Review of Social Network Sites (SNS) and Relationships: Jealousy, Satisfaction, and Relational Maintenance Theory

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**Introduction**

With social network sites (SNS) becoming more fully integrated into people’s lives, such as through the use of Facebook and other social media, jealousy and concerns for a romantic partner’s use of these social networks is becoming more and more important as it relates to satisfaction among couples (Ultz & Beukeboom, 2013). Not surprisingly, SNS and social media have much to do with jealousy and dissatisfaction within relationships, as they are now being used as main communication channels between partners (Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015). In conjunction with SNS and social media, it is also important to note how effective self-disclosure is when communicating within a relationship through online mediums. This review will therefore discuss the power SNS have on relationships, positive and negative, as well as looking at self-disclosure and satisfaction in relationships as they relate to SNS and social media. This review is also supported by research done on Relational Maintenance Theory and its connection with SNS and social media.

**Social Networks and Relationships**

Social network sites (SNS) are sites that have profiles to display different connections between users (Ultz & Beukeboom, 2013). They are used by couples to communicate with their partner and share their feelings with them (Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015). There are three characteristics of SNS, according to a study done by Ultz and Beukeboom (2011), most of which relate to jealousy within a relationship: (1) SNS increase the amount of information that people receive and find out about their partner, which can, in turn, induce jealousy; (2) SNS provide people with a “socially accepted way” of monitoring their partner (people who are more jealous and with low self-esteem
are more likely to partake in monitoring their partner via SNS); and (3) SNS can
publically display information that can be relevant to a romantic relationship, which can
enhance positive or negative feelings about one’s partner. The idea of jealousy in a
relationship due to SNS causes relates to the addition of appropriateness in our study,
siting that jealousy can be provoked by inappropriate comments, likes, or messages from
a person’s partner online. However, at the end of their report, Ultz and Beukeboom
(2011) found that people generally experienced more happiness than jealousy when
discovering their partner’s activities on SNS. At the end of the day, people are more
likely to be themselves online (Farrugia, 2013).

Sometimes, it is the amount of social media and network use between couples that
plays the biggest part in a relationship; Facebook is a larger example of this. Facebook
has two primary functions: self-presentation on one’s profile page and enabling
communication between site users both publicly and privately (Carpenter & Spottswood,
2013). Facebook does provide people with a way to self-disclose information online, but
it has definitely resulted in the altering of the way a relationship develops and the kinds
of interaction people have in relationships (Farrugia, 2013). For example, Facebook helps
people identify common interests, speeding up relational processes between two people
(Farrugia, 2013), and can also be used to display signs of commitment in a relationship,
such as when a person’s relationship status is changed to “in a relationship” (Ultz &

How people act on- and offline in a relationship can determine if the relationship
continues. While Facebook is used to declare more intimate relationships and establish
the significance of a relationship, it is also not uncommon for Facebook and other forms
of social media to cause a breakup, such as when it is used for surveillance of one’s partner (Farrugia, 2013). It is in this way that Facebook can lead to high amounts of jealousy in a relationship. In fact, a study done by Dainton and Stokes (2015, p. 369) stated that “the amount of time spent on Facebook directly relates to an increase in the feelings of jealousy in a romantic relationship”. This should be no surprise, as Facebook is one of the most public places a couple will represent themselves, such as through photographs. Photographs are an important aspect to any Facebook user, especially couples (Bowe, 2010). Some researchers have even looked into the possibility of the number of friends a person has on Facebook contributing to the amount of jealousy a person experiences when monitoring their partner’s profile page and activities online. It has been found, however, that the number of Facebook friends has no connection with the number of past relationships of the users (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013). Jealousy is discussed later in this review with regards to relational satisfaction.

Upon further exploration of SNS and relationships, some studies have found that there is a difference between men and women in social media and network use. For example, Farrugia (2013) reported that women are more likely to express themselves online. Reed, Tolman, and Safyer (2015) found that this relates to how women may feel more jealousy or emotional distress from social media-related issues, while Bond (2009) concluded that women are more likely to be sexually expressive online. Women also tend to use social media to maintain relationships, whereas men use social media to build new relationships and expand career opportunities (Reed, Tolman, & Safyer, 2015). Specifically, women use social media for more communication; men use social media for
more entertainment (Bond, 2009). The conclusion of the study done by Bond (2009) is that men and women were socialized differently; therefore they use SNS differently.

