

The Couple Who Facebooks Together, Stays Together: Facebook Self-Presentation and Relationship Longevity Among College-Aged Dating Couples

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Abstract

Drawing on public commitment theory, this research examined the association between Facebook self-presentations of coupledom and relationship longevity among college-aged dating partners. Using a longitudinal design and a path model analytic approach, this study shows that Facebook self-presentational cues (i.e., being listed as “in a relationship,” posting dyadic photographs, writing on the partner’s wall) were associated with an increase in relationship commitment for dating couples, which, in turn, increased their likelihood of remaining together after 6 months. Contrary to predictions, the number of mutual Friends and the number of posts written by partners on participants’ walls were negatively related to relationship commitment. This study is the first to apply public commitment theory to an online romantic relationship context, and one of the few to examine the effects of Facebook on the state and fate of romantic relationships.

Introduction

RELATIONSHIP THEORISTS have long noted that the success of romantic relationships depends in large part on couples’ social environments. For instance, the longevity of romantic relationships is affected by the extent to which friends and family are aware of and approve of them.^{1–3} In recent years, the social environment inhabited by romantic couples has been substantially altered by social network sites (SNSs). On Facebook, the largest SNS, users typically reveal detailed information about their romantic involvements⁴ to audiences consisting of hundreds of Friends.^{5,a} Additionally, social norms dictate that SNS communication is positive and affirming,⁷ enabling users to attract support for their relationship-related postings. How does this new social environment, characterized by publicness and social validation, affect couples’ state (i.e., commitment) and fate (i.e., likelihood of staying together)?

This study addresses this question using public commitment theory,⁸ which focuses on the effects of public self-presentations on individuals’ self-views. We focus on dating relationships among college-aged adults because this demographic are at a prime developmental stage for negotiating romantic relationships and are also heavy users of SNSs.⁹

A public commitment framework for couples’ Facebook self-presentation

Self-presentation is the act of editing the self in order to convey a desired image to an audience.^{10,11} While meant to

influence others, self-presentation has the important side-effect of influencing how self-presenters view *themselves*. The intrapersonal outcomes of self-presentation are the purview of public commitment theory,⁸ which argues that people come to view themselves in ways that are consistent with their public claims. For example, after publicly claiming to be extroverted, people believe themselves to be more extroverted.^{8,12} The shifting of the self-concept to match public self-presentations is a largely unconscious process known as *internalization* (in fact, the theory is sometimes referred to as “identity shift”^{12,13}). Internalization occurs because deeply engrained social norms prescribe that people be who they claim to be. Therefore, public statements psychologically obligate people to fulfill them. Indeed, the mechanism behind internalization is similar to that behind cognitive dissonance, whereby people change their attitudes to match their behaviors,¹⁴ or the behavior–attitude consistency norm, whereby people feel pressured to be consistent in their behaviors and expressed views.¹⁵ In all cases, there is a powerful urge to match private beliefs with public behaviors.

Public commitment theory has received ample support in the context of personality traits (e.g., extraversion, sociability, emotional stability), with individuals claiming to possess these traits in front of real or imagined audiences believing themselves to actually possess them more than individuals who lacked an audience.^{8,12,16–19} However, the literature is limited in that it has only considered self-presentational

claims related to personality traits and short-term effects, with internalization measured immediately after the self-presentation took place. Can the public commitment framework be extended to self-presentations that pertain to romantic relationships, and to long-term effects?

Facebook self-presentation and romantic commitment

We argue that it can. Public commitment is defined as “a pledging of self (a) to an action; (b) to a person, group, or organization; or (c) to an idea.”^{8(p21)} Romantic coupledom can be conceptualized both as a pledging of self to another person, and to the idea of being in a relationship. As discussed, Facebook self-presentations tend to be highly public, thus meeting the criterion for internalization. Further, they are recordable and salient for long periods of time. Through repeated exposure, internalization may become deeply rooted and long lasting.

