How Facebook is Ruining Your Romantic Relationships
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Abstract
This review looks into the popular use of a social networking site like Facebook, and how it is negatively affecting romantic relationships. With romantic relationships being a crucial part to many lives, it is interesting and important to learn how everyday activities such as using Facebook may strain these relationships. Through surveys and interviews, jealousy and mistrust are found to be fueled by the use of Facebook. Some of these research methods ask questions mainly about the use of Facebook and its direct effect on relationships, while others also explore the possibility that certain genetic pre-dispositions may have a hand in the matter. Though in some cases it is discovered that certain types of personalities may be more prone to using Facebook and also being of a jealous nature, it is conclusive that the relatively modern use of social networking sites has created new and unnatural elements in romantic relationships which have led to increased jealousy and mistrust. The implications of these results are important to pay attention to because it is a modern and relevant problem that has been identified but not yet remedied. Many participants in the interviews discovered that after they quit using Facebook the quality of their relationship increased. While quitting Facebook may not be a move most are interested in, it is important to recognize that a solution should be found. Further research is needed to discover ways to remedy the problem or to find viable ways to understand and cope with the strains of jealousy and mistrust that Facebook has introduced to the modern world of romantic relationships.

Introduction
When Facebook was introduced at Harvard University in 2004, it was a social networking site exclusively for Harvard students. As Facebook’s popularity grew so did the amount of people it reached as it spread to other universities and eventually went public. Being on Facebook most often means you are connected to those in your offline social group, and therefore if you are dating you may also be “friends” with your significant other. Facebook has many ways in which your offline romantic relationships can be viewed online. There is a “Relationship Status” section where a user of Facebook can record a number of different statuses such as “Single,” “In a Relationship,” “Married,” and “In an Open Relationship.” There is also the ability to upload pictures by camera, computer or phone, and users may choose to upload pictures of themselves with their boyfriend or girlfriend. It seems that Facebook is supportive of romantic relationships and allows for them to flourish online. But what happens when the use of Facebook actually begins to damage the offline relationship? In this review, the degradation of offline romantic relationships linked to Facebook is investigated to determine how and why problems may occur.

Time Spent on Facebook and Jealousy
The first group to extensively research the correlation between Facebook use and romantic jealousy was Muise, Christofides and Desmarais. Their study consisted of an anonymous online survey of Facebook users in which the majority of participants were in a relationship. Questions related to both Facebook use and feelings of jealousy were asked, such as “How likely are you to become jealous after your partner has added an unknown member of the opposite sex?” A unique factor in the Muise et al. study is that they took into account the fact that a certain person may be more genetically prone to jealousy. “Feelings of jealousy in a specific situation...are predicted by general levels of emotional jealousy, or trait jealousy, suggesting that some individuals are more prone than others to jealousy (441).” They hypothesized that “Exposure to
information about a romantic partner's friends and social interactions may result in an environment that enhances jealousy (442).” Rachel Elphinston and Patricia Noller support this theory, finding that their “results indicate that individuals who are more highly involved with Facebook may have relationship difficulties such as jealousy and dissatisfaction (634). They believed that the amount of time spent on Facebook would determine jealousy.

We hypothesized that Facebook use uniquely contributes to the experience of jealousy, and we therefore tested a model of Facebook jealousy that took into account a variety of personal and relationship factors known to be associated with the general experience of jealousy. (442)

The results from their research lead to the conclusion that there is a positive correlation between time spent on Facebook and Facebook related jealousy. Manner, Blakley, Lawrence, O’Neill and Raines’s findings also align with the findings of Muise et al. “An interesting finding in our study is that frequency of Facebook use is positively associated with negative relationship experiences on Facebook” (18). Muise et al. find that Facebook creates opportunities to expose users to information about their partners that they may not have had without Facebook, which then increases their “surveillance” of their partner on Facebook. This can create a vicious cycle of Facebook use:

Our results suggest that Facebook may expose an individual to potentially jealousy-provoking information about their partner, which creates a feedback loop whereby heightened jealousy leads to increased surveillance of a partner’s Facebook page. Persistent surveillance results in further exposure to jealousy-provoking information. (443)

The information users discover can lead to theorizing of negative situations that may or may not have happened. The participants in the study reported that they “felt the Facebook environment created these feelings and enhanced concerns about the quality of their relationship” (Muise et al. 443). Those who previously had not been jealous of their partner began to feel jealous after surveying them on Facebook, and those who already had feelings of jealousy felt their feelings were intensified by looking at their partners’ Facebook activity. Muise et al. believe that it is the presence of otherwise unknown information about a person’s significant other that leads to this jealousy:

Social network sites such as Facebook have changed the nature of public and private in the sense that much more information is available to individuals about their partner’s relationships and interactions than they would have with other online or offline methods of communication. This lack of privacy in the traditional sense may expose individuals to more information about their partner than they would access otherwise. (442)

Muise et al. offer an excellent first look into the problem. They propose that Facebook is an environment that provides new ways of accessing and expressing information about people that had previously never been available. This access to information, however, leads to surveillance of users’ partners and can result in feelings of jealousy and mistrust in relationships.

