

Mistry, Henna (2015) Facebook official: the attitudes towards the role of social media in romantic relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science*, 1 (2). pp. 76-90.

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Facebook Official: The attitudes towards the role of Social Media in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Social networking platforms have become an important tool for initiating and maintaining romantic relationships amongst the younger generation (Hand, Thomas, Buboltz, Deemer & Buyanjargal, 2013). This study examines and explores the attitudes towards the role of social media in romantic relationship and also investigates the term “Facebook Official” using a mixed methods design. A total of 137 participants completed a questionnaire, which was divided into five categories: relationship status importance, public displays of affection, jealousy, surveillance and initiation, and were analysed by a MANOVA test. Furthermore, nine participants aged 21-40 were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews, which were analysed by thematic analysis. Results suggested that age, surveillance and initiation were significant factors in determining the attitude towards social media in relationships. From the interviews the themes that were uncovered were communication, surveillance, jealousy and interference of social media/others. Overall it was found from the study that there was a negative view towards social media in the older group compared to that of the younger generation.

Keywords: Social Media, Romantic Relationships, Communication, Jealousy, Surveillance,

Introduction

Social Media is ever present in everyday life, not only for the younger generation, but is becoming more popular with older generations, implying our reliance on technology (Mod, 2010). It has been suggested that Facebook has become an important factor in the initiation and maintenance of a relationship with more couples confirming that their relationships began due to communication on Facebook, and the plethora of social media platforms that are available such as MySpace, Bebo, Hi5, Twitter, and Instagram (Hand, Thomas, Buboltz, Deemer & Buyanjargal, 2013). Researchers have explicated the role of the popular social media platform, Facebook, in the mental and social welfare of an individual (Papp, Danielewicz & Cayemberg, 2012). Facebook was initially launched in order for individuals to connect with their friends and family who had moved away and who they were unable to see and converse with on a daily basis. It now has an extensive user base worldwide which has increased from 300 million daily users in 2011 to almost 1000 million daily during the second quarter of 2015 (Statista, 2015). It has been found that the use of such social networking platforms has become an issue of co-dependence in the younger generation, especially with the abilities of one to “check in” their whereabouts and share a status of what they have been up to that day and also posting photographs, once edited, to share within their friendship circles, which has been seen to increase self-esteem in younger people and enforce being accepted by their peers (Mod, 2010; Papp, Danielewicz & Cayemberg, 2012).

Older adults have embraced modern technology into their daily routines and have since been using social media websites, mainly Facebook due to its simplicity and ease of use, which means that a wider range of adults are able to connect with friends and family (Xie, Watkins, Golbeck & Huang, 2012). For many adults, social media not only provides an environment in which they can socialise, but also provides a medium where online relationships can be developed and a sense of community can be gained from their social circle (Xie et al., 2012; Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). Previous studies have found that older users of social media stated that it was a prominent method of generational communications.

Fox, Warber and Makstaller (2013) found that for college students in America becoming “Facebook official” increased relationship commitment. Similarly, a study

involving 532 Hungarian participants found that the need to alter Facebook status was in part because social media provides a sense of security and the façade of a “digital wedding ring” enhances romantic commitment (Orosz, Szekeres, Kiss, Farkas & Roland-Levy, 2015). To further explore the quantitative findings above, the current study will utilise both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in order to incorporate previous conclusions and investigate them further.

Several researchers have noted the most common themes to arise in relation to social media and relationships are jealousy, public displays of affection (PDA), surveillance and attachment (Elphinston, Rachel & Nolle, 2011; Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro & Lee, 2013). These themes have arisen from several qualitative studies involving focus groups (Elphinston Rachel & Nolle, 2011). Research by Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) found a large number of participants used Facebook and other social media websites as a way of showing affection by posting messages on their partners’ wall and commenting on photographs. In contrast, research has also shown that the use of social media such as Facebook had led to an increase in relationship dissatisfaction and relationship jealousy (e.g. Hand et al., 2013); the reliance on social media websites can lead to jealousy, paranoia and anxiety within the relationship (Muisse & Desmarais, 2009). Muise and Desmarais (2009) found evidence that increased Facebook use predicted jealousy within the relationship. To further explore their findings, the researchers conducted thematic analysis and found the themes which appeared to support that Facebook harboured negativity and enforcing jealousy. Additionally, the relevance of this study has provided grounds for the current research in examining the negative aspect of social media platforms.

