The Impact of Social Media on Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

As the prevalence of social media rises in our daily interactions in society, research regarding this topic has become increasingly important. With the emergence of social media accounts, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, the way in which people create and maintain relationships, especially romantic relationships, has been greatly affected. People now have access to millions of people all around the world who, in the past, may never have met. Studies have shown a negative impact on romantic relationships due to an increased usage of social media for various reasons, including jealousy. The current research study examined the effect of increased social media use on the overall satisfaction of romantic relationships. The Social Network Site Intrusion Questionnaire (SNSIQ) and a questionnaire on relational satisfaction was administered to 100 students of a private, faith based university in the southern United States. The researchers hoped to determine how important social media was to each participant and then measured how satisfied that individual was in his or her romantic relationship. Based on the results, the null hypothesis was rejected, finding a negative correlation between social network site intrusion (SNSI) and relationship satisfaction. Based on the findings, the authors discuss the impact of social media on romantic relationships and the possible causes behind the participants' reports on their relationships with their significant others.

Keywords: social media, social network site, romantic relationships, relationship satisfaction

1 Introduction

According to the American Psychological Association and the U.S. Census Bureau, over 90% of people in Western cultures will be married by the age of 50; however, compared to past statistics of about 25% in the 1950s, today, about 40 to 50% of marriages will end in divorce in the United States (Kazdin, 2000). Statistics also show that one-third of all relationships in the United States begin online (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, & VanderWeele, 2013). With the divorce rate steadily increasing through the years and the rise of social media usage and online dating as a method of meeting a significant other, there could be a connection between failing relationships and the prevalence of online social networks and online dating. The internet has created a plethora of opportunities for communication, information, and social relationships, among other things. With the emergence of social media accounts, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, it has affected the way in which people create and maintain relationships, especially romantic relationships, with new and existing significant others.

Social media sites, including online dating sites, have allowed individuals to be introduced that may never have had the opportunity to meet in the past. People now have access to hundreds of eligible men and women within their cities and even around the world. Furthermore, communication is extremely convenient with the use of mobile phones, video chat applications, messaging applications, and easy photograph sharing options. People are in constant conversation with others no matter where they are and no matter what they are doing.

However, along with the benefits of social media and the internet, there have also been negative impacts on relationships. Social media sites have made the process of meeting new people and maintaining conversations with them very easy. Consequently, this ease of access does not necessarily discontinue once a person enters a romantic relationship, nor does communication with other people stop. It is likely for a person in a committed relationship to continue to use social media and dating applications, causing difficulties in relationships, including infidelity, distrust, jealousy, and resentment.

Furthermore, even if a couple remains faithful during a relationship, if that couple begins to argue regularly or begins to have conflict, instead of focusing on ways to maintain the relationship, one or both individuals may choose to forgo the relationship due to the many, seemingly more appealing prospects that are readily available at the literal touch of a finger. Also, while in a relationship, one or both partners may remain in contact with ex partners or spouses. In such cases, it may

cause strain on the current relationship because a significant other may start to feel jealous of his or her partner's contact with a previous partner, or the partner may begin to have feelings for his or her ex. A partner's satisfaction in a relationship may also decrease based on his or her perception of other relationships seen on social media sites. If a certain event is viewed on a social media site, such as seeing a friend receive a nice gift, it may create conflict for an individual who has not experienced the same event, creating a conflict that may not have existed previously. Furthermore, this kind of jealousy is created through viewing events online that possibly did not occur the way they were portrayed, however, the events still have the negative effect on the individual viewing them.

In relationships, it is highly likely that in cases that involve high emotional strain, one or both individuals may seek solace in other people, including past or maybe present love interests. With the increased use of social media, access to other relationships is easier than ever and can result in broken relationships. While using a social media site, the user is bombarded with photos and information of other people's lives. Social media profiles can create unattainable standards of people by showcasing perfectly manipulated profiles, with carefully selected scenes of an individual's life that may inaccurately portray that person's reality. For someone who is having trouble in their current relationship, or for someone who is bored and looking for something new, social media can provide him or her with many options that can be detrimental to the current relationship. It can also show an individual a reality that he or she may believe to be better than the current.

Literature Review

Social Networks

People rely on traditional family and friend networks for emotional and social support by means of churches, schools, work environments, and various other avenues where one might physically interact with another person. Studies have shown that social networks, including friends and family, tend to have a positive impact on romantic relationships (Sprecher, 2011). In a study involving 529 university students from the Midwest, Sprecher (2011) explored how social networks impact romantic relationships by asking a series of questions on the participants' reactions about a relationship, and measuring their approval. Findings showed that two-thirds of participants believed they had an influence on the romantic relationships of their social network.

