

# “Are We Facebook Official?” Implications of Dating Partners’ Facebook Use and Profiles for Intimate Relationship Satisfaction

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## Abstract

Extending previous research on positive and negative correlates of Facebook use for individuals’ outcomes, this study examined male and female dating partners’ ( $n=58$  couples) Facebook use and portrayals of their intimate relationship on the Facebook profile. Confirming hypotheses from compatibility theories of mate selection, partners demonstrated similar Facebook intensity (e.g., usage, connection to Facebook), and were highly likely to portray their relationship on their Facebook profiles in similar ways (i.e., display partnered status and show their partner in profile picture). These Facebook profile choices played a role in the overall functioning of the relationship, with males’ indications of a partnered status linked with higher levels of their own and their partners’ (marginal) relationship satisfaction, and females’ displays of their partner in their profile picture linked with higher levels of their own and their partners’ relationship satisfaction. Finally, male and female reports of having had disagreements over the Facebook relationship status was associated with lower level of females’ but not males’ relationship satisfaction, after accounting for global verbal conflict. Thus, the findings point to the unique contribution of Facebook disagreements to intimate relationship functioning. Results from this study encourage continued examination of technology use and behaviors in contexts of intimate relationships.

## Introduction

THE GROWING INFLUENCE of social networking sites, particularly Facebook, in our daily lives encourages psychological researchers to identify how such technology facilitates and/or hinders individuals’ growth and development in multiple domains of functioning. Initial efforts have explicated Facebook’s role in individuals’ well-being and connections with others. As specific examples, research has found that viewing and editing personal information on Facebook profiles predicts users’ self-esteem increases,<sup>1</sup> using Facebook is paradoxically linked with both improvements and dissatisfaction in relationships,<sup>2,3</sup> and Facebook communication with a friend improves the relationship’s offline closeness.<sup>4</sup> To date, research has focused on elucidating correlates of Facebook use for individuals and their relationships, thus prompting questions concerning the role of Facebook in dyadic partners’ outcomes.

The current study extends initial findings on the link between Facebook use and individual-level outcomes by using a dyadic analytic approach with a sample of young adult dating partners. Extending research that clarifies connections

between social media use, particularly the ubiquitous site Facebook, and intimate relationships is important for several reasons. First, existing studies have tested Facebook use solely in relation to individuals’ outcomes, even though a large literature suggests that intimate relationship partners’ behaviors (including health and recreational activities,<sup>5,6</sup>) are intertwined.<sup>7</sup> Relatedly, evidence supporting psychological implications of technology abounds,<sup>8</sup> and we can no longer disregard the potential connections between Facebook and intimate relationships, which serve as one of the most important contexts of individuals’ growth and development.<sup>9</sup> Second, even studies that have examined associations between Facebook and close relationship outcomes such as jealousy, intimacy, and self-disclosure have not relied on data provided by relationship partners,<sup>10,11</sup> thereby leaving understudied inter-partner associations, dyadic-level associations of Facebook use, and intimate relationship functioning. Couple-level data designs that facilitate rigorous statistical approaches are needed to clarify the unique implications of Facebook for intimate partners and relational outcomes. Finally, given the growing usage of technologies such as Facebook in daily life,<sup>8</sup> discussions between partners regarding

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Facebook usage and profile displays may be leading to conflict. Unresolved and poorly managed conflicts on any topic are problematic; thus identifying whether Facebook is a unique problematic topic for couples and their relationships warrants investigation.

#### *Within-partner Facebook similarity*

Romantic partners tend to demonstrate similar recreational characteristics such as health behaviors and leisure activities.<sup>12,13</sup> Compatibility theories of mate selection suggest that individuals who are similarly matched on key traits marry each other, in part, due to a greater likelihood that they will be able to establish a mutually satisfying relationship.<sup>14</sup> Despite growing attention to the intersection of technology use and personal well-being, and related problematic outcomes for individuals,<sup>15</sup> investigation of whether partners demonstrate similarity on technology behaviors is scarce. One earlier study, based on longitudinal couple-level data, revealed that one partner's e-mail and Internet use at Time 1 did not predict their spouse's use of the technologies at Time 2 (approximately 2–3 years later), although husbands' cell phone or pager use significantly predicted wives' cell/pager use over time.<sup>16</sup> However, interdependence between romantic partners' use of specific social network sites awaits investigation, with similarity of Facebook behaviors emerging as a particularly important question given the time and attention it receives.