**Self-Disclosure in Relationships**

Self-disclosure is defined as the “process of revealing personal information to someone else” (Choi & Bazarova, 2015, p. 480). Self-disclosure can come in two forms: Emotional self-disclosure, or self-disclosure regarding a person’s feelings; and factual self-disclosure, or small but private information that is revealed about a person (Lee & Pistole, 2012).

There are four stages that typical relationships will pass through regarding self-disclosure: (1) Orientation, which involves revealing basic information to the other person to develop the relationship; (2) exploratory affective exchange, or the time period where people begin to understand each other’s personalities and individuality; (3) effective exchange, when there is more personal self-disclosure as intimacy between two people develops; and finally, (4) stable exchange, where there is complete openness between both people on all aspects of the relationship and life (Farrugia, 2013).

The amount of self-disclosure can play a significant role in a relationship, especially if it is put online. When there is self-disclosure on a social network, it is no longer a private and personal disclosure; instead it becomes a self-disclosure that is shared with the collective audience on that social network, and characteristics of the social network can affect the amount and kind of self-disclosure on it (Choi & Bazarova, 2015). This means that there could be more self-disclosure—either positive or negative self-disclosure—on one type of social network than another.
Online self-disclosure can also happen at a higher frequency than face-to-face self-disclosure because there are fewer social cues, such as facial expressions or tone of voice, when using communication technologies as opposed to looking a person in the eye (Ruppel, 2015). It is in this way that communication technologies with reduced or no social cues can reduce a person’s self-consciousness, making it easier to participate in self-disclosure online, as there are no nonverbal social cues (Ruppel, 2015).

While people are motivated to expand or provide more self-disclosure about themselves so that they can develop close relationships (Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013), there are some forms of communication technologies that are more useful than others. Ruppel (2015) explains that while phone calls and video chatting are somewhat useful in less-developed relationships, emails and texting can hinder a relationship more than they can help. Ultimately, using any form of communication technologies results in lower self-disclosure between partners than if there is face-to-face communication (Ruppel, 2015).

**Satisfaction in Relationships**

Many reports have been done on the satisfaction of people in relationships; one such study did a report on husbands and wives. It found that the “wives’ satisfaction was best predicted by wives’ perceptions of husbands’ honesty, physical affection, self-inclusion, sensitivity and shared spirituality” (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 218).

Satisfaction is often interrupted, however, by jealousy in a relationship, which can be caused by SNS and social media use. The fact that social media and social networks are not anonymous allows for no privacy, therefore there is a higher potential for jealousy. Jealousy is important in a relationship, but it can also cause its destruction, since there is a constant availability of information on SNS (Ultz & Beukeboom, 2011).
Farrugia (2013) describes three types of jealousy: reactive jealousy, or emotional reactions from a person; anxious jealousy, or the fear of unfaithfulness in a partner; and possessive jealousy, or the monitoring or controlling behavior of a partner, such as through online surveillance of partner, which has been found to cause dissatisfaction and mistrust in relationships. These types of jealousy also relate to whether or not a person’s romantic partner is displaying inappropriate behavior on SNS and social media (Dainton & Stokes, 2015). Therefore, as relationships continue to be displayed in online settings, intimacy becomes more important, and trust certainly becomes the key component in any relationship (Farrugia, 2013).

**Relational Maintenance Theory**

All relationships need maintenance, which is better defined within a relationship as “behaviors that function to sustain preferred relationship characteristics, such as satisfaction” (Dainton & Stokes, 2015, p. 367). Dainton and Stokes (2015) found that there are strong connections between the online use of maintenance behavior and experiencing jealousy. Stafford and Canary (1991) also found that there are gender differences in maintenance behavior. Despite gender differences, maintaining a relationship leads to partners becoming interdependent upon each other in terms of how they act and behave, which motivates couples to continue the maintenance of their relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

In relation to the review of jealousy and relational satisfaction, Stafford and Canary (1991) reported that we think of “maintenance behaviors as efforts expended to maintain the nature of the relationship”. The nature of a relationship includes certain traits presented by both people in the relationship, namely: commitment, which can be
overturned by jealousy and inappropriateness using SNS and social media, and satisfaction (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

**Research Question**

These reports and findings lead into this review’s main question to generate further study: Are romantic partners with more integrated online social networks more likely to have concerns about the appropriateness of their partner’s communication with shared contacts through social media?

