



"Up a bit, left, bit higher, nearly there..."

Can you **really** find **LOVE** on Instagram?

Move over dating websites, social networks are where the love's at, says **Dawn O'Porter**. Here's how to Tweet, 'like' and DM your way to a new relationship

My husband and I met on Facebook. It wasn't entirely random. A friend told him he should get in touch with me, so he did, and after ignoring his friend request multiple times, I eventually accepted and partook in some very enthusiastic flirtations via Facebook Chat. It was exciting, private, funny. We eventually got together and I then spent the next six months posting every picture I took of us on the site in the style of an obsessive maniac who had a point to make. I saw Facebook as a way of claiming ownership, so I used it to the hilt. Four years ago it felt like madness. But when I see so many people in their

twenties using social networking sites as a way to find, snag and promote their love stories today, maybe I wasn't so mad after all, just a bit ahead of the crowd.

Despite meeting my husband this way, the majority of my single life was spent meeting people via the traditional route (that's going out, getting drunk and hoping for the best, in case you'd forgotten). But there's an emerging generation who don't know what it was like before the internet took over the world, and meeting people in bars or clubs is becoming less and less the norm. I'm only 34 (she says, reaching for a tub of eye cream) but my teenage years had nothing to do with technology – we didn't even have mobile phones. Sure, by my early twenties you could text your feelings rather than say them out ►

◀ loud, but relationships still came from face-to-face contact – or a ‘friend’ tripping you into the arms of the guy you liked.

It was hard. I fluffed my words and dribbled in front of boys I fancied more times than is fair in life because meeting people you want to get off with is awkward. The new singles are bypassing this problematic first contact with the help of social networking sites. By the time they actually meet, the hard work is done. The only thing to discover is if they fancy each other. Dan, 24, says, “I met my girlfriend on Instagram. I ‘liked’ one of her photos (she had done a bit of amateur modelling for a photographer friend of mine) and we got chatting over the comments bit. When I had to find people for a work photo shoot, I asked her to be involved. We hit it off and have been together six months now.”

Despite having the hallmarks of traditional internet dating, this is actually very different. I asked on Twitter why meeting someone on a social networking site is preferable and Antonio, 24, summed it up nicely: “Twitter is more relaxed because you don’t sign up at 1am worrying that you’re going to die alone and hoping to find your soulmate. You go on Twitter to condense the ramblings

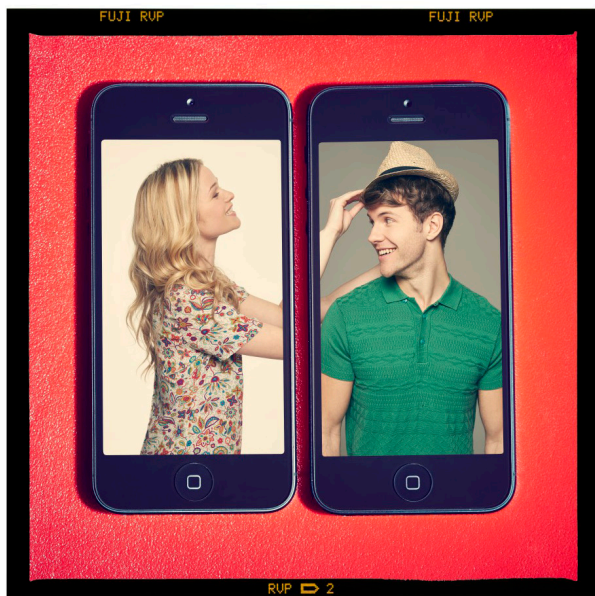
in your head to 140 characters and if you by chance meet someone cute who responds to your flirty Tweet, that’s just a nice bonus.”

Perhaps it’s the sense that if you go to a dating site, you’re obviously looking for one thing. But you can be on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter like anyone else. You can blend into a crowd and pounce when ready. You can also see what someone’s like with other people, rather than just analysing the private correspondence you might have with them on a dating site. “I’d been flirting with this guy on Twitter and was looking forward to meeting him,” says Hannah, 24. “But then I saw he called a celeb a stupid cow and it turned me off. I saw his nasty side before we even met, which I was grateful for.” Maybe this will be the end of dating sites. Wouldn’t most people rather hide behind the guise of not really looking for love? “I met my boyfriend on Twitter,” says Chloe, 25. “I followed him after his friend Tweeted about him – he sounded interesting. Then he followed me back and we got chatting. When we met, it turned out to be one of the best first dates ever. We now laugh about the ridiculous way we met!” But that’s the thing, it’s not ridiculous – it’s happening all the time.