In addition to Facebook usage behaviors, testing similarity in partners' displays of their intimate relationship on Facebook profiles is needed. An emerging area of research on how individuals construct and manage their profiles suggests that decisions about what information to portray online are highly deliberate and intended to reflect the person's real-world characteristics.<sup>17–19</sup> Specifically, Facebook users are provided with multiple options to build their profile and disclose information concerning their dating relationship, such as revealing their relationship status and showing their partner in a profile picture. Facebook users are also given the option to "hide" these demographics from other users to maintain privacy; however, sharing personal information is relatively common,<sup>20</sup> with most users electing to display their relationship status.<sup>21</sup> Although less studied than profile status, the user's profile picture is increasingly recognized as a defining and revealing feature.<sup>22</sup> The current study extends initial findings based on individuals' profiles by considering dating partners' presentations of their intimate relationships on their Facebook profiles.

**H1a: Male and female dating partners will report similar Facebook intensity levels (i.e., usage, connection).**

**H1b: Dating partners will display similar relationship presentations on their Facebook profiles (i.e., relationship status, profile picture).**

#### *Relationship representations on Facebook profiles and intimate relationship satisfaction*

Studies based on data collected at an individual level suggest that Facebook use has the potential to hold implications for close relationships. As an example, increased time on Facebook emerged as a significant predictor of jealousy on Facebook (e.g., becoming jealous after a partner added an unknown opposite-sex friend<sup>10</sup>). Muise and col-

leagues argue that Facebook provides partners with relationship information that is potentially ambiguous and otherwise not available, which, in turn, increases jealousy and leads to heightened monitoring of the partner's profile page. We suspect that both male and female partners are aware of such effects of their own profile page, and argue that decisions about how partners present their relationship on Facebook might interrelate with broader relationship functioning. In particular, whether partners portray their relationship status as partnered and show their partner in their profile picture likely has implications for relationship functioning. Although research has not yet examined how partners use the relationship status feature on Facebook, a preliminary study of individuals revealed that listing the status as single was rated as the top method for attempting to receive contact from potential partners.<sup>19</sup> Even less previous research has considered Facebook users' profile pictures as a correlate of intimate relationships. Again, we suspect that showing a profile picture that includes the dating partner serves as an underpinning of better relationship functioning, reflecting either a greater commitment to the relationship or an effort to relieve the partner's potential concerns.<sup>10</sup>

**H2: Specifically, men and women who display their relationship status as "partnered" and show their partner in the profile picture will demonstrate higher levels of relationship satisfaction.**

#### *Implications of Facebook disagreements for relationship functioning*

To date, the importance of how intimate relationships are portrayed on Facebook largely stems from anecdotal evidence of hearing that partners discuss whether their relationship is "Facebook official," and that individuals confirm to friends that a relationship has ended by noting that their Facebook status has been changed to "single." Although not yet systematically studied, it follows that ongoing intimate relationships themselves have been affected by partners' discussions of how they display the relationship on their Facebook profiles. Given the central role of Facebook in young adults' lives<sup>23</sup> and the attention that people place on maintaining their profiles,<sup>24</sup> couples' conflicts concerning the displayed relationship status of one or both partners are expected to be linked with relationship functioning. Findings further indicate that people view their partners' profiles for information about the relationship.<sup>10</sup> Thus, conflicts over the profile displays are expected to hold significant relational consequences. Demonstrating that Facebook disagreements hold unique implications for relationship functioning requires that general levels of relationship conflict are accounted for in the model; thus, verbal conflict is included as a covariate.