Several self-presentational elements on Facebook should induce public commitment toward one’s romantic partner. First, Facebook allows users to associate with romantic partners by listing themselves as “in a relationship” and linking to their partner’s profile. Relationship listing on Facebook is so meaningful for today’s dating couples that it has received its own colloquial nomenclature, “going Facebook official.”²⁰ Research shows a connection between relationship listing on Facebook and relationship functioning: More committed and satisfied couples are more likely to declare themselves “in a relationship.”^{21,22}

A second option for broadcasting one’s romantic involvement on Facebook is via photographs depicting the self-presenters with their partners. These dyadic photographs are a potent display of merged identities, as they illustrate joint activities and often affectionate behavior. The frequency of posting dyadic photographs has been shown to correlate with relationship satisfaction for both married and dating couples.²³

Third, Facebook enables romantic partners to converse publicly with one another by posting messages on their respective walls. Focus groups indicate that public communication serves the purpose of affirming togetherness, with one participant memorably stating that it is the “ultimate form of PDA...cause everyone can see it.”^{22(p531)}

Fourth, Facebook allows users to declare publicly which events they attended, what interest groups they are affiliated with (e.g., “Cat lovers”), and what networks they belong to (e.g., high schools, universities). When partners partake in the same events, groups, and networks, they can be conceptualized as having joint affiliations, an indicator of togetherness. Research in face-to-face settings shows that participating in social activities together affirms romantic partners’ coupledom by gaining the recognition of friends and family.^{3,24}

Finally, Facebook allows users to accrue mutual Friends. Research shows that closer and more stable romantic partners have more friends in common, a situation referred to as network embeddedness.²⁵ While couples may not be purposefully accumulating Friends for self-presentational purposes, this system-generated cue enables them to visualize their own network embeddedness, and therefore may lead them to understand themselves as part of a social unit, bound together by common relations.

In sum, we propose that the frequency of posting the above-mentioned self-presentational elements is associated with an increase in individuals’ commitment toward their romantic partners (H1). In turn, this increased commitment should produce a stabilization of the relationship, with more committed couples more likely to endure over time. Indeed, the link between relationship commitment and relationship duration is well established,^{26–28} particularly among young adults in dating relationships.^{29,30} Therefore, we hypothesize that relationship commitment will serve as a mediator between Facebook self-presentations of coupledom and relationship longevity (H2).

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 212 undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who were currently involved in a geographically close^b dating relationship. Only heterosexual students were invited to participate in a study of “romantic relationships and media use.” Participants were recruited through advertisements posted on the department of Communication Arts’ subject pool Web site, and were compensated with extra credit in their classes.

A longitudinal design was used, where Facebook self-presentation was hypothesized to correlate with participants’ commitment to their partner measured during a lab appointment (time 1) and their likelihood of remaining together 6 months after the lab appointment (time 2).

At time 1, participants filled out a questionnaire with demographic and relationship measures. Then, they were asked to log into their Facebook profile and use the freely available “Friendship” application on themselves and their partner. This application generates a joint profile for any pair of Friends, on which it displays the Facebook information shared by these two individuals (e.g., number of mutual Friends, numbers of dyadic photographs). A research assistant copied this information^c into an Excel file, without downloading the joint profile.

Thirty-two participants were unable to use the application because they or their partners were not Facebook users, reducing the sample size to 180 (78.3% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.01$ years, $SD = 1.92$; 83.9% white, 12.8% Asian, 2.8% other). The excluded participants did not differ from the rest of the sample in terms of relationship longevity, $t(164) = -1.28$, $p = n.s.$, but reported lower relationship commitment, $t(206) = -2.16$, $p < 0.05$.

Six months later, participants were asked via e-mail whether they and their romantic partners were still together. Participants were reminded of the initials of the partner on whom they previously reported. Eighty percent of the participants responded to the e-mail, a rate consistent with similar studies.^{32,33} There were no differences between participants who responded and those who did not in terms of any of the variables reported in this study.