“ Twitter is more relaxed – you don’t sign up at 1am worrying that you’re going to die alone ”

“I met my boyfriend on Facebook and now we’re head over heels about each other,” says Lyndsey, 25. “I don’t think we would ever have met if it wasn’t for Facebook as we both live in little towns on the outskirts of Durham. Social networking is a blessing.” Hammering home the fact that not everyone lives in a part of the country where potential new partners come and go daily, for lots of people, meeting online is the best way to find your match.

A survey by social site Badoo found that 39% of Americans spend more time socialising online than in person. And 33% said they were more likely to speak to someone new online than in the flesh. Is this a surprise when most of us spend the majority of our days at computers? YouGov stats show that nearly half of UK singles have experimented with finding love online at some point. In 2011, Brits spent £168.5 million on online dating. Of course, these are for subscription-based sites set up for a service, but it shows the increasing acceptance of finding ▶





◀ partners online. It's no wonder tech-friendly twentysomethings have found their own way.

Skeptics, however, will raise their eyebrows when they hear that a third of divorce petitions filed in the UK in 2011 contained the word 'Facebook', according to a survey by Divorce Online. The most common reasons for divorce included inappropriate messages to members of the opposite sex and Facebook friends reporting a spouse's behaviour. There's no denying there's plenty of love lost, as well as found, thanks to social media. "I busted my last boyfriend on Facebook," says Sarah, 24. "He was tagged in a post by another girl: 'Can't wait for Adam to come over armed with Domino's and DVDs'. He was adamant he had 'no idea what I was talking about', but he'd been caught out." This makes me wonder if we're asking for trouble by exposing ourselves in this way.

I asked my 16-year-old cousin, Will, why he left Facebook recently and he told me, in a frighteningly grown-up tone, that he thinks it will be the ruin of us all. He became frustrated at how obsessed everyone in his class was: "Even in lunch breaks, they all sit and look at people's profiles, no one talks. It isn't right." Pretending that I couldn't give a damn about social networking sites (I'm addicted – I can't go more than ten minutes without checking Twitter), I wished him well with his quest to push against

the flow. But, surely, for people looking to hook up, it's another valuable tool?

Laurie Davis, author of *Love @ First Click* and founder of eflirtexpert.com, agrees and has created guidelines for how to Tweet your way to a date. The first step? Be noticed. "Jump in on a conversation he's having that you have an opinion on," she says. And don't worry if you don't know him. "On Twitter everyone talks to everyone; you don't need to have mutual friends as you do on Facebook." Once you've got his attention with your snappy one-liners, develop that connection. "The key is content, not frequency: only Tweet him about topics relevant to you, so you're showing him you have lots in common," says Davis. The final stage is the clincher. "Make things private with a DM. Follow up that discussion on modern art with a link to a cool article," says Davis. Then, get

things offline. "Don't be afraid to suggest meeting up. Pick an activity that links to your DMs so it seems natural: if you've been discussing your love for The Vaccines, suggest going to their gig." How does she know it works? She met her fiancé on Twitter.

Single people getting together through social networking sites makes perfect sense. It's fast, fun and modern. It suits a lifestyle that already involves masses of socialising and it has no major side effects if someone changes their mind – just block, delete and unfollow. If it had been around in my day (dips face directly into that eye cream), I would have been all over it.

You have to wonder what's next though, don't you? Before we know it, we'll be able to invite holograms of people we fancy into our living rooms and have dates with them without them even being there. We can scoff, but someone, somewhere, is probably already working on it.

Whatever is next, we need to keep embracing change. After all, ten years ago, if anyone had said it would be acceptable to poke someone before you'd even met, we never would have believed it!

Paper Aeroplanes by Dawn O'Porter is out on May 2 (£7.99, Hot Key Books)

Dawn's top tips for finding love

DON'T beg to be followed. It isn't cool on the street, it isn't cool online.

DON'T be too sarcastic. It doesn't translate well in a Tweet or post and you just sound rude.

DON'T tell people you know where they live.

DON'T Tweet photos of yourself naked – it never comes across well.

DO retweet their jokes. Nothing is more powerful than massaging an ego. ☺

Hair by Amber-Rose Peake at Carol Hayes. Make-up by Kenny Leung at Era Management. Manicurist: Kimberley Casey. Models: Chloe Huntley at MOT and Sam M. at Nevs. iPhone 5 by Apple