**H3: We further predict that partners' reporting of relational disagreements over Facebook relationship status will be uniquely linked with lower levels of relationship satisfaction for men and women.**

Hypotheses 2 and 3 were tested with the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM<sup>25,26</sup>). Briefly, the APIM is a dyadic data analytic approach that simultaneously estimates the effect which a respondent's independent variable has on

both their own dependent variable (i.e., actor effect) and on another respondent's dependent variable (i.e., partner effect).<sup>27</sup> APIM models were fit by using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS, v.19.0). In addition to testing simultaneously within- and between-partner effects, APIMs appropriately account for the statistical interdependence of partner data by modeling correlations between predictor variables and error residuals.

**Method**

*Participants and procedure*

A sample of dating couples was recruited from a medium-sized town in the Midwest. Flyers advertised an opportunity for couples to participate in a study of "the connections between close relationships and everyday feelings and behaviors." Couples were required to be dating exclusively for a minimum of 1 month to increase the likelihood that the study would capture relationship processes of stable and exclusive relationships. The study also required that participants be at least 18 years of age, not be currently married, or have been previously married, and not have children. The recruited sample consisted of 59 heterosexual couples who had dated for an average of 19.6 months (standard deviation [SD]=16.9 months). Most participants (94.9 percent of men and 88.1 percent of women) currently attended school. Couples attended two laboratory-based sessions, facilitated by trained research assistants. Only procedures used in the current study are described. During the first session, couples completed informed consent, demographic information, and questionnaires. During the second session, couples completed additional questionnaires and received compensation. The university's Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Participants who had a current Facebook account completed a self-report questionnaire regarding their Facebook usage and profile displays as well as their relationship discussions about Facebook. Usage information was assessed via the Facebook intensity scale described by Ellison et al.<sup>28</sup> This scale was designed to capture usage information beyond frequency and duration indices, and includes eight items that tap the respondent's engagement in Facebook activities (e.g., "In the past week, on average, approximately how many minutes per day have you spent on Facebook?"), emotional connection to Facebook (e.g., "I would be sorry if Facebook shut down"), and integration of Facebook into daily schedules ("Facebook is part of my everyday activity").<sup>28</sup> Following Ellison et al., individual items were standardized before summing to account for differential response scales (see descriptive statistics of all study variables in Table 1). The scale

demonstrated good internal consistency for men ( $\alpha=0.87$ ) and women ( $\alpha=0.73$ ). The current study's Facebook questionnaire also asked participants to report their current relationship status as shown in their profile: "No status shown," "Single," "In a relationship," "Engaged," "Married," "It's complicated," or "In an open relationship." For present analytic purposes, Facebook relationship status was coded as 1 for participants who endorsed being in an exclusive relationship (i.e., "In a relationship," "Engaged," or "Married") and 0 for those who did not. Participants also endorsed whether their dating partner was in their current or recent Facebook profile picture (0=no; 1=yes). In addition, participants responded to the following two questions (0=no; 1=yes): "Have you and your dating partner ever had a disagreement over your Facebook relationship status?" and "Have you and your dating partner ever had a disagreement over your partner's Facebook relationship status?" For the present analysis, participants who had endorsed either type (or both types) of disagreement received a 1 for having relational disagreement over Facebook relationship status, whereas those who had indicated no disagreement received a 0. One female partner did not have a Facebook account, thus resulting in a sample for subsequent analyses of 58 couples.

Participants self-reported their relationship satisfaction by using the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI<sup>29</sup>). The current version includes 32 items, rated on differential response scales, and results in possible relationship satisfaction scores that range from 0 to 161 (men  $\alpha=0.95$ ; women  $\alpha=0.96$ ). The CSI correlated with standard relationship assessments in a large sample of dating and married participants.<sup>29</sup>

Participants completed the verbal conflict subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale,<sup>30</sup> which was included as a covariate when predicting relationship satisfaction. The subscale includes 6 behavioral items (e.g., "did or said something to spite the other one"), which participants were asked to rate the occurrence of in the past year on a scale from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*). Verbal conflict scores were computed by summing item responses (men  $\alpha=0.75$ ; women  $\alpha=0.85$ ).

