Port Elizabeth area? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Have you recently (in the past 12 months), experienced a romantic relationship breakup? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Were you the initiator of the breakup, or were you broken up with? (Please tick the appropriate answer)

I initiated the breakup ☐

I was broken up with ☐

Do you have access to the internet (on your mobile phone or a computer)? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes
No

Are you an active user of any social networking sites (e.g. Facebook / Twitter)? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Which social networking sites do you belong to? (Please tick the appropriate answer(s))

Facebook □
Twitter □
Instagram □
Gmail+ □
MySpace □
Pinterest □
Tumblr □

How often do you share posts (photos, statuses etc.) and/or update your profile (profile picture, information, interests etc.)?

Several times a day □
Once a day □
Every other day □
Once a week □

How often do you read/follow other people’s walls/profiles?

Several times a day □
Once a day □
Every other day □
Once a week □
**Consent Form**

NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCHER’S DETAILS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of the research project</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reference number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Principal investigator</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Address</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Postal Code</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contact telephone number</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. DECLARATION BY OR ON BEHALF OF PARTICIPANT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I, the participant and the undersigned</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ID number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OR</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I, in my capacity as</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>of the participant</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A.1 I HEREBY CONFIRM AS FOLLOWS:

I, the participant, was invited to participate in the above-mentioned research project that is being undertaken by Elzaan Cothill From Psychology Department of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS HAVE BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME, THE PARTICIPANT:

<p>| | | | |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Aim:</td>
<td>The investigators are studying role of social media in coping with romantic relationship dissolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The information will be used to/for:</td>
<td>A research treatise that will be published as well as a research article that will be submitted to research journals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Procedures:</td>
<td>I understand that I will be required to take part in an interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Risks:</td>
<td>I realise that the interview will cost me time and that it will include information regarding my use of social networking sites to cope with relationship dissolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Possible benefits:</td>
<td>As a result of my participation in this study knowledge will be generated on the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Confidentiality:</td>
<td>My identity will not be revealed in any discussion, description or scientific publications by the investigators.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Access to findings:</td>
<td>Any new information or benefit that develops during the course of the study will be shared as follows: Feedback of the findings will be emailed to me after the research had been finalised as well as be available in the NMMU library.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Voluntary participation / refusal / discontinuation:</td>
<td>My participation is voluntary YES NO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My decision whether or not to participate will in no way affect my present or future care / employment / lifestyle TRUE FALSE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. No pressure was exerted on me to consent to participation and I understand that I may withdraw at any stage without penalisation.

4. Participation in this study will not result in any additional cost to myself.

| A.2 I HEREBY VOLUNTARILY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ABOVE-MENTIONED PROJECT: |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Signed/confirmed at             | on              |
|                                 | 20              |
|                                 | Full name of witness: |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. STATEMENT BY OR ON BEHALF OF INVESTIGATOR(S)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I, Elzaan Cothill, declare that:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I have explained the information given in this document to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and / or his / her representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. He / she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions;</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. This conversation was conducted in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And no translator was used OR this conversation was translated into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have detached Section D and handed it to the participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed/confirmed at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of interviewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full name of witness:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO PATIENT/REPRESENTATIVE OF PARTICIPANT</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dear participant/representative of the participant</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your/the participant’s participation in this study. Should, at any time during the study:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- an emergency arise as a result of the research, or</td>
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<tr>
<td>- you require any further information with regard to the study, or</td>
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<td>- the following occur</td>
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<tr>
<td>(indicate any circumstances which should be reported to the investigator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kindly contact</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elzaan Cothill (<a href="mailto:s213381397@live.nmmu.ac.za">s213381397@live.nmmu.ac.za</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>at telephone number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>083 643 6647</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Participant Information Letter

RESEARCH DISSERTATION ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN COPING WITH RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION

My name is Elzaan Cothill. I am a Counselling Psychology Masters student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). I am conducting research on the role of social media in coping with relationship dissolution. The letter below will give you more information:

**Title of Study:** Coping with Romantic Relationship Dissolution: The Role of Social Media

**Aims:** The aim of the study is to obtain an understanding of the role that social media plays in coping with relationship dissolution. This understanding will be obtained through the description of participants’ subjective, lived experiences of the use of social media in their efforts to cope effectively with the dissolution of a personal, romantic relationship.