Measures

Relationship commitment. This was measured using the relationship commitment subscale of the investment model scale³⁴ (7 items; e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner,” “I feel very attached to our

TABLE 1. MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR ALL THE CONTINUOUS VARIABLES IN THE PATH MODEL

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Relational commitment*	5.69	1.02
Number of dyadic photographs	50.06	82.99
Number of participant-initiated wall posts	1.05	2.07
Number of partner-initiated wall posts	0.67	1.29
Number of joint affiliations	7.65	18.70
Number of mutual Friends	126.67	146.92

*Measured on a scale from 1 = “not at all committed” to 7 = “extremely committed.”

relationship—very strongly linked to my partner”). Items were rated on a scale from 1 = “not at all” to 7 = “extremely.” High reliability was achieved ($\alpha=0.85$), and a confirmatory factor analysis revealed a one-factor structure. The relationship commitment score was normally distributed.

Relationship longevity. This was operationalized as whether the relationship endured until the 6 month check-point (yes/no). A total of 76.4% of the participants were still together with their partners, while 23.6% had broken up, a rate consistent with prior research.³⁵

Facebook cues. The following cues generated by the “Friendship” application were recorded: (a) whether participants were listed as “in a relationship” with their romantic partners^d; (b) the number of photographs in which both participants and their partners were tagged; (c) the number of comments posted by participants on partners’ wall during the last month (i.e., participant-initiated wall posts); (d) the number of comments posted by partners on participants’ wall during the last month (i.e., partner-initiated wall posts); (e) the number of mutual Friends; and (f) the total number of networks (e.g., high schools, universities), groups, and events in which both partners were enrolled (i.e., joint affiliations). Descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 1.

Covariates. These included gender (because women’s mate selectivity is different from men’s in ways that may affect relationship longevity),³⁶ age (because younger people’s relationships tend to be shorter, less committed, and more likely to break-up³⁷), and the length of the romantic

relationship ($M=15.22$ months, $SD=14.76$; because relationships that have already stood the test of time may have a higher chance of endurance).

Results

Analytic approach

The hypotheses were tested through a path analysis conducted with the Lavaan package in R.³⁸ Since the endogenous variable in the model (i.e., relationship longevity) was binary, we used the maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors (MLR), which can handle non-normal data.³⁸ A test of joint significance³⁹ was used to examine the mediating effect of relationship commitment. See Table 2 for a partial correlation matrix between all variables, after controlling for gender, age, and the length of the romantic relationship.

Hypotheses testing

Our primary goal was to examine whether Facebook self-presentation of coupledness increased relationship longevity among college-aged dating couples by enhancing relationship commitment. To test this prediction, a path model was generated with the hypothesized Facebook cues entered as exogenous variables, relationship longevity as an endogenous variable, and relationship commitment as a mediator (see Fig. 1). Gender, age, and relationship length were entered as covariates. Based on Kline’s⁴⁰ cutoff criteria, the model demonstrated excellent fit with the data— $\chi^2(6)=4.07$, $p=0.67$; RMSEA=0.00 [90% confidence interval 0.00–0.09]; CFI=1.00; GFI=0.97; TLI=1.15; WRMR=0.43—and explained 35.7% of the variance in the endogenous variable, relationship longevity.^e

The following Facebook cues were positively associated with relationship commitment: relationship listing, number of dyadic photographs, and number of participant-initiated wall posts. Contrary to expectations, the number of mutual Friends and of partner-initiated wall posts were negatively associated with relationship commitment. Joint affiliations were not significantly related to relationship commitment. H1 was therefore partially supported.

