

Cheating, Breakup, and Divorce: Is Facebook Use to Blame?

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between using the social networking site known as Facebook and negative interpersonal relationship outcomes. A survey of 205 Facebook users aged 18–82 was conducted using a 16-question online survey to examine whether high levels of Facebook use predicted negative relationship outcomes (breakup/divorce, emotional cheating, and physical cheating). It was hypothesized that those with higher levels of Facebook use would demonstrate more negative relationship outcomes than those with lower use. The study then examined whether these relationships were mediated by Facebook-related conflict. Furthermore, the researchers examined length of relationship as a moderator variable in the aforementioned model. The results indicate that a high level of Facebook usage is associated with negative relationship outcomes, and that these relationships are indeed mediated by Facebook-related conflict. This series of relationships only holds for those who are, or have been, in relatively newer relationships of 3 years or less. The current study adds to the growing body of literature investigating Internet use and relationship outcomes, and may be a precursor to further research investigating whether Facebook use attributes to the divorce rate, emotional cheating, and physical cheating.

Introduction

RELATIONSHIPS, BOTH PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL, transpire daily, and the dynamics of such relationships are constantly changing and being influenced by numerous factors outside of the actual relationship itself. Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, have provided a relatively new platform for interpersonal communication. Research has shown that Facebook is used most frequently to keep in touch with others and to monitor regularly friends' activities.¹ Additionally, Facebook has been found to be used to monitor the activities of current romantic partners.² Although monitoring others' activities has been cited to leading to negative relationship outcomes such as online and offline relational intrusion,³ the current study's aim is to examine whether Facebook use may lead to negative relationship outcomes, and whether those outcomes lead to emotional cheating, physical cheating, breakup, and divorce.

SNSs Effects on Interpersonal Relationships

At the beginning of October 2012, the SNS Facebook reached one billion monthly active users and 552 million daily active users.⁴ As a result of such popularity, Facebook has become a major area of interest for researchers. The exploration

of the negative impacts of SNSs such as Internet addiction, anxiety, jealousy, and its effects on normal human behavior in general are a few areas that have become a major concern.^{5–7} One study involving 2,368 college students found "a significant negative relationship between frequency of engaging in Facebook chat and time spent preparing for class," which suggest that online chatting may somehow detract from learning and schoolwork.^{8(p168)} A more severe or dangerous concern as a result of the increasing popularity of SNSs is the behavior associated with stalking. Facebook has been found to facilitate behaviors that are symptomatic of personal intrusion, which have consequences for users' security and privacy.⁹

Recently, one study found that exposure post-breakup to an ex-partner's Facebook profile may obstruct the process of healing and moving on.¹⁰ Moreover, previous studies have shown that Facebook jealousy, partner surveillance, ambiguous information, compulsive Internet use, and online portrayal of intimate relationships can be damaging to romantic relationships.^{11–15} Internet use in general, not just SNSs, have been shown to influence romantic relationship quality negatively. Kerkhof¹⁴ found that compulsive Internet users reported greater conflict with their partners, more feelings of exclusion and concealment in addition to lower commitment, lower feