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When More Information Does not Help: The Connection between Facebook Monitoring Behavior, Relationship Uncertainty, and Relationship Quality

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Abstract

This study examines the connection between relationship uncertainty, relationship satisfaction, and Facebook monitoring activity. We hypothesized that (1) people who monitor a romantic partner's Facebook activity will also report feeling less satisfied in their current relationship, (2) increased monitoring of Facebook will correlate with greater uncertainty in romantic relationships, and that (3) greater uncertainty in a relationship will adversely affect relationship quality. Using an online survey taken by a volunteer sample of 77 participants across the United States, we found support for these hypotheses.

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Interpersonal relationships are central to the human experience. Communication, then, becomes necessary due to the social nature of humankind. With exceptional ease we can now instantly communicate with almost anyone, anywhere. For example, as of the third quarter of 2015, Facebook had 1.55 billion active users, defined as those who logged on at least once in the past 30 days (Facebook: Monthly active users).

Although past research on the connection between social media use and interpersonal relationship quality has been conducted, such knowledge is easily dated because of the rapid development in ways of communicating via social media (compare, for example, Baym, Yan Bing, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin, 2007). The ever-changing dynamics between technology and interpersonal relationships need to be closely examined and updated frequently to match the rate of technological innovation, which is constantly evolving.

The Reduction of Uncertainty in Interpersonal Relationships

Within the study of interpersonal relationships, an important question is how we build and maintain our relationships. According to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), we seek out information about our relational partners and potential partners in order to become more confident in the trajectory of the relationship. In practicing this ritual of predicting our partner's behavior and making sense of them as people through disclosures, we become more intimate over time (as cited in Antheunis et al., 2009; Antheunis et al., 2012; Ayres, 1979; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002; Theiss and Solomon, 2008; Yang et al., 2014). This process of disclosure and discovery of information builds intimacy. Intimacy is essential to the

development of healthy interpersonal relationships as the foundation for trust, conflict

management, and relational satisfaction (Theiss & Solomon, 2008).

However, the desire for uncertainty reduction can motivate surveillance of current

romantic partners, as an attempt at relational maintenance to keep intimacy intact. Uncertainty

reduction is an important component of relational maintenance (Stewart et al., 2014). Of course,

relational maintenance, or efforts to keep relationships in a preferred state of satisfaction, is key

to relational quality.

Early disclosures in intimate relationships can be superficial and unreliable (Yang et al.,

2014). However, over time partners seek and disclose more deeply, asking and sharing more

intimate questions that are evaluative rather than descriptive (Ayres, 1979). In this way, intimacy

corresponds to not just a revealing of trivial information such as what someone did that day, but

how that person feels about their experiences. Thus, one could assume that such information is

valuable to relational partners, and they might find a variety of ways to obtain it. To discover

information of increasing depth, people engage in passive, active, and interactive tactics

(Antheunis et al., 2009; Antheunis et al., 2012; Theiss & Solomon, 2008). Passive tactics involve

unobtrusive observation, while active tactics require interaction with someone who has

information about the party in question. Finally, interactive methods rely on direct interactions

with the person in question. Social media use can involve all three of these ways of reducing

uncertainty, although they probably lend themselves most easily to passive, unobtrusive

observation.

Social Media Use and Uncertainty Reduction in Intimate Relationships

The study of computer mediated communication, or CMC, is increasingly necessary in a

world where mediums for communication are expanding. A particular facet of CMC is social

network sites or SNSs. SNSs can include sites like Facebook and MySpace, as well as online dating sites, such as Tinder (Sheldon, 2008). SNSs have overwhelmingly become a part of everyday life and communication for most people. Indeed, "74% of single adults seeking romantic relationships have used an online dating service" (Ramirez et al., 2014, p. 99).

Some interpersonal motivations for using social media include staying in touch with friends and family, as well as meeting new people (Antheunis et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2008). Social connections also can decrease loneliness, drawing many people online (Yang et al., 2014). People also use social media for emotional release, interpersonal relationship development or maintenance, to reinforce personal identity, and to conduct surveillance on others (Sheldon, 2008). This suggests that users are motivated to use social media because they are motivated to make disclosures. Furthermore, SNSs play an important role as platforms for uncertainty reduction about others. According to one college student, "Facebook has become our social Bible for definitive information on our classmates, crushes, and high school peers" (As quoted by Sheldon, 2008, p. 41).