**Method**

Are romantic partners with more integrated online social networks more likely to have concerns about the appropriateness of their partner’s communication with shared contacts through social media?

**Participants**

Ninety-eight participants (sixty-two completed; male = 19.4%, N = 12; female = 80.6%, N = 50) between the ages of 18 and 33 (mean = 22; mode = 21; median = 21) consented and completed an online questionnaire about romantic relationships and social media use. Each participant confirmed that they were completing the survey based on a current or past relationship (78% said they were talking about a current relationship; 22% said they were talking about a past relationship).

**Procedures**

A twenty-two item online questionnaire was sent out via email, Facebook, and through other forms of social media to potential participants from a convenient sample. Participants were first asked if his or her relationship was a current or past relationship, if it was a long-distance relationship or not, and the level of commitment him or her had in
the relationship. This was done to understand the demographics of the sample, as the online questionnaire had been distributed using the convenience sampling strategy.

**Variables**

**Appropriateness**

Appropriateness was measured using two items adapted from Spitzberg and Canary’s (1985) Conversational Appropriateness Scale, and appropriateness of self-disclosure was measured using Wheeless’ (1978) Revised Self-Disclosure Scale. Almost half of the participants (47.5%) said that their romantic partner had said things on social media that they should not have said, while 30.5% of participants said that their romantic partner has said things on social media that were embarrassing.

**Integration of online networks**

We created high and low network integration groups based on a scale score (i.e., each participant’s average rating across all eight self and partner network integration items). The “low” group (52% of participants) had scale scores less than or equal to 4.75. The “high” group (48% of participants) had scale scores greater than 4.75.

**Technologies**

Participants were asked if he or she communicated with his or her partner, closest friends, siblings, children, other family members (i.e., aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.), other friends, coworkers, and clients/customers using mediums such as Facebook (100% of participants’ partners’ use Facebook), Twitter (59.3% use Twitter), Instagram (76.5% use Instagram), Snapchat (93.9% use Snapchat), or other forms of social media (9.8% use other forms of social media), as well as to what extent he or she communicate in those relationships using those mediums.
Relational Satisfaction

Relational satisfaction was measured using an abbreviated version of Hendrick’s (1988) Relationship Satisfaction Scale, which used three items instead of the original seven. When reporting on a past relationship, 26.7% of participants said that their relationship was good compared to most, while over half (61.9%) of participants reporting on a current relationship said that their relationship was good compared to most.

Results

The research question asked if romantic partners with more integration within his or her social media networks predicted more concern about the appropriateness of their partner’s communication using social media. Based on our sample of participants, the answer to the research question is “no”; there were no significant differences within the appropriateness variable (honesty: $p = .654$; appropriateness: $p = .377$; tendency to self-disclose: $p = .409$). While this does suggest that there were some differences, and that the people whose online networks were more integrated tended to rate their partner’s social communication as more honest and more appropriate, results were not statistically significant. Relatively low scores on the “tendency to self-disclose” scale suggest that participants generally saw their partners as controlled and judicious in what they shared via social media.

Because the strategy used to collect the data was online and included more closed-ended questions than open-ended questions, future research should allow participants to expand upon their feelings regarding their partner’s social media use by interviewing them instead. Future studies should also focus on one or two common forms
of social media use in relationships (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to gain more insight into specific social network mediums and the affects they have on romantic relationships.

**Methods for Interview Process**

In the case of social media, the specifics of each message, such as the language and grammar used, are crucial to understanding and interpreting the message, and even then the meaning of those messages are often taken the wrong way. It is because of this that interviewing was an appropriate method for this section of our study; each participant that was interviewed was able to fully express themselves regarding how their own personal experiences with social media and relationships went wrong, and how they resolved the issues, if they were resolved at all. From these interviews, I hoped to gain knowledge on what exactly causes angst in a relationship when social media is involved. In order to try and draw out these answers, I asked interviewees what they considered to be inappropriate behavior online and how they responded to it, and if they learned anything new about using social media in relationships that they did not know before. I also asked them why they thought problems with relationships and social media existed in the first place.

I interviewed four different people, all in their early twenties and all either majoring or minoring in Communications. The majority of the participants spoke about a past relationship when being interviewed. With the participants’ consent to being interviewed, the interviews lasted about nine minutes each.

**Findings**

Between all four interviews, participants’ answers were relatively the same when I asked them the same questions. For most of the participants, the main issue with social
media being involved in their relationship was the idea that there was not enough trust in the relationship before the problems online surfaced, and these problems were only mostly relevant to one of the partners, particularly the female partners.

While conversing with the participants, the most common circumstance that was concerning to them was when their partner “liked pictures and statuses” of someone of the opposite sex, saying how “it really bothered” them. One way to interpret this would be to suggest that people in relationships do not like it when their partners communicate with others through social media because it limits the power and control they have in their relationship, as well as being concerned with their partner’s behavior because they are missing certain verbal and nonverbal communication cues that would ease their worrying.

Of the participants interviewed, all stated that they would definitely confront their partner if such a problem existed; one participant commented on a past relationship, saying that the confrontation led to the partner “blocking” or “de-friending” certain people on their social media accounts to defuse the problem. This seemed to suggest that no other conclusion could be reached, or that no other solution is really possible in the case of social media.

Many of the participants also looked for me to relate to them as they were being interviewed; phrases like “oh, you know” or “obviously” were dropped continuously throughout the conversation. There were even some hints of angst and defensiveness when discussing some of the questions with participants. I would interpret this as though the interviewees wanted to be sure I would keep the information confidential, most likely
because they wanted the situations of their relationships or past relationships to be kept confidential and private.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to examine the ways in which social media and social network sites have an impact on romantic relationships, and how they particularly invoke jealousy between partners who use them inappropriately. Based on our results, the answer to our research question was “no”, and there was no statistical significance. From these findings, it can be interpreted that social media and the large population behind its growth are going to continue progressing in the future, and couples may very well soon start to rely even more on SNS. These interpretations suggest that the Relational Maintenance Theory will be more important in cultivating relationships, especially to those partners who count heavily on social media to continue their relationships.

Drawing from our interviews, we can be sure that many young adults at the very least who use social media in their relationships will be more likely to feel jealousy and see inappropriateness in their partners actions on SNS. They will also more likely feel powerless when the inappropriateness of others towards their partners online is brought to their attention.

This study is not without its limitations, however; we did not study enough participants, both by our survey and interview methods, and more participants would have given more credibility to our research. We also looked at various forms of social media where we could have focused on one main social network site, such as Facebook or Twitter. This would have narrowed down our conclusions considerably in finding what specific messages arouse feelings of jealousy in relationships, as well as what specific
messages on different sites make for inappropriate behavior online. Finally, our sample of participants was not random; therefore it was difficult to provide enough valuable and credible evidence to support our findings and interpretations.

Future research should draw on interviews to reach more plausible feedback; there is a better understanding to be had regarding what stands as inappropriate in online communication and what provokes jealousy. This lies with interviewees who have the ability to express themselves when it comes to social media and their relationships, and who have the ability to explain in full detail how they deal with these issues. Future research should also study appropriateness in social media specifically in terms of the Relational Maintenance Theory, and how the Relational Maintenance Theory can assist partners in relationships when it involves SNS.

**Conclusion**

In this study we discussed the power SNS have on relationships, positive and negative, as well as looked at satisfaction and self-disclosure in relationships and how they relate to SNS and social media. We also studied the Relational Maintenance Theory and its connection with SNS and social media.

This study conducted an online survey of a convenience sample, as well as four separate interviews, both of which concluded the answer to our research question was “no” and was not statistically significant, although the interviews provided us with more in-depth answers as to what makes a message on social media inappropriate when it comes to relationships.

In real relational challenges, social media is still finding its place; however, it is making progressions in the way partners in relationships communicate with one another,
both in a positive and negative light. The standards of communication are being
inherently driven by SNS and the power they hold over our attention, and should be
studied further to interpret how it will affect generations to come.
References


