

The Interplay of Real Life and Facebook in Defining Interpersonal Romantic Relationships

Electronic communication has been redefining the ways in which people communicate with each other since its wide-spread introduction in the 1990's. E-mail, instant messaging, internet forums, and social networking have added entirely new meanings to interpersonal interaction and community. Through time, internet based communication has developed its own set of non-verbal communication (emoticons, select usage of certain punctuation, chat speak, etc.) Like all other communication technologies, it has also been adapted into everyday life and everyday communication (by those that have access of course).

It is the interplay between internet and real life communication and its subsequent effect on interpersonal relationships that is the focus of this research proposal. Popular social networking websites such as Facebook have bundled many of the internet communication standards such as e-mail, forums, and instant messaging into one resource. Then these communication standards are linked together through a Web 2.0 standard called "social networking." Social networking allows users to link and communicate with each other through a myriad of ways... and it is always at the user's discretion.

Research has already been done on who uses Facebook, why they do, and how much time they spend on it (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). There has also been introductory research done on the benefits of social networking through Facebook (Stern & Taylor, 2007) and the electronic presenting and "looking glass" self through Facebook (Walther 2008). The academic world knows what Facebook is and why it's used. However, in the last two years, Facebook usage has become a staple activity in a young adult's life. While it varies slightly among gender

and race groups, overall, young adults (college aged) who have internet access use Facebook regularly for some type of social contact. With this mass assimilation into daily life, it has already begun to change the way in which interpersonal relationships are defined.

I want to take the research further and into the zone of romantic relationships. Facebook is one of the *the*, if not the top medium for young adults to “scope out” and “research” potential partners. While research has been done on internet based dating, I want to look at how Facebook is being used to define, redefine, develop, and maintain real life romantic relationships. With Facebook playing a large role in many romantic relationships, it’s important to see how this will continue to shape interpersonal communication in the future.

While Facebook is used for both the cultivation of real life and internet-only relationships, the importance of this research proposal is to look at how Facebook is an extension of real life. This research proposal aims to discover how far Facebook is used to define, cultivate, and maintain real life interpersonal romantic relationships. Through looking at previous research on Facebook, online romantic relationships, and disclosure through internet communication, we will see what direction research needs to go to find valid conclusions on the interplay of real life and Facebook in the development of interpersonal romantic relationships.

Literature Review

Much research has been done in the area of relational development through the medium of internet based communication. Since its genesis, internet based communication has been incorporated into the development of interpersonal relationships. As new internet based communication mediums have surfaced, so has the integration of these utilities into relationships. Likewise, as popular social networking sites MySpace and Facebook have cropped up over the years, affecting the way in which people communicate, so has limited research on the social mediums.

Facebook and the Electronic Presenting Self

Rumbough's (2001) study on the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships through computer-mediated communication found that college students do, in fact, use the internet to meet new people. It was found that 28% of the students in the study had been deceptive in their internet communication. This includes things such as lying and gender switching. With the possibility of such deception, the study found that it may be hard for internet users to apply things such as uncertainty reduction. However, many things have changed in the world of internet infused relational development since this 2001 study. With the development and mass adoption of Facebook by college students, there has been much more of a blur between the line of computer-mediated communication and real life communication.

Stern & Taylor (2007) found that Facebook is used by traditional college students as a way to keep in touch with old friends as well as meet new ones. The students were found to do this through both direct communication using the wall post and private message features as well as indirectly by the viewing of others profiles. While Facebook is used to cultivate old and new

relationships, it is also used by students in romantic relationships to display and check the status and commitment of their relationship.

The indirect communication found through profile posting and viewing is vast. Through the profile system, users enact a type of Facebook “presenting self,” much like that found in real life (Ting-Toomey, 2005). When people write and develop their profile, choose their profile picture, and publicly write on other user’s Facebook “walls,” they are all consciously and unconsciously developing that Facebook “presenting self.” Research has shown that when college aged males posted information about culturally negative moral behaviors (partying, sexism, etc.) that they were participating in on other users “walls.” their perceived attractiveness went up. However, when females did it, their attractiveness went down (Walther, et al., 2008). This only furthers the notion that male-centric sexist language (Kramarae , 1981) is prevalent in American society and has continued into new media. Wall posts, profiles, and profile pictures have also been shown to directly affect a user’s perceived attractiveness when comparing their own information and photos with others on Facebook (Walther, et al., 2008). This aligns itself well with Mead’s (1934) definition of self that has shown that the “self” is many times not found through introspection, but instead through taking the role of the “other” and imagining how we look from the other’s perspective.