Because so many people utilize SNSs to meet new people and then engage in uncertainty reduction practices, social media presents a unique platform for self-representation. For example, on sites like Facebook, users are invited to create a profile often containing intimate information about themselves such as religious background and sexual preference. However, the broadcasting nature of these sites sterilizes these potentially intimate disclosures. Users not only engage in the trivialization of disclosure through status updates about their pets and posting photos of their food, but simultaneously employ intimate self expression tactics to relieve emotional stress through disclosure.

Many SNS users are motivated to be highly selective about their self-presentation (Ramirez et al., 2014; Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011). Particularly on online dating sites, there is a motivation to be perceived in a flattering light in order to receive self-affirmation but also because the goal is to eventually meet face to face and develop a romantic relationship. Ramirez et al. (2014), asserts that most people do not blatantly lie on SNSs, but still engage in a certain degree of dishonesty about themselves to appear more attractive as a relational partner. Ramirez et al. found that users expect a degree of dishonesty and people that were too honest on online dating sites were seen as asking for too much intimacy, too soon. In addition, relational partners who met online had to meet face to face relatively quickly, at which time uncertainty reduction would take place because of the disclosure of their "real" personality and appearance etc. If they failed to quickly meet face to face, their online personas would become too real for their partners to overcome and uncertainty would increase upon meeting.

Moreover, college students assert that they can't really know someone just by looking at their Facebook and that the information is often unreliable (Yang et al., 2014). Online profiles are "more selective, malleable, and subject to self-censorship" and "encourage individuals to experiment with new forms of representation that vastly diverge from their 'real life' identities" (Gibbs et al., 2006, p. 153). Although the 2006 Gibbs et al. study found that people were more honest in their direct disclosures to others if they anticipated meeting face to face, no such evidence was found to support such honesty in profiles overall. Additionally, people in this study refused to admit that they misrepresented themselves online but contradictorily asserted that they felt that the majority of people were somewhat dishonest online. According to Sheldon (2008), users say things electronically that they would never say in person, making inauthentic disclosures, and take on personas that are not representative of their real personalities.

Social Media Use and Relationship Quality

Although social media can be a place to build relationships, its connection to relationship quality seems somewhat tentative. For example, Fox et al. (2014) found that "participants almost universally described Facebook as having negative effects on romantic relationships." However, research by Stewart et al. (2014) suggests that Facebook either plays no relational maintenance role amongst partners that are already well acquainted, or that SNSs can sometimes play a negative role in romantic relationships. Regardless, it is certain that "Facebook is likely changing the way people develop, maintain, and dissolve romantic relationships" (Fox et al., 2014, p. 533).

Because it is unclear whether SNSs build relational quality through disclosures or impede it and so many relationships begin and are in some way maintained online where relational attraction is developed, it is important to understand how the use of Facebook and similar SNSs might impact relational quality via uncertainty reduction tactics. In this study, we examine the effects that social media use, specifically the monitoring of another's Facebook activity, has on relational quality. This is an important topic to research because, as previously discussed, Facebook is increasingly becoming a central means for uncertainty reduction in modern relationships. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Facebook monitoring adversely affects relational quality in romantic relationships.

H2: Increased monitoring of one's partner's Facebook posts correlates with heightened uncertainty in romantic relationships.

H3: Heightened uncertainty in romantic relationships adversely affects relational quality.

Method

Participants

Our participants included a group of 159 total online survey responses, with 77 usable completed surveys, all of which were in romantic relationships in which both partners had a Facebook account. Participants' ages ranged from 18-58 ($M = 30.00$, $SD = 10.42$). Fourteen (18.2%) of our participants were male, and 63 (81.8%) of our sample were female. Four African American participants (5.2%), five Asian (6.5%), 47 Caucasian (61%), 14 Latino/Hispanic (18.2%), three Native American/Alaska Native (3.9%), three Middle Eastern (3.9%), and one Other (1.3%) ethnicities were reported.

After having our project approved by the IRB, a volunteer sample of participants was recruited using Craigslist. Ads were posted in Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, New York, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Portland, Raleigh, Sacramento, San Diego, and Seattle using Craigslist's Community section under the Volunteer subsection. We offered one, $25 Amazon.com gift card through a lottery-style drawing as a form of financial incentive.

Measures

Relational quality was measured using the *Perceived Relationship Components Scale* (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) and the *Relational Uncertainty Scale* (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). The *Perceived Relationship Components Scale* or (PRQC), consists of eighteen items, measuring six separate relational qualities. However, guided by Fletcher et al. (2000), we shortened the survey to six items to reduce redundancy in the items. Each of the six relational qualities in the measure assessed by one question, instead of the standard three questions. Each statement is measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (where 1= not at all, to 7= extremely).