**Results**

*Do dating partners report similar Facebook intensity levels and relationship presentations?*

As predicted, male and female dating partners reported similar levels of Facebook intensity (i.e., usage and connection),  $r (n=58)=0.30, p=0.024$ . In addition, male and female partners were highly likely to report being partnered on Facebook if their partner also did,  $\chi^2 (1, N=58)=35.38, p<0.001$ . Specifically, in 45 of the 58 couples, both male and female partners reported being in a relationship on Facebook. Of the

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

| Study variable                                       | Male partners |       | Female partners |       |
|--|---------------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| Facebook intensity                                   | 0.02          | 0.74  | 0.00            | 0.63  |
| Partnered relationship status on profile             | 79.3          |       | 82.8            |       |
| Partner shown in profile picture                     | 72.4          |       | 62.1            |       |
| Any disagreement over relationship status on profile | 15.5          |       | 25.9            |       |
| Relationship satisfaction                            | 138.09        | 19.17 | 136.05          | 20.70 |
| Verbal conflict                                      | 7.34          | 6.28  | 7.21            | 7.14  |

N=58 couples. Means and standard deviations are presented for continuous variables; percentages are presented for categorical variables.

remaining couples, in nine, both indicated that they were not partnered; in one, the man indicated having a partner, whereas the woman did not; and, in three, the woman indicated having a partner, whereas the man did not. Similarly, men and women were significantly likely to show their dating partner in their profile picture if their partner also did,  $\chi^2(1, N=58)=8.91, p=0.003$ . Specifically, in 31 of the 58 couples, both male and female partners showed their dating partner in the profile photo. Of the remaining couples, in 11, both men and women did not show their partner in the photo; in 11, the man showed his partner, whereas the woman did not; and, in 5, the woman included her partner, whereas the man did not. Taken together, the results supported Hypotheses 1a and 1b, indicating that male and female dating partners report highly similar Facebook use and engagement as well as relationship presentations (i.e., relationship status, display partner in profile picture).

#### *Are relationship presentations on Facebook associated with dating relationship satisfaction?*

Next, APIMs addressed the hypothesis that partners' relationship presentations on Facebook would be associated with relationship satisfaction. The models provide estimates of male and female relationship presentations (i.e., partnered status, partner in profile picture) in relation to their own satisfaction ( $a_M, a_F$ ) and their partner's satisfaction ( $p_M, p_F$ ), respectively. APIMs included correlated predictor variables and correlated residual parameters (i.e., error terms). Traditional model-fit statistics are not presented because APIMs are recursive.<sup>25</sup> Results are shown in Table 2. Male partners' indications of a partnered status on their Facebook profile were linked with higher levels of their own and their partners' (marginal) relationship satisfaction. However, females' indications of being partnered on their Facebook

profile were not related to partners' satisfaction. In addition, females' displays of their partner in their profile picture were associated with higher levels of their own and their partners' relationship satisfaction, whereas males' displays of their partner in the profile picture were not significantly linked to relationship satisfaction. Thus, H2 was partially supported.

#### *Are Facebook disagreements uniquely associated with relationship satisfaction?*

We used an APIM to test the final hypothesis that relational disagreements over Facebook relationship status will be uniquely linked with male and female partners' relationship satisfaction. The APIM provided estimates of male and female reports of any Facebook disagreement in relation to their own satisfaction ( $a_M, a_F$ ) and their partner's satisfaction ( $p_M, p_F$ ). Male and female verbal conflict scores were included as correlated covariates of their own relationship satisfaction scores. Results indicated that males' and females' Facebook disagreements (accounting for global verbal conflict) were linked with lower levels of females' relationship satisfaction ( $b = -13.62, t = -2.20, p = 0.028; b = -15.03, t = -2.94, p = 0.003$ , respectively), but not with males' ( $p$ -values  $> 0.05$ ) satisfaction, thereby partially supporting H3.