Another part of the Facebook “presenting self” is found within the “status” feature. Kindred & Shannon’s (2004) research found that certain parts of instant messaging, such as the “away message” or “buddy information”, were found to manage college student’s online identities. While Facebook is in the preliminary stages of implementing instant messaging, it has taken these two online identity formation tools used in instant messaging and implemented them well. The Facebook “status” uses the exact same principles as away messages as well as the

“profile” acting as advanced “buddy information.” While these studies have confirmed that the “presenting self” of Facebook serves a social function, they haven’t closely looked into how it interplays with the development of real life interpersonal romantic relationships.

While Facebook has been shown to be very positive in the formation and cultivation of social capital for college students (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), there can be a definite negative response from the users. It has been shown that unwanted private messages and friend requests, private information that was made public, and stalking have all added to users negatively responding to Facebook usage (Sterne & Taylor, 2007). In the area of romantic relationships, no Facebook research has looked at how much real life interaction is required before a potential romantic partner is not seen as a “stalker” or in any kind of negative light.

Since internet usage is directly related to psychological well-being, relationships, and the identity of self, it is of interest to note that there is a positive relationship between measures of internet usage and loneliness (Matsuba, 2006). No research has looked into how lonely or desperate a Facebook user is when trying to find a potential romantic partner.

Online Romantic Relationships

Matsuba’s (2006) research has shown that real life relationships are looked at as more “real” in the negative and positive dimensions of personal qualities, while internet only relationships were less extreme. If real life relationships are seen as more “real” and Facebook is an online medium of communication for those real life relationships, then research needs to look at how far Facebook defines the romantic relationships. Nevertheless, it’s important to look at people’s views of internet-only romantic relationships.

Research has found that those who use the internet to create and maintain a secondary romantic relationship in addition to a real life one showed higher levels of relational certainty and high expectations of future interaction with their online partners (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer). Conversely, those where the online relationship was their only romantic relationship were found to have lower levels of relational certainty and lower expectations of future interactions with their online partners. It's also been found that time spent online and positive views of the internet lead to a more favorable view of online romantic relationships (Anderson, 2005). It's important to note that the respondents of this particular study did not correlate their personal romantic beliefs with their perceptions of online-only romantic relationships. Therefore, there's a possibility that personal romantic beliefs are used more for a conventional relationship than an online-only relationship. While these studies have little relevance to the cultivation of a real life romantic relationship through Facebook, it is important to see the connections and disconnects between real life and internet life. This needs to be developed further to see how much Facebook is used in the initial stages of romantic relational development compared to usage when the partners have a highly developed real life relationship. The point needs to be pinpointed as to where the user applies their personal romantic beliefs to their Facebook infused romantic relationship.

It's interesting to note Stevens & Morris's (2007) study that found individuals who reported high levels of social and/or dating anxiety were not more likely to use the internet to make online relationships than those who reported lower levels of social or dating anxiety. However, the research did show that certain online media (particularly webcams) are more likely to be used by people with social and dating anxiety symptoms, than those with less. This could play into new research about whether certain features of Facebook are used more so in romantic

relational development by social and dating anxious than other features. For example, a dating anxious user might post more general public “wall posts” than a confident user who might send more personal private messages.

Disclosure through Internet Communication

Through research on adolescents, it’s been found that extroverted adolescents self-disclosed and communicated online more frequently than introverted adolescents (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). Along with the disclosure and online communication came the formation of online friendships. Conversely, introverted adolescents used online communication to compensate for their lacking of certain social skills. However, along with these characteristics came a stronger motivation to talk online, resulting in more online based friendships. It is interesting to note that the introverts use the internet to compensate for their lack of social skills. Research needs to see if those who lack social skills use Facebook for the development of romantic relationships, whether it is in the initial stages or not, more so than those that don’t lack the proper skills.