Instructions ask that the participant rate their partner and their relationship on each item. Sample questions include "How satisfied are you with your relationship?" and "How much do you trust your partner?" This measure has been found to have good internal consistency in past research (α = .85-.88; Fletcher et al., 2000).

Relationship uncertainty was measured using the *Relationship Uncertainty Scale* (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). This measure is comprised of sixteen questions, which index four separate subscales: *Behavioral Norms Uncertainty* (extent partners can predict each other's behavior in the relationship), *Mutuality Uncertainty* (extent partners perceive they feel the same about the relationship), *Definition Uncertainty* (extent participants say they would define the relationship the same), and *Future Uncertainty* (extent partners believe they think that the relationship is going in the same direction). These subscales are scored and used to measure how certain the participants are about the current status of their relationship at the present time. The four Likert-Type index are scored from 1-6, where 1 = completely or almost completely uncertain and 6 = completely or almost completely certain. Thus, higher scores indicate greater certainty. Past research has found these subscales internally consistent (α = .83-.91; Dainton, 2003; Stewart et al., 2014).

Facebook monitoring was measured using nine items from the *The Facebook Jealousy Scale* (Muise, et al., 2009) that purport to measure Facebook monitoring behavior. Sample items include "What is the likelihood that you would...Look at your partner's Facebook page if you are suspicious of their activities" and "What is the likelihood that you would...Add your partner's friends to your Facebook to keep tabs on your partner." The items are scored on a Likert-Type scale from 1-7, where 1= very unlikely, and 7 = very likely. After analyzing the scale for internal validity, we found that the nine items included had high internal validity as demonstrated by our high reliability score (α =.93).

Procedure

We distributed the link to our survey over a span of 12 days on the volunteer section of 20 metropolitan Craigslist sites, as stated above. We uploaded the survey to each city simultaneously, and updated the surveys every three days to maximize visibility. The survey took approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the survey, we asked the participants to provide an email if they wished to be eligible to receive a $25 Amazon gift card. This was done in order to have a way of contacting the participant if they were to win the raffle, as a reward to participants for finishing the survey. We only kept the email addresses until the conclusion of the gathering of survey results, and did not use them in any other way, aside from notifying the winner of the raffle. At the conclusion of our result-gathering period, we deleted each posting from the volunteer section, so as to not continue to gather results or email addresses. Two days after the postings were deleted, we deactivated the Qualtrics survey in order to start processing the resulting data.

Results

In addition to the results discussed below, all results are presented in Table 1. To test our first hypothesis that Facebook monitoring adversely affects relational quality in romantic relationships, we calculated the Pearson Product Moment Correlation between the variables. The results showed a weak, but significant negative correlation ($r = -.25$, $p < .01_{\text{One Tailed,}}$ $r^2 = .06$).

To test our second hypothesis that increased monitoring of a partner's Facebook posts correlates to heightened uncertainty in romantic relationships, we calculated the Pearson Product Moment Correlation between the variables. Note that higher numbers on the uncertainty scale meant more certainty, and lower numbers indicated greater uncertainty.

The results showed a weak negative correlation between all four measured subscales and Facebook monitoring, including behavioral norms certainty ($r = -.22$, $p <.03_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .05$), mutuality definition certainty ($r = -.33$, $p <.01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .11$), relationship definition certainty ($r = -.35$, $p <.01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .12$), and future definition certainty ($r = -.29$, $p <.01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .08$). Again, because lower scores on the uncertainty measure indicate greater certainty, these negative correlations indicate support for our hypothesis.

To test our third hypothesis that heightened uncertainty in romantic relationships adversely affects relational quality, we calculated the Pearson Product Moment Correlation between the variables. The results showed strong positive correlations between mutuality definition certainty ($r = .75$, $p < .01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .56$), relationship definition certainty ($r =.79$, $p < .01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .63$,) and relationship satisfaction, while behavioral norms certainty ($r = .61$, $p < .01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .37$), and future definition certainty ($r =.61$, $p <.01_{\text{One Tailed}}$, $r^2 = .38$) showed more moderate positive correlations.