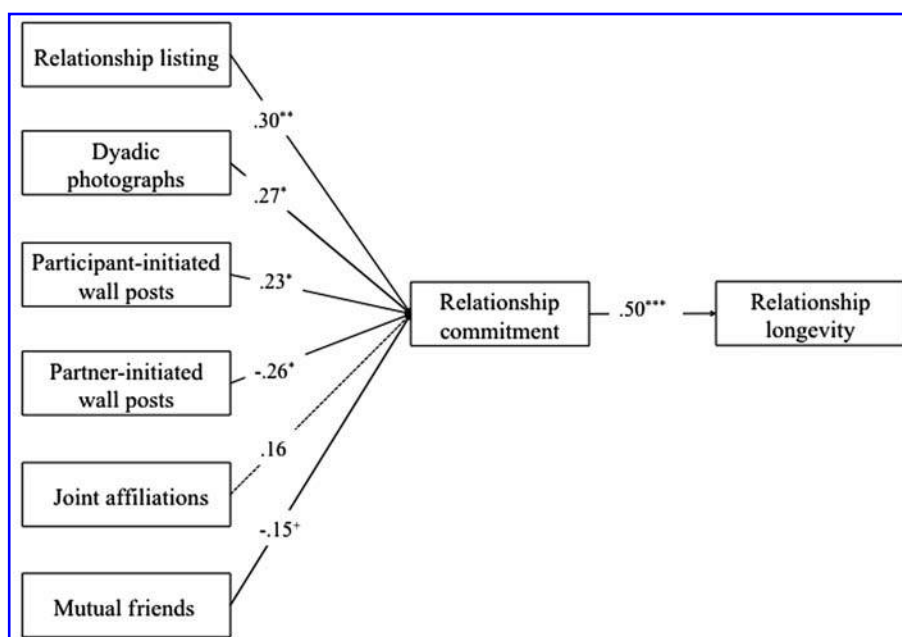
Consider now the mediational role of relationship commitment between Facebook self-presentation and relationship longevity. The preceding analyses demonstrate that some Facebook cues were related to relationship commitment. Further, relationship commitment had a direct and

TABLE 2. PARTIAL CORRELATION MATRIX FOR THE VARIABLES USED IN THE PATH MODEL AFTER CONTROLLING FOR THE COVARIATES ($N=144$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Relationship listed on Facebook	—							
2. Number of dyadic photographs	0.22*	—						
3. Number of participant-initiated wall posts	0.21*	0.33***	—					
4. Number of partner-initiated wall posts	0.15*	0.61***	0.61***	—				
5. Number of joint affiliations	0.07	0.15	-0.09	0.08	—			
6. Number of mutual Friends	-0.16	0.06	-0.05	-0.05	0.16	—		
7. Relationship commitment	0.37***	0.26**	0.20*	0.11	0.15	-0.15	—	
8. Relationship longevity	0.27**	0.12	0.13	0.05	0.20*	-0.01	0.43***	—

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

FIG. 1. Path coefficients for all the hypothesized relationships in the model. ⁺ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.



positive association with relationship longevity. For a one-unit increase in the relationship commitment score, the odds of the couple staying together after 6 months increased by 50%. According to the test of joint significance,³⁹ H2 was supported. None of the covariates reached statistical significance. See Figure 1 for all the path coefficients in the model.

Despite our theoretical predictions that Facebook self-presentation *affects* relationship commitment, it is possible that it *reflects* couples' pre-existing commitment. That is, couples who are more committed are more likely to create the types of self-presentations examined here. To investigate this competing possibility, we generated a path model with relationship commitment as the exogenous variable, relationship longevity as an endogenous variable, and Facebook cues as mediating variables. Following Kline's⁴⁰ cutoff criteria, this alternative model showed an unsatisfactory fit with the data— $\chi^2(16) = 639.58$, $p = 0.00$; RMSEA = 0.53 [90% confidence interval 0.43–0.50]; CFI = 0.54; TLI = 0.20; WRMR = 03.95. Therefore, we conclude that the data are consistent with the claim that Facebook self-presentation affects, rather than is affected by, relationship commitment among college-aged dating couples.

Discussion

Romantic relationships do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are affected by the social context in which they are embedded. In recent years, Facebook has changed this social context by, among others, allowing couples to make public claims about their relationship. This study investigated how these public self-presentations of couplehood shaped individuals' commitment toward their romantic partners, as well as the fate of the relationship.

Results show that the public association between the self and a romantic partner generally boosted Facebook users' relationship commitment, which, in turn, increased their likelihood of staying together after 6 months. The more participants listed themselves as "in a relationship" with

their partners, shared dyadic photographs, and wrote messages on their partners' wall, the more commitment they experienced. Consistent with public commitment theory, these publicly posted cues likely induced participants to perceive themselves as part of a romantic unit, thus cementing the relationship.