Other Theories

Some disagree with Muise et al.’s theory that time spent on Facebook leads to increased jealousy. Robert Tokunaga believes that Facebook use does lead to jealousy; however, it is the act of “Social Surveillance” that causes it. Tokunaga argues Muise et al. do not provide a valid conclusion because the recorded amount of time spent on Facebook may be “spent maintaining one’s own profile or responding to friends’ messages” (Section 5). Elphinston and Noller concur with the theory that surveillance on Facebook leads to feelings of jealousy (634)
Others in the field used Muise et al. as the base point for their study. With the realization that increased Facebook use may lead to increased jealousy there is the question of why this happens. What is it about Facebook that leads to this jealousy? Disclosure say some; lack of context say others. Sonja Utz and Camiel Beukeboom lay out three important characteristics of social networking sites: increased amount of information received about users’ partners, a socially acceptable way to monitor their partner, and publicly displayed activities (512). Greg Bowe discusses the disclosure on Facebook in his study Reading Romance: The Impact Facebook Rituals Can Have on a Romantic Relationship:

- Students tend to use their real names and engage in high levels of disclosure on the website. Photographs play an important role for any Facebook user with over 300 million images being updated daily and that can be swapped between users. (63)

Bowe also discusses the role that photos take in the experiences of jealousy. On Facebook, personal photos are one of the most important parts of the site. They show moments from the offline world online and allow for tagging (which will “tag” a picture with someone who was in the picture and also allow for the picture to be viewed from their profile) and for “liking” and commenting (which allow for the pictures to have an active role in the social networking site). There is the saying “if it’s not on Facebook, did it happen?” playing at the fact that people are so often documenting their life for Facebook it seems like that had become the major role of photo-taking at social events. Bowe states that “For those in a relationship, photographs are likely to cause the most problems and evoke feelings of jealousy above anything else on Facebook” (71). Photographs and messages of affection from past relationships in the offline world can be easily hidden away and never viewed by current partners but in the online world they are much more easily found. “My girlfriend uploaded some nice pictures of me and her after a party and then immediately her ex-boyfriend really nastily put up pictures of him and her while they were going out, as if he owned her” (qtd. in Bowe 72). This example is from part of Bowe’s study and the ex-boyfriend in this excerpt lived in another country entirely from the subject and therefore, in the offline world, would never have caused such problems.

Exes, however, are not the only reason photos on Facebook can cause a strain. Another of Bowe’s subjects also points out that she experienced jealousy in her relationship when her boyfriend was in pictures with other girls and she was not present. Her boyfriend does not have his own Facebook account.

- I saw him in pictures with another girl on a night out, just in each picture being with that girl and in each picture hugging and cuddling…I thought maybe there’s something more to it and you just don’t know how to interpret these things…especially in the beginning when from previous experience you’re unsure. (72)

Ilana Gershon observes that the subjects in her study also find photographs in Facebook to be a real source of jealousy. One subject states that had she not been constantly seeing the pictures of her boyfriend with other girls she would not have cared because, realistically, she knew that he would be hanging out with other girls. “The problem was the photographs, was being able to see her boyfriend with other women but not being able to know what exactly was going on” (886). The reason for the problems with these photographs, Gershon discovers, is that they are viewed as very truthful glimpses into certain social scenes. However, as one of her subjects states, “You don’t know if this person was maybe just walking by and someone said ‘hey, come get in this picture.’ All you see is that they were in the picture” (887). The de-tagging of pictures also leads to problems because it is viewed as a very public statement of not wanting to have that photograph seen: “[U]ncovering a photograph that has been detagged requires persistence and creativity. People will search for a photo that has been detagged because they see this as a revelation of the detagger’s intentions” (Gershon 879). One of the many interesting features of these various sources of jealousy is that in the offline world there is no such equivalent. These are not just “different” forms of jealousy; they are completely new forms.
What Can Be Done

With the understanding that Facebook is a very real cause of jealousy, what have these authors proposed in the way of remedying the problem? Gershon is the only one who really dives into a possible solution. Many of the students she interviewed said “they had deactivated their Facebook accounts either to preserve their romantic relationships or to make future relationships possible” (865). They had found that Facebook had made them feel like “anxious, jealous, and monitoring selves that they did not want to be” (866).

Most suggest further research, including Manner et al., who warn that certain people use Facebook in ways harmful to themselves and those around them.

It is imperative for researchers to continue to identify the psychosocial factors that influence some individuals to use online social networks in ways that prove harmful to themselves and to others. Research like this can help inform psychologists, counselors, educators, and parents of the types of people who are likely to develop relational problems using Facebook and other online social network sites. Once identified, these individuals could be encouraged to participate in less risky sensation-seeking activities. (Manner et al. 18)

Tokunaga also mirrored this idea when he discussed the fact that different individuals use Facebook for different reasons, not exclusively for monitoring (section 5). Utz and Beukeboom agree, adding that people who have different levels of self-esteem will look to Facebook for different reasons (523). It seems that for the time being, until more research is done, there has not been a solution found to this problem other than simply quitting Facebook, which many will find extreme.

Conclusion

This review looked into the subject of Facebook related jealousy and why it occurs. Using a variety of different research methods such as interviews and anonymous surveys, much evidence is found that Facebook does create feelings of jealousy. Various aspects of Facebook such as photographs, disclosure and surveillance were discovered to have had a hand in creating the jealousy. Though only one researcher proposed a rather drastic solution, most of the others propose that further research must be done before any solutions can be discovered. The subject is relevant and important to most young adults and should certainly be addressed. Given that Facebook is increasingly popular among other age groups as well, it should be viewed as a problem that all would benefit from solving.

Works Cited