Research has also shown that those who are more trusting in real life have a harder time trusting online (Feng, Parvaneh, Lazar, & Preece, 2004). However, this may be wrong within the context of Facebook relational development. If a person trusts another highly in real life, they might highly trust that same person on Facebook. Likewise, if a user has little trust for a person in real life, they may have little to no trust for the same person on Facebook. This particular study has also shown that online trust can be directly linked to empathy. The accuracy of empathy and the types of responses to that empathy have a large influence on interpersonal trust. Shouten, Valkenburg, & Peter (2007) found that the more users in instant messaging

conversations perceived the relevance of reduced non-verbals and controllability, the more they self-disclosed. Both private and public self-consciousness affected the perceived relevance, but did not directly affect the instant messaging self disclosure. The studies show how important a user's perception of internet communication affects their levels of self disclosure. Interpersonal trust is found online through how *much* the users perceive the other person to be telling the truth. Without the non-verbal cues of deception that are found in real life face-to-face or voice communication, internet empathy and trust can be very misleading. However, with Facebook interaction, things could be different. Research needs to look into how knowing someone directly could directly affect the way in which disclosure, empathy, and trust is built through Facebook. We also see an entirely new set of internet based non-verbals forming. While research has found that emoticon and emoti-text (LOL, BRB) have been widely adopted into instant messaging and used often (Kindred & Roper, 2004), it has not been looked into how these forms of communications can be looked at non-verbally and affect online relational trust. It would also be interesting to look at how uses of punctuation and sentence structure might cue nonverbal responses of romantic relational development. For example, two single people of the opposite sex who are romantically interested in each other might use a myriad of exclamation marks while writing on each other's Facebook walls. They could be doing this completely subconsciously to display their emotional excitement for the other person.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

RQ1a: What role does Facebook play in the definition of a real life romantic interpersonal relationship? We know that internet communication has its own set of variables concerning romance, disclosure, and definition of self. We also see the interplay between ideologies of real life and virtual life. Overall, this question seeks to find the level in which college students use Facebook to create, define, and cultivate their romantic relationships.

RQ1b: What level of real life interpersonal interaction with a romantic intent is required for romantic interaction on Facebook? We know that users can feel stalked or receive unwanted messages on Facebook. This question seeks to find out how much a person needs to have a romantic interest in real life before they are comfortable with displaying romantic interest through Facebook.

RQ2a: How is the Facebook presenting self associated with the development of interpersonal romantic relationships? We know that people have an “electronic presenting self” on Facebook and in instant messaging much like they do in real life. This question seeks to find how a user’s wall, profile, wall posts, pictures, and other media play into the development of real life romantic relationships.

RQ2b: To what extent does social and dating anxiety play on the usage of certain features of Facebook? We know that those whom are more socially and dating anxious are more adept to use internet communication to make up for their social ineptness. We also know that extroverted individuals tend to disclose more information online than introverted individuals. This question seeks to find how a socially anxious (introverted) person might use certain features of Facebook over a socially extroverted individual.

RQ3: How do people non-verbally communicate through Facebook? We know that self disclosure and empathy lead to interpersonal trust. People many time gauge this trust on non-verbal cues. This question seeks to find the extent of ways that people nonverbally communicate through Facebook.

A Few Hypotheses

H1: The lonelier a user is, the more they will use Facebook to find a romantic partner. This hypothesis goes in conjunction with the discussion of social and dating anxiety. It is my conclusion that the more one is socially anxious and introverted, the more one is socially lonely. The more one is lonely, the more he or she will use Facebook to find a romantic partner. One who finds satisfaction in their real life relationships might not go to Facebook as much to find and cultivate a romantic interpersonal relationship.

H2: Introverted users are more likely to use Facebook in the initial stages of romantic relational development than extroverted users. This hypothesis works in conjunction with the first hypothesis, in that more users are likely to be cultivating a romantic partner on Facebook because of their inability to do so in real life.

H3: For the Facebook users that use it for initial romantic relational development, they will use it less as their relationship grows deeper. Once the romantic relationship reaches a certain level, they will stop using Facebook as much to cultivate that relationship. They may spend more time physically together, communicate using other mediums such as phone, or even through e-mail instead of Facebook e-mail (private messaging).