**What will happen to the findings:** The findings of the research will be published in a treatise which will be available from the NMMU library. The research will also be presented...
in an article which will be submitted to accredited scientific journals. Should the opportunity arise the findings will also be presented at a scientific conference.

Confidentiality/ Anonymity: The identities of all participants will be confidential; your name will not appear in any published material. You will be required to fill in your details on a standard NMMU consent form for legal purposes; however this form will be kept separate from any data collection material. Your contact information will only be available to the primary researcher and will only be used to contact you to notify you about the research project (i.e. time of data collection, availability of findings.)

What do participants need to do:

- Once you have been identified as a potential candidate, you will receive a short registration form. This form will be emailed/handed to you.
- You will fill in the registration form, I will contact you for a meeting should you meet the research requirements.
- Once contacted you will be required to take part in a +- 1 hour interview with myself where information will be collected regarding the aims of the research.
- You will be required to sign a legal consent form, this form will state that you are voluntarily taking part in the study and understand what the study is about.
- After all the data has been collected it will be analysed by the researcher, you will not be required to do anything else.
- Once findings have been evaluated you will be emailed a brief summary of the findings.
- You are welcome to contact me at any time if you have any questions or concerns, before or after data collection.

Participation Requirements:

To participate in the study you should:
• Be 18 years or older and in possession of a valid ID/Passport number.
• Have access to the internet
• Have recently (in the past 12 months) experienced a romantic relationship breakup
• Frequently participate on social networking sites
• Be literate in English as all communication and correspondence will occur in English.

Thank you for taking time to read this information letter. Your involvement in this research project will provide invaluable data. If you know of anyone who would be interested in this study please forward their details to me, if you have any questions please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Elzaan Cothill
Elzaan.cothill@gmail.com
0836436647

Supervisor: Ms. Tania Lambert
Co-Supervisor: Prof. Greg Howcroft
HOD Psychology: Prof. Diane Elkonin
## Appendix D

### Table 1: Themes Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advantages of social media use</td>
<td>Could be helpful in the short term: 2,3,4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive effects of Facebook use</td>
<td>Positive effects of Facebook use: 1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Enhance offline relationships: 1,3,4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing what is happening in others’ lives: 1,2,3,4</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>For information: 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of connectedness: 1,2,3</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Distraction: 1,2,3,4</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Emotional outlet: 3,4</td>
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<td>Positive Facebook image results in feeling good: 3</td>
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<td>A source of comfort and inspiration, seeing quotes and others in similar situations: 1,3,4</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reminder that not everything was negative: 1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disadvantages of social media use</td>
<td>Interferes with moving on and letting go: 1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Behaviour: 1,2,4</td>
<td>Stalking behaviour by looking at ex-partner’s profiles</td>
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<td>Stalking behaviour triggered by curiosity/interest and missing ex-partner</td>
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<td>Change in behaviour knowing ex-partner can see user’s profile</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Effects of behaviour: 1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Negative emotions:</td>
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<td>Destructive potential: 2,3</td>
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<td>Not helpful in the long-term: 3,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative effects of Facebook use</td>
<td></td>
<td>More difficult to move on: 1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Public platform is not for self-disclosure: 1,2,3</td>
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<td>Skewed perception of others’/ex-partners’ lives; profiles tend to be more positive: 1,3</td>
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<td>Increased loneliness: 2</td>
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<td>Restricts offline contact: 1,2,3</td>
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<td>Inadequate coping mechanism:1,2,3</td>
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<tr>
<td>The role of personality in social media behaviour</td>
<td>Dealing with breakup based on personality and attachment style: 1,3</td>
<td>User’s personality influences online behaviour: 1,2,3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phases of the</td>
<td>Initial phase –</td>
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<td>Breakup</td>
<td>Illusion of contact: 1,2,3,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase two – severing ties and reaching closure</td>
<td>Untagging photos: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Deleting or removing partner from SNSs: 1,2,3,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive side of social media aids in closure: 1</td>
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<td>Phase 3 – Portray positive online image</td>
<td>Best of real image: 1,3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social media as a relationship screening tool: 1</td>
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