The aim of the current study was to examine the attitudes towards the role in which social media, namely Facebook, has in initiating, maintaining and dissolving of romantic relationships and whether the influence is seen as positive or negative. The study intended to examine crucial elements, by means of a questionnaire, of the following categories and themes: jealousy, initiation, PDA, surveillance, and the importance of updating relationship status. Subsequently, semi structured interviews were conducted using a small participant sample to further explore the quantitative findings. The nature of the questions that were asked during the interview represented the themes and ideas that emerged in previous literature. A further aim was to investigate the idea of “Facebook official” and the reasons as

to why attaining this status increases relationship commitment, using one to one semi structured interviews. The majority of previous research involves the use of a student sample, whereas the current research used a sample of both student and adult participants to further explore the suggestion that the older generation is increasingly using social media to create and maintain romantic relationships (Elphinston, Rachel & Nolle, 2011). It was predicted that there will be an overall negative attitude towards social media and its role in romantic relationships (Drouin, Miller & Dibble, 2014; Muise & Desmarais, 2009; Tong, 2013). It was further predicted that age would be a significant factor in determining the attitudes towards social media in romantic relationships (Fox et al., 2013; Farquhar, & Davidson, 2014; Elphinston, & Noller, 2011; Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009).

Method

Design

The design of this study was mixed method which was employed in order to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research. Qualitative data by means of semi structured interviews provide additional support towards the quantitative data and also suggest areas for further exploration in future research within the field. Subsequently the data collected qualitatively by the semi structured interviews were analysed by thematic analysis. In terms of using mixed methodology, it has been employed as it involves philosophical assumptions with the inclusion of inquiry methodology, which aid in direction of collecting and analysing the data. In addition to this, mixed methodology is an effective form of triangulation in the current social phenomena of romantic relationships compared to using qualitative or quantitative methodology solely (Braun & Clarke, 2006; McEvoy & Richards, 2006). Furthermore, the majority of the previous research in this field of psychology has simply employed one method of analysis (Hand et al., 2013; Knobloch, Miller & Carpenter, 2007; Fox, et al., 2013; Drouin, et al., 2014; Farquhar & Davidson, 2014).

Participants

For this study 138, participants completed the questionnaire of which 90 were women and 48 were men, with an age range of 18-57. All the participants reported using Facebook as the main form of social media. For the purpose of the semi structured interviews, there were nine males that were used and they had an age range of 21-50 and were of both homosexual and heterosexual orientations. All the participants except from one were in a committed relationship/marriage.

Measures

A questionnaire method was used for the quantitative aspect of the study. This asked about the different aspects of relationship experience describe and was based on a 5 point Likert scale of 1 (strong disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was divided into five sections; relationship status importance, jealousy, surveillance, initiation and PDA. After conducting the reliability analysis it was found that that following scales had Cronbach's α of: relationship status importance .82; jealousy .94; surveillance .90; initiation .74 and PDA .76. These values from Cronbach's α show that the scales were respectable and very good. The scale for jealousy had a value of .94 which indicated that shortening the scale should be considered as it appears to be too long. The questionnaire was in electronic format via the system of Bristol Online Survey (BOS) in order for ease and speed of completion.

Procedure

Before starting the questionnaire, participants were provided with an information sheet and were then ask to give their consent. Participants who were recruited in the interviews were given a tailored version of an information sheet and consent form. After completing both the questionnaire and the interviews, participants were then given a debrief form which contained suitable contact details of organisations to contact should they feel upset by any of the issues/themes raised. For the interviews, the researcher informed the participants that it was expected to last 40 minutes. All participants asked to remain anonymous, and in order to honour the request, the participants have been assigned letters (A,B,C,D,E) and these are referred to when discussing relevant quotations.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of male and female participants on their scores from the questionnaire, which was divided in to the following sub-categories: Relationship status importance, jealousy, initiation, surveillance and PDA (Public Display of Affection).

Table 1

A summary table of the means and standard deviations from the study

			Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	Relationship status importance		16.92	4.78
	Jealousy		20.46	8.80
	Initiation		22.54	7.40
	Surveillance		11.85	5.34
	PDA		25.26	5.80
Female	Relationship status importance		14.86	4.54
	Jealousy		20.06	9.02
	Initiation		22.83	5.58
	Surveillance		12.74	5.25
	PDA		25.56	5.17

Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) test was conducted as it was intended to examine a group difference on multiple dimensions in order to find a greater effect between age and gender towards the role of social media in relationships. There was no significant result for gender: ($F(5,89) = .22, p = .952, \eta^2 = .01$), nor was there a significant results for the interaction of gender and age: ($F(5,89) = 1.18, p = .198, \eta^2 = .11$). However, there was a significant result for age: ($F(5, 89) = 1.27, p < .05, \eta^2 = .30$), which implies that age has a significant effect on the combination of the variables: relationship status change, jealousy, initiation, surveillance and PDA further implying that attitudes towards the social media

within the variables is dependent on the age of the user. Due to the multivariate effect, univariate F values were examined. These were only significant for initiation ($F(42,93) = 2.36, p < .001$) and surveillance ($F(42,93) = 2.13, p < .01$). Inspection of the means suggested that there is a significant effect of age on initiation and surveillance suggesting that as we grow older, initiation of relationships increases and the act of surveillance decreases.