## Discussion

This study presented an initial investigation of intimate partners' Facebook use and profile disagreements by using a dyadic analytic approach. Taken together, the results suggest that Facebook plays an important role in dating partners' intimate relationships. First, dating partners demonstrated similarity in their usage of Facebook as well as how they portrayed their relationship on their Facebook profiles (i.e., relationship status, profile picture). Thus, this study is one of the first to suggest that intimate partners demonstrate similarity on technology behaviors and preferences. Next, how dating partners portrayed their relationships held importance for relationship functioning, with both males' displays of a partnered status and females' inclusion of their partner in the profile picture linked to greater relationship satisfaction. The unanticipated gender differences in the associations suggest that men and women may place differential importance on certain public portrayals of the relationship, with future work encouraged to uncover the underpinnings and consequences of these findings. Finally, the results that showed (male- and female-reported) disagreements over Facebook relationship status to uniquely account for significant variance in females' relationship satisfaction imply that Facebook disagreements are problematic for relational well-being, likely tapping broader relationship themes such as jealousy, commitment, and power.<sup>9</sup> These results also point to differential pathways for how intimate relationship conflicts concerning various technology usage and behaviors are linked to relationship outcomes, and perhaps to rejection or relationship termination,<sup>31</sup> for men versus women.

The study's findings should be interpreted in the light of several limitations. First, results based on this convenience sample may not generalize beyond educated, young adults in committed relationships. In addition, although the present results encourage continued study of both relationship status and profile picture as correlates of relationship

TABLE 2. ACTOR-PARTNER INTERDEPENDENCE MODEL ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN FACEBOOK RELATIONSHIP PRESENTATIONS AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION: RELATIONSHIP STATUS (TOP) AND PARTNER IN PROFILE PICTURE (BOTTOM)

| Dependent variable:<br>relationship satisfaction | Relationship status |           |                   |
|--|---------------------|-----------|-------------------|
|  | <i>b</i>            | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i>          |
| Male actor effect, $a_M$                         | 26.83               | 8.30      | 3.23***           |
| Female actor effect, $a_F$                       | -3.86               | 10.94     | -0.35             |
| Male partner effect, $p_M$                       | 18.53               | 10.20     | 1.82 <sup>+</sup> |
| Female partner effect, $p_F$                     | -1.34               | 8.90      | -0.15             |
| Dependent variable:<br>relationship satisfaction | Profile picture     |           |                   |
|  | <i>b</i>            | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i>          |
| Male actor effect, $a_M$                         | -1.43               | 5.79      | -0.25             |
| Female actor effect, $a_F$                       | 14.64               | 5.33      | 2.75**            |
| Male partner effect, $p_M$                       | 10.58               | 5.78      | 1.83 <sup>+</sup> |
| Female partner effect, $p_F$                     | 13.18               | 5.33      | 2.47*             |

$N=58$  couples. Relationship status (0=not partnered; 1=partnered). Profile picture (0=partner not shown; 1=partner shown).

<sup>+</sup> $p \leq 0.069$ , \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

*SE*, standard error.



functioning, our study only collected ratings of partners' disagreements regarding relationship status. Thus, we do not know whether any couples had disagreements over their profile pictures, and, if so, whether these disagreements help explain variance in relationship functioning. Moreover, the role of technology in couple relationships certainly encompasses many other Facebook behaviors and options (e.g., wall posts), as well as usage of other devices and cyberspaces (e.g., texting, Skype). Nevertheless, this study's findings support continued investigation of the role of technology in the well-being of individuals and their close relationships. Finally, our tests of the associations between relationship features on Facebook and relationship functioning point to interplay between the two, but do not allow us to determine whether one process precedes the other. Future studies based on process-oriented, longitudinal designs are needed to explicate processes through which Facebook use and profile options are associated with intimate relationship functioning.

**Conclusion**

As users of technology and social media experience more "spillover" between their online and offline behaviors and relationships,<sup>15</sup> psychological research will need to uncover how contexts of growth and development are impacted. A particular need is to better understand how to manage Facebook usage and profile displays (and other technologies) for optimal functioning of individuals and relationships, with the goal of identifying, preventing, and treating potential areas of conflict and distress.

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