Method

Since Facebook is used and integrated by such a large audience, then it is important that the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of this audience are represented well. A cross-sectional survey is proposed so that the most information about the user's specific Facebook usage can be found. Survey is likely the best way to get a response from Facebook users because people are used to disclosing information about themselves online, especially through surveys.

This research survey proposal seeks to answer many questions about the dynamics of interpersonal romantic development through Facebook, which in effect, will make this a long survey. In respect to the user's (and researcher's) time, the survey will need to be closed format so that the variables of interest can be easily quantified.

Since this proposal deals directly with people who use Facebook, the sampling frame will consist entirely of Facebook users. The survey will need to reside online, linked through either a Facebook group or event. Facebook forum groups and event listings employ powerful social networking in that users can invite their entire "friends" list to either join the group or event. If select socially active Facebook users are able to invite their online friend circles, then it is the hope of the researcher that a type of "snowball" network sampling internet effect that will grow the sampling frame to quite a large number.

Since the survey will be administered through social networking, it will create a non-random volunteer survey. While this method doesn't ensure that every type of member of the Facebook population will be selected, it will still be able to show the trends of user's in interpersonal romantic development. The self-administered questionnaire will be completed outside the presence of any researcher. Since the survey will be completed online and not in a

group setting, there will be little worry of the respondent's verbal and nonverbal comments influencing others' responses.

It is the interest of the researcher to find the interpersonal and social patterns of all Facebook users, therefore, there will be no stratification concerning age, sexual orientation, or ethnic boundaries. These will still be important to evaluate trends from a sociological perspective, but the only general information that will need to be found about the user is how much they use Facebook and their intro/extroversion socially and dating wise. The International Personality Item Pool (2001), which is "A Scientific Collaboratory for the Development of Advanced Measures of Personality and Other Individual Differences" (2008) has developed a simple questionnaire for easily defining extroversion and introversion in an individual. This will be slightly modified for this proposal's usage and will effectively gauge the personality type of the respondent.

After the general information is found, specific questions will be asked to explore the areas of the presenting self, romantic development, disclosure, and nonverbal communication.

Here are a few areas and ideas that the questions might be developed off of.

The Presenting Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How much they spend tweaking their profile. b. How important their profile is to them. c. How much they think people judge them based on their profile, pictures, wall posts, and status. d. How often is all of that updated? e. Do they display their “relational status”?
Romantic Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. If they have a romantic partner, how long they have been together? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. How much they communicate with their partner on Facebook. ii. How much they’ve used the “relational status” box to define the status of their romantic relationship. b. If and how much the user has used Facebook to find a potential romantic partner. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Has the user every used the search function to find potential single partners? b. Has the user contacted a person of romantic interest without ever meeting the person in real life? c. Has the user looked for a potential romantic partner in states of loneliness or depression?
Disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How much has the user disclosed to people of the opposite sex on Facebook in the interest of romantic relational development? b. How soon in interaction is the user willing to disclose personal information? c. How much has the user disclosed on their profile?
Non-verbal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Have they found themselves writing differently to people they are interesting in romantically? b. Does the user gauge if someone else is interested in them by non-verbals such as amounts of wall posts, private message length, status updates, etc? c. At what point does the user feel “stalked” by someone with romantic interest, and no longer wishes to communicate with the other party? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How does the user sever communication with another party?

While internet based social networking has developed largely over the past decade, it is with the evolution of Facebook that we see a massive onslaught of users using it to help define their real life relationships. Electronic communication such as e-mail, instant messaging, internet forums, and social networking have added entirely new meanings to interpersonal interaction and community. Facebook effectively combines these types of communication into an extremely accessible package, of which is so accessible that people integrate the social utility into their everyday lives. While there have been numerous studies on internet based communication concerning romantic relationships, self disclosure, and social networking, this research proposal takes it a step further to look at the social utility of Facebook and the subsequent interplay of real life and on-line life in defining interpersonal romantic relationships. As integration of computer/internet-mediated communication grows with people's assimilation of the technologies, it will be interesting to see how it changes the way in which we communicate at the most basic level.

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