Analysis revealed that age was a significant factor in determining the role of social media in romantic relationships implying that the perception of the role of social media in relationships is dependent on the age of participants and this view can be altered over time. Furthermore, jealousy and surveillance were found to be significant factors in determining the role of Facebook and aided in the maintenance and dissolution of relationships. The results do support aspects of previous research which has outlined relationships between Facebook and increased relationship jealousy and surveillance (e.g. Coyne et al., 2011; Elphinston, & Noller, 2011; Fox & Warber, 2014; Marshall et al., 2013). The data collated from the interviews offers further support to previous research, particularly in the dissolution of romantic relationships due to the interference of social media platforms (Muisse & Desmarais, 2009; Orosz et al., 2015).

Analysis of Qualitative Data

After transcribing the data, two super-codes were derived from the transcript: maintenance (communication and surveillance) and the second was the dissolution of relationship (jealousy and interference of Social media). The themes and accounts derived by the participants themselves support that of previous literature. It was interesting to find that although the participants did view the role of social media, more namely Facebook, in a positive light, when asked to reflect on past and current experiences, the role was quickly reversed into a negative light, thus leading itself to further, in depth discussions. In the table below is a summary of the semantic themes which developed from the data, alongside quotes from the participants for support

Table 2*Sub-ordinate themes and semantic themes with an example quote*

Semantic/Latent Theme	Sub-themes	Quote
Maintenance	Communication	“Me and my partner have used social media since the beginning of our relationship because again due to it being an easier way of communicating with it being long distance”
	Surveillance	I’d say that I look at my partners profile often when looking through social media, I do this often during my session on SM, it’s a quick glance to keep up to date and to keep on top of what he’s up to in case I miss anything.
Dissolution of Relationship	Jealousy	All the time. I was getting jealous as it bothered me because it felt the guys she was talking to were cooler and it got me frustrated. She was always talking to other guys and uploading photos for their benefit. In the end I had to end it.
	Interference of Social media/others	SM can also be dangerous in some relationships and be the reason behind their breakups. SM gets involved with relationships and it’s always “well I saw you do this on Facebook!”

From the interviews jealousy was noted as a common theme, particularly due to being partly responsible for the dissolution of relationships. Mainly participant C; who was the youngest out of the males at 21 and displayed higher levels of jealousy. He found an increase in relationship jealousy portraying Facebook as a medium where his partner could put on a façade in order to gain the attention of other males, despite being public about their relationship and making their union “Facebook official”. From this, the current study can be seen as success in supporting not only Orosz et al.’s (2015) study, but also that of Mod (2010), who also found that the main issue evoking jealousy within relationships is around photographs and that social media provides an environment where users can reinvent themselves, but issuing negative results on relationships. The issue with uploading

photographs or “selfies” is that the user has made them seemingly more attractive for the purpose of a new profile picture in order to appear more desirable to the opposite sex. In the case of the above participant who found his girlfriend uploading such pictures for the benefit of other males, there is a seeming need for peer attention and satisfaction, which harms the relationship and increases jealousy. This portrays Facebook as having a negative influence but the role of social media, particularly Facebook, has been found to be that of a positive role within romantic relationships including long distance relationships and personal self-esteem (Bargh, & McKenna, 2004; Mikami, et al., 2010). All of the participants stated that social media had played an important part in the initiation of the relationship, and subsequently the maintenance of the relationship, in particular the maintenance of long distance relationships. In the case of participants A, B, E, G and H who were all part of a long distance relationships, who found that keeping in touch with their significant other by means of social media was cost effective and instant, especially with messages being delivered straight to their partners’ phone and being able to send photos free of charge, which can be said to increase relationship satisfaction (Mod, 2010) and even individual self-esteem (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). It was found that self-esteem can be increased during long distance relationships via the use of comments on statuses and photographs/pictures which have been uploaded by their significant other (Papp et al., 2012)

Findings in the current study found surveillance as a significant factor of the role of social media in romantic relationships, which implied that the surveillance of partners on social media tends to decrease with age, implying that the dependence on social media lessens once the transition into older adult is upon us (Harley, & Fitzpatrick, 2009). The current study found that surveillance amongst the younger generation was more than that of the older generation, thus offering support to the study by Tong (2013) who found that in their sample surveillance was a variable which increased, albeit, increased post-relationship termination. Furthermore the current study offered suggestion that younger participants used social media to publish aspects of their relationship publicly on Facebook in order to gain social acceptance from peers and to reduce aspects of bullying, which supports previous literature that has found participants who did not publish aspects of their relationship on social media were open to negative behaviours from peers (Vanderhoven, Schellen & Valcke, 2014). It was found in the interviews that younger participants had a more negative view

towards social media in romantic relationships due to increased surveillance compared to that of the older participants who had a positive view towards Facebook (Vogel et al., 2014; Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