However, several self-presentational elements did not operate in the predicted way. First, the number of mutual Friends was negatively associated with relationship commitment. This could be the case because more mutual Friends signal a larger social network and, thus, the availability of many alternative romantic partners. Indeed, the investment model of relationships^{41,42} proposes that the more alternative partners are available, the less committed individuals feel toward their existing partners. Second, posts written by partners on participants' wall diminished relationship commitment, unlike posts written by participants on their partners' wall. This double standard could occur because participants interpret partners' wall posts as a sign of possessiveness, or oversharing, but their own as a sign of commitment. Finally, joint affiliations were not associated with relationship commitment. These cues are not displayed straightforwardly on Facebook profiles. For instance, in order to determine whether both participant and his/her partner attended the same events, it is necessary to click on each event and scroll through the list of attendees. Due to their decreased visibility, these cues may not exercise psychological effects. Future research is required to test these possibilities fully.

Despite these unexpected findings, the general pattern of results advances public commitment theory in meaningful ways. The present study represents the first application of this theory to *romantic* self-presentations, thus extending its boundaries to a new and important self-presentational domain. It is also the first to demonstrate the temporal endurance of public commitment effects.

This study also advances the literature on the effects of Facebook on romance by suggesting a causal order of the variables under scrutiny. While previous literature^{20–23} has

used correlational or qualitative methods to suggest that Facebook activity *reflects* relationship characteristics (e.g., more committed couples are more likely to list themselves as “in a relationship”), this is the first study to indicate that Facebook activity might also *affect* relationship characteristics. In fact, the path analysis suggests it is more likely that Facebook self-presentation was associated with changes in the way partners experienced their romantic relationships, rather than it merely reflected this experience.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, this study’s focus was on premarital, dating relationships among heterosexual college-aged adults. Future research should examine individuals across life stages and relationship types. Second, self-presentation is only one aspect of Facebook use in the context of romantic relationships, along with partner monitoring⁴³ and the maintenance of back-burner relationships,⁴⁴ for instance. How do self-presentations of coupledom fit into this larger ecology of Facebook use? What is the net effect of these different aspects of Facebook use on romantic commitment and longevity? Third, it bears noting that while longitudinal designs are superior to cross-sectional surveys in drawing conclusions about causality, they still do not provide definitive evidence. Future research employing an experimental approach is needed.

Conclusion

While originally intended to connect people with their friend networks, Facebook has become an important space for the negotiation of romantic relationships. Indeed, the present research suggests that Facebook use may have an impact on the very existence of dating relationships.

Notes

- a. Following Ellison and boyd’s⁶ suggestion, we capitalize the word “friends” to denote social connections on Facebook. Facebook Friends include close and distant friends, family members, acquaintances, and even strangers.
- b. Long-distance relationship partners were excluded from this study because a large body of research shows that they use and are affected by the media differently than geographically close partners.³¹
- c. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors’ institution only allowed the numeric information produced by the “Friendship” application to be recorded (e.g., number of mutual Friends, number of photos), but did not grant permission to record the content of the messages exchanged by the partners, or to save their photographs. This information could therefore not be examined in the present study.
- d. In addition to listing themselves as “in a relationship” with their partners, Facebook users also have the option of choosing other romantic relationship listings, such as “in an open relationship” or “it’s complicated.” Since fewer than 5% of our sample chose these other options, they were not considered in our model.
- e. We also ran a structural equation model (SEM) with relationship commitment as a latent variable and ob-

tained similar results— $\chi^2(5) = 2.91, p = 0.71$; RMSEA = 0.00 [90% confidence interval 0.00–0.07]; CFI = 1.00; GFI = 0.99; TLI = 1.13; WRMR = 0.40. The model explained 29.5% of the variance in the endogenous variable, relationship longevity. We decided to report the path model, rather than the SEM, because our sample size was below that recommended for running SEM.⁴⁰

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