It is highly impractical to assume that a relationship would only involve two individuals; instead, romantic relationships may include many other people, such as family or friends, that influence the relationship in positive and negative ways. A large influence on relationship success lies in friend approval (Etcheverry, Le, & Hoffman, 2013). Depending on how accepting an individual's friends are of his or her significant other, a relationship can deteriorate if friends are not satisfied with how the relationship is progressing.

Etcheverry et al. (2013) conducted a study examining the predictors of friend approval of a relationship by using interdependence theory and investment theory. According to interdependence theory, through a system of minimizing costs and maximizing benefits of certain interpersonal relationships, people can evaluate the overall satisfaction of those relationships and how worthy they are to maintain (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Rusbult (1980) claimed that investments are resources put into a relationship that are contingent on the relationship's success, therefore, if the relationship dissolves, that also includes any investments.

Investment theory involves two constructs: relationship investment and relationship commitment to understand relationships (Rusbult, 1980). Although not directly involved in the romantic relationship, as most friends and family members are concerned with the well-being of at least one of the two involved in a romantic relationship, friends assess the cost and benefits of their friends' relationships and provide feedback. According to this feedback, a relationship can either be supported and thrive, or it can deteriorate.

As the researchers predicted, the study showed that perceived satisfaction by the friend in a romantic relationship was a strong predictor of relationship approval (Etcheverry et al., 2013). However, a friend's approval may be reliant on his or her perception of the relationship rather than the reality of how successful it is. Couples that are too reliant on the opinions of their social networks can introduce unnecessary problems into their relationships and avoid engaging in healthy communication with their partners.

In times of conflict within a romantic relationship, emotions can become unbearable for some to handle alone. Using 106 young adults in romantic relationships, Jensen and Rauer (2014) researched how the frequency of involving a social network impacts relationship functioning by posing the questions: to whom should a romantic partner turn, and what might be the effects of turning to a friend? Participants were given questionnaires about their personal attributes, how their relationships function, and how they interact with their friends, and they then measured relationship work, happiness, commitment, and relationship quality (Jensen & Rauer, 2014).

The research suggests that couples, especially women, who often discuss their relationship problems with their social networks and not with their significant others results in poorer relationship success than those who regularly discuss their concerns with their significant others (Jensen & Rauer, 2014). Talking about issues can be healthy and should not be eliminated completely, but research has shown a negative outcome when a partner confides in their social network consistently without talking with their significant other (Jensen & Rauer, 2014). Social networks are good for providing advice, but they are unable to actually solve problems, especially ones in which they are not directly involved.

Social Networks Online

With the rise in new technology and social media communication, social networks have changed their range of influence, now becoming relationships predominantly accessed online. Researchers have begun to explore the effects of these new resources on relationships. Social network influence has been researched, but the added convenience of being able to contact friends and acquaintances from all around the world has had a profound effect on interpersonal relationships. Now, the social networks that have been researched to have a strong impact on a person's relationship, can be accessed at any time and more often than they were before the internet.

Also, if someone wants to find information on a significant other, they no longer have to face the discomfort of asking another human being, but rather, within the privacy and comfort of their own home,

they can find almost any information about another person. Within the context of a romantic relationship, this fact can be catastrophic if misused.

Using 517 participants from a Midwestern University, Fox and Anderegg (2014) conducted a study examining how social media sites are utilized to obtain information on a current or potential significant other. Fox and Anderegg measured Facebook behaviors on three categories: passive (e.g., looking at a person's wall), active (e.g., adding a person to a friend's list), and interactive (e.g., commenting on a person's wall or picture) uncertainty reduction strategies. The participants were asked to rate how normative they perceived these behaviors to be during four stages of the development of a romantic relationship: before meeting, after meeting, while casually dating, and while exclusively dating. The research indicated that women tend to find passive uncertainty reduction strategies to be normative no matter the stage of development of a romantic relationship, but men did not (Fox & Anderegg, 2014).

Fox and Anderegg also found that as the stage of the development of a romantic relationship changed, the perception of how normative different uncertainty reduction strategies also changed. This research indicates that as a relationship develops, certain behavior on social media changes and is deemed as more or less normative. This includes increasing active and interactive uncertainty reduction strategies to incorporate more contact between the partners of a relationship and their friends and family as well (Fox & Anderegg, 2014).

With the intrusion of social network sites in everyday life, new issues have come forth that were never a problem before, such as trust issues because of online dating exclusivity, easy access to information, and easy access to new and past relationships (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Individuals have access to exes, friends of their partners, and new people to whom they may be attracted. Unnecessary, and even unnatural consistent interactions of romantic partners with people of their past can cause distrust, jealousy, and doubt in relationships that would have otherwise been unaffected (Elphinston & Noller, 2011).

In the past, once a relationship was over, or one fell out of contact with another individual (even if there was an attraction), there was very little opportunity to see them again; but social network sites, such as Facebook, make losing contact very unlikely (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Even if two people are not physically speaking, seeing consistent status updates, pictures, and personal information can keep two people connected long past the end of the relationship. Once the person enters a new relationship, this contact does not necessarily end with the individual's other relationships from the past.

Fox, Osborn, and Warber (2014) conducted a study that incorporated relational dialectics theory (RDT) to understand why social media accounts, such as Facebook, had such an effect on relationships. According to RDT, couples constantly struggle to face forces that are pulling their relationship apart and bringing it together, which creates struggles known as dialectics that are unique to each relationship (Baxter, 2011; Fox et al., 2014). Fox et al. conducted a study, using 47 participants from a small U.S. Midwestern university, to explore the role of Facebook in the development of the romantic relationships of young adults' related to the integration–separation, expression–privacy, and stability–change dialectics of RDT.

As constantly changing and flowing internal (within the couple) and external (between the couple and their social network) factors take place, a couple must deal with the consequences that arise as a result. These fluctuations can result in uncertainty, given the rise in frequency due to the prevalence of social media in everyday life. Researchers found that Facebook is interwoven with the dialectics mentioned in the development of romantic relationships, and has allowed for a shift of control over relational information from the couple to their social network members. Relationships thrive on trust, stability, and respect. Even if those values are present in a relationship, social media can create the perception that they are not (Fox et al., 2014).

Studies suggest that the rise in the use of social media has also resulted in the rise of violations of fidelity and decreased trust and relationship satisfaction (Norton & Baptist, 2014; Clayton, 2014). Couples must establish appropriate behavior for online social media usage, such as pictures and information posted about personal life and the relationship. It may be detrimental to the romantic relationship if every time a couple fights, they post about it on social media, or one of them starts looking at the page of their ex-girlfriend or boyfriend when he or she is bored or unsatisfied with the current status of the relationship.

Both studies by Norton and Baptist (2014) and Clayton (2014) examined the effect of the use of social media on feelings of trust and fidelity in romantic relationships and marriage. Norton and Baptist included 205 married individuals and measured relationship trust and satisfaction using confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to test for the fit of variables accounting for Internet boundaries of openness, fidelity, faith, dependability, and predictability (Arbuckle, 2009). Researchers found that trust, not satisfaction, was associated with behaviors that reflect online sharing behaviors, and decreased behaviors were associated with flirting online and contacting former romantic partners (Norton & Baptist, 2014).

Clayton (2014) used 581 Twitter users to examine the relationship between Twitter use and relationship length. Researchers gave participants online survey questionnaires containing 20 questions inquiring about any problems they had faced with romantic partners through the use of Twitter, including conflict, infidelity, or emotional cheating. Results indicated that active Twitter users faced increased conflict with romantic partners or spouses, which can lead to infidelity, break-up, or divorce (Clayton, 2014).

Also, the idea of being "Facebook official" gives rise to conflict based on how public a couple wants their relationship to be (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). Sometimes, one of the two wants to be "Facebook official" for the world to see, while the other may be hesitant to do so. The reasons behind a partner's hesitation may merely stem from a desire to keep the relationship private, however, now the other partner may become suspicious of their significant other's motives, possibly increasing feelings of distrust or jealousy (Fox & Anderegg, 2014).

Furthermore, the ease of access to other people's perfectly groomed and manipulated profiles can make it easy for individuals to look through other people's lives whenever they desire, often during times when their relationships may be the most vulnerable. Relationships are difficult and involve a lot of hard work; and having easy access to hundreds or thousands of other people from all around the world could make it difficult to remain loyal to just one person (Clayton, 2014). It

may provide individuals with unrealistic standards with which to compare their own relationships.

Also worth considering is that couples are now faced with having to figure out what they are allowed to post about their relationship, whether or not they want to make their relationship public, and how often they post about their relationship. New couples not only have to have the "exclusivity talk" among themselves, but now they have to decide whether or not to make their relationship public on their social media forums. Orosz et al. (2015) conducted a study exploring how becoming "Facebook official" affects relationships based on the intensity of romantic love of a couple and jealousy between them. Their study suggested that for couples that made their relationship "Facebook official", there was an increase in the intensity of romantic love and jealousy (Orosz et al., 2015).

These findings may lead us to believe that involving an online social network in one's relationship can have serious implications on that relationship given the rise in an emotional association with it. As hundreds of other people, including friends and strangers, are now involved in a couple's romantic relationship by being "Facebook official", it can provide one or both partners a feeling of security or it can create tension and jealousy by allowing freer access to the couple's social life by the significant other. Depending on the intentions of the couple, having more access to their personal social life can be a positive or negative thing (Orosz et al., 2015)

Countless research indicates that an increase in use of social media when in a romantic relationship can negatively impact the relationship, because of the many resources available to a couple that may incite negative emotions and feelings. Research has shown that the increase in the use of social media has resulted in negative outcomes for romantic relationships, including infidelity, break-ups, and divorce. Although there are positive aspects of social media use, such as ease of communication, social media has provided many with various conflicts to confront in their relationships. Besides facing normal relational conflicts, through social media, couples face an increase in feelings of jealousy, relationship dissatisfaction, distrust, and infidelity.

In relationships, it is highly likely that in cases that involve high emotional strain, one or both partners may seek solace in other people, including past or maybe present love interests. With the increased use of social media, access to other relationships is easier than ever and can result in broken relationships. Social media profiles create unattainable standards of people by showcasing perfectly manipulated profiles, with carefully selected scenes of an individual's life that may inaccurately portray that person's reality. For someone who is having trouble in their current relationship, or for someone who is bored and looking for something new, social media can provide them with many options that can be detrimental to their current relationships.

Although the literature on the effects of social media on relationships is extensive, the research lacks when it comes to studying the emotional attachment that social media has on a romantic relationship because of constant contact with another individual or because of a misrepresentation of a person due to the perception they give on social media. Based on the amount of "likes" or comments a person receives on their profile, there is little research examining whether or not these factors increase or decrease the attractiveness of a potential mate. Based on previous findings, the current study proposes to exam the relationship

between social network site intrusion and relationship satisfaction. It is proposed that this relationship will be a negative one.

2   Method

After obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board (IRB), this study utilized a convenient sample of 100 participants from a private, faith-based university in the southern United States. The sample included 63 females and 37 males, with 27 participants identifying as white, 27 identifying as black/ African American/ Caribbean, 28 identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 8 identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 10 identifying as "other". Ages of the participants ranged from 18-56, with a large majority of participants in their 20s. Using the university directory, the researcher sent emails to university professors seeking participants for the study and handed out the research questionnaires, demographic questions, and informed consent forms to various students around campus. Before handing out the questionnaires, the researcher provided a brief overview of the study and also provided her email for any inquiries participants may have in the future. This was done during the fall semester of the 2017 academic school year.

Participants were asked questions inquiring their age, gender, sexual affiliation, relationship status and length, most utilized social network sites, how long they spend on social media sites in a week, and race/ethnicity. Then, participants were given the Social Network Site Intrusion Questionnaire (SNSIQ) originally called the Facebook Intrusion Questionnaire (FIQ), which is an eight-item questionnaire with responses reported on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The SNSIQ has high internal validity with an alpha of 0.85 and measures Social Network Site intrusion based on Brown's (1997) addiction components (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). The questionnaire measures the prevalence of social network sites in an individual's life, including how often an individual thinks about social media and whether or not the individual can stop using social network sites.

In Elphinston and Noller's study (2011), they explored how Facebook Intrusion affected relationship satisfaction, among other factors. However, in the current study, the researchers wished to include all social network sites, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. At the time of Elphinston and Noller's study in 2011, Facebook was much more popular. As new social media sites emerged, they became more popular as well. The researchers felt that only measuring Facebook use would limit the data substantially, so they expanded the Facebook Intrusion Questionnaire to include all social media sites.

Relational satisfaction was assessed based on a questionnaire assessing investment model constructs (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998; Elphinston & Noller, 2011). The questionnaire will comprise of Thirteen items, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with sample items, including "I feel satisfied with our relationship".

3   Results

The aim of the current study was to measure the effects of SNSI on relationships by measuring levels of relationship satisfaction and SNSI. By using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0., the data was analyzed using parametric tests (e.g., Pearson

correlation and t-test for independent samples). All tests were run at the 0.05 significance level. Descriptive statistics for each of the variables and research materials, including the demographic, SNSIQ, and relationship satisfaction questionnaires are listed in Table 1 and Table 2.

It was predicted that a negative correlation would be found between SNSI and relationship satisfaction among college students. Using a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, r (one-tailed), it was found that high SNSI scores were correlated with low relationship satisfaction scores, $r = -0.231$, $p < 0.05$. This suggested a negative, weak correlation between relationship satisfaction and SNSI. The null hypothesis was rejected (see Table 1 & 2). The data indicated that as the prevalence of social network site use increased in an individual's life, the less satisfied he or she reported to feel in his or her relationship.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics For SNS Intrusion

	Mean	Std. D	N
SNSI	27.7000	11.41725	100
Relationship Satisfaction	69.1200	19.17189	100

Table 2. Correlation Data for SNS Intrusion and Relationship Satisfaction

		SNSI
Relationship Satisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	-.437**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	100

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Discussion

In previous studies, it has been found that trust, not relationship satisfaction, was affected by increased media use (Norton & Baptist, 2014). However, the current study showed a negative relationship between relationship satisfaction and SNSI. This indicated that those individuals that use social media consistently and "intrusively" tend to feel less satisfied in their relationships than those who did not report that social media is highly intrusive in their lives. Overall, the more that social networks sites play a predominant role in the life of an individual, the less satisfactory he or she reported a romantic relationship to be. On social network sites, individuals have unlimited access to other people and profiles. This access can include information that is manipulated to seem ideal by adding events and images that portray a desirable perspective, even if the actual relationship is not ideal in real life (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Can these profiles be the reason behind many couples' dissatisfaction in their relationships?

With research showing the prevalence of social networks in the health of a romantic relationship (Sprecher, 2011), viewing certain events online from someone in an individual's social network seems to influence that individual's satisfaction with his or her partner. For example, when a woman in a romantic relationship sees a member of her own social network receiving a gift or maybe taking a trip on Facebook, even if the she is happy in her relationship, upon viewing the event, she may not feel as satisfied with her significant other's efforts in their relationship. This can result in an overall sense of dissatisfaction over time. As conflicts arise, as they ultimately do in relationships, social media provides an outlet for individuals that may serve as a negative influence. When events or images are posted on a social network site, such as Facebook, these events are now public for anyone to access, when in reality the events that occur in a relationship should be private for a couple. Instead of sharing an intimate moment together, a couple that posts their interactions on social network sites are sharing their relationship with many other people besides themselves. These people have their own sets of ideas and opinions that can ultimately affect a couple's relationship satisfaction.

When looking over the findings of this study, several limitations should be considered. Since participants were students from a small, faith-based university in the Southern U.S., in future studies, the sample size should be increased and the population should be expanded to include a sample of the rest of the population. Also more men should be surveyed, which might affect the results of the study, due to the fact that fewer men were interviewed than women. During research, some participants asked for clarification of the wording of the questionnaire. Others may have also had the same questions but may have refrained from asking because of hesitation or laziness. This may also indicate a difficulty in understanding operational definitions of important terms in the study, including online dating websites, social network sites, romantic relationships, and/ or long distance relationships. Many of the operational definitions of these terms are pivotal to the way participants answer and interpret questions from the questionnaire. Depending on the participant's interpretation of a certain term or question, this could affect the outcome of the study.

Furthermore, many of the questions from the questionnaire were very intimate and personal questions. Based on a participant's personal beliefs and experiences, it could affect how they answer questions, regardless of the reality behind the answer. They may be more willing to answer questions about their significant other based on how they feel they should answer, rather than how they actually think.

Self-report is a data collection method that can contain significant error, based on participants' perceptions of themselves and their desire to be perceived in a certain way. This affects the validity of their reports. A participant may indicate higher levels of relationship satisfaction because of a desire to seem happy, regardless of the fact that participation in the questionnaire is voluntary and anonymous.

Furthermore, participants may be unwilling to report negative aspects of themselves or their relationships, failing to indicate higher surveillance behaviors, distrust, or jealousy, because they may feel that is a negative representation of themselves and therefore undesirable traits.

Also, the researcher noticed a difference in the answers of younger undergraduate students and older graduate students. Younger undergraduate students were more likely to pay less attention when taking the questionnaire, asking less questions and sometimes missing the

control questions aimed at conserving validity and reliability. This limitation was rarer with older students. Older students, especially graduate students were more likely to ask questions to clarify any confusion and were less likely to miss the control questions.

The findings of this research suggest a negative influence of the consistent and intrusive use of social media on romantic relationships. Although the research shows a general tendency with a decrease in relationship satisfaction because of social media intrusion, one might ask, how can one measure how much social media usage is too much? Should social media be avoided completely once an individual is in a romantic relationship? Is an increase in social media use the reason behind the increase of the divorce rate in the United States? With our changing society, one that is highly involved in technology and social media for information, we should be careful in how dependent we are on our electronic devices and technology.

Acknowledgements

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