Discussion

Facebook monitoring correlates with reduced relationship quality

Our first hypothesis was supported, as we found a negative correlation between Facebook monitoring and relational quality. This is to say that as Facebook monitoring increases, relational quality decreases, and vice-versa. This finding is interesting partly because past research has found that Facebook surveillance behavior (e.g., I pay attention to this person's profile to monitor his/her interactions and watch out for his/her best interests" is related to increased closeness, satisfaction, and liking (McEwan, 2013). Obviously, the kind of monitoring items we measured here assume a problematic situation in a relationship to begin with (e.g., "What is the likelihood that you would…Look at your partner's Facebook page if you are suspicious of their

activities."). One implication of this finding, then, is that there are multiple potential motives for, and types of, Facebook monitoring activities. It could be that some monitoring behaviors associated with positive personal and relationship states, whereas other monitoring behaviors are associated with more negative states. In our case, it seems that more information may not be much better when the search for it is motivated by jealousy, suspicion, or perceived threat to the state of one's romantic relationship.

Facebook monitoring correlates with increased relationship uncertainty

Our second hypothesis was supported when we found that increased monitoring of one's partner's Facebook posts negatively correlates to heightened certainty in romantic relationships. This held true for our four subscale measures of uncertainty: behavioral norms, mutuality, relationship definition, and future certainty. Again, recalling that higher scores on the uncertainty measure reflected greater certainty, our negative correlations indicate support for the hypothesis.

This finding logically follows from the literature review in which previous research demonstrates that people increasingly engage in uncertainty reduction online. One potential explanation for this finding is that monitoring a partner's Facebook activity is an attempt at reducing one's uncertainty. However, it could also be that people who feel uncertain about their relationship are more likely to report engaging in Facebook monitoring behavior. Either way, this particular finding suggests that the means and ways in which people use communicative activity to reduce uncertainty deserve further investigation.

The use of passive, active, and interactive uncertainty reduction strategies (e.g., Berger, 1995) were developed in an time without social media, and while Facebook monitoring behaviors are distinctly passive in nature, they are also extractive in nature (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002; Carr & Walther, 2014). In other words, they are a set of activities

that involve seeking out and observing (both actively and passively) the stored information one might place or have placed about him/herself in online environments. Some research (e.g., Carr & Walther, 2014) has shown that the mere availability of online information for extractive information seeking purposes increases one's perceived knowledge about a hypothetical job applicant. However, this does not necessarily appear to be the case for people involved in current romantic relationships, wherein they feel suspicious about their current partner and relationship.

Relationship certainty correlates with increased relationship quality

Finally, we found a positive correlation between heightened certainty in romantic relationships and relational quality, which supported our associational hypothesis that heightened uncertainty in romantic relationships adversely affects relational quality.

This finding is consistent with past research on relationship uncertainty and relationship quality. Put together with the other findings, however, we have reason to suspect that, while Facebook monitoring relates to both decreased relationship quality (H1) and increased uncertainty (H2), the reduction of uncertainty (possibly through Facebook monitoring) would increase relationship quality. Again, if just the simple possibility of extractive information seeking opportunities increases one's perceived ability to predict another's behavior (e.g., Carr and Walther, 2014), then it might be possible that being able to monitor a partner's life on Facebook could be a way in which people worried about their relationships find some degree of comfort and increased relationship satisfaction.

Limitations

There were some limitations that affected the generalizability of our findings. For example, our sample size was less than ideal, and only consists of a volunteer sample of mostly

females in dating relationships. We cannot definitively say if our findings apply to non-volunteer samples, males, or to people in other kinds of relationships.

Another limitation presented was our method of gathering data. We used an online survey, as it provides optimal reach to a nation-wide audience, while providing anonymity to those being surveyed. However, while anonymity allows for the opportunity to be honest without fear of judgment, a self-report still presents an opportunity for a less-than-honest disclosure from the participants, particularly when discussing their own relationship due to selectivity bias. It is unclear if all of our participants were completely honest in their responses, even though we do not have an immediate reason to suspect that they were not.

Conclusion

This study shows that Facebook monitoring behaviors relate to decreased relationship quality and increased uncertainty in one's romantic relationship. However, increased certainty and increased relationship satisfaction also correlate. Facebook monitoring may not always yield positive information. However, it seems possible that even the ability to do it might help people feel more content in their romantic relationships, to the extent that it actually helps them feel more certain about how they should act, how their partner feels, the current status of the relationship, and/or the potential for a future in the relationship.

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Table 1

Correlation between Four Types of Relationship Certainty, Facebook Monitoring, and Relationship Satisfaction (N = 77).

Variables	Behavioral Certainty	Mutuality Certainty	Definition Certainty	Future Certainty
Facebook Monitoring	-.22[*]	-.33[**]	-.35[***]	-.29[**]
Relationship Satisfaction	.61[***]	.77[***]	.79[***]	.61[***]

Note: * Correlation is significant at the .05 level (1-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (1-tailed). *** Correlation is significant at the .001 level (1-tailed)