It was further found that male participants felt that social media was an interfering medium, which enabled peers and the public to gain an insight into the relationship. It was interesting that the male participants showed this level of emotion and relational problems as it has been suggested that women tend to show relational attachment and therefore put forward higher emotions in relation to the role of social media in their relationship (Knobloch, Miller & Carpenter, 2007; Tong, 2013). The male participants from the current study commented on that items posted online on social networks were easily viewed and shared, particularly amongst women who have a tendency to put forward their views, thus becoming involved with the relationship. The previous research commonly used the views and opinions of female participants, leaving a gap in the literature to expand and investigate the ideas from the male perspective, to which the current research study has completed successfully. In addition to this, it is said that the inference of social media in relationships aids in one of the individuals of the relationships putting on a façade or a mask, especially in profile photographs, which can invite unwanted attention from members of the opposite sex (Ballentine, Lin & Veer, 2015).

Limitations and future research

The main limitation of the study is around sample size and unequal group sizes. To rectify the study and alter it to ensure replication with significant findings would be to gain equal numbers of male and females participants of various ages, which can then be divided into age categories of “Older” (31+) and “Younger” (18-30) which would then enable the study to compare the attitudes towards the role of social media of the varying age groups, in order to gain a true insight into the opinions towards Facebook. This would then be able to support previous literature claims that there is an increase in the use of social media by older generation, to which the current study is unable to take into account fully. Despite this, in an attempt to resolve the results, the current study used male participants for the purpose of the semi-structured interviews in order to capture their viewpoint on the role of social media,

furthermore, the male participants were of various ages which spanned from 21 years to 50, which meets the criteria for comparison of younger and older generations.

A further limitation of the study is that of the use of the Likert scale. This is considered a limitation as it gave participants the opportunity to not respond and use the middle option; “neither”, and it is felt that due to this, it could have encouraged ambiguity. A final limitation of the study would be that of socially desirable bias, which may have been obtained during interviews. With the male participants which were used for the interviews, there may have been a bias as the responses given may have been that of what the participants thought the researcher was seeking, in order to aid in collecting the data. In addition to this, there was a power differential between the researcher and the participants, which was more apparent during the qualitative process.

Conclusion

The main aim of this project was to explore and understand the term “Facebook official” and why it is a status which individuals strive to attain within their relationship. Previous research has identified a need for couples to share the news of their union via the updating of their relationship status resulting in increasing relationship commitment (Fox & Warber, 2014; Fox et al., 2013; Papp et al., 2012). The qualitative aspect of this study did not support these claims as it was not agreed that relationship commitment was increased, instead it was felt that the updating of the status was a façade and a method to increase jealousy in peers.

The current study addressed gaps in the literature and can be seen as an extension and combination of previous studies due to the current research expanding and utilising a participant sample of both students and adults (Elphinston, & Noller, 2011; Fox et al., 2013; Papp et al., 2012). The research found that there was a general negative view of social media in relationships, which is consistent with previous literature and also meeting the main aim of the research, which was to examine the role of social media in romantic relationships (Vogel et al., 2014; Bargh, & McKenna, 2004). It was also found that from the qualitative part of the study that the attitudes towards the role of social media within relationships can change with age. The second hypothesis was partially supported as age was found to be a mildly significant factor in determining the role of social media in relationships, to which the qualitative aspect of the study evidences the varying attitudes towards social media amongst

the participants. From the interviews it was concluded that older males harboured a more positive attitude towards social media in relationships compared to the younger males, mainly due to the concept of maturity and the need to not publish relationship updates publicly on social media platforms as majority of older adults use Facebook and other social media for the purpose of communication with friends and family, and also in later adulthood, to initiate new romantic interests.

From this it is concluded that social media does play an important part in the initiation and maintenance of a relationship for the younger generation, but the reliance on social acceptance and the need to continually publish relationship updates diminish during the transition into later adulthood. What the results from the study can imply is that younger participants harbour a greater reliance on social media in order to receive social acceptance and therefore have a more negative view of social media compared to that of older participants. In terms of future directions, it would be beneficial to use the questionnaire and the results from this study as a pilot study with the amendments to the scale as suggested with more equal participant groups in order to retest the hypotheses. Additionally it would be interesting to gain a first-hand insight into the changing attitudes towards social networking in relationships, by undertaking a longitudinal study, observing and interviewing; by means of semi-structured interviews, as they transition from childhood (age 11 years) until later adulthood. Furthermore, it is also suggested that exploration would be needed to examine the perceptions of photo comments/uploads onto social media and the effects of self-esteem and peer competition, the results of which would be beneficial to that of social psychologists and also educational psychologists as it would aid educationalists to understand peer interactions and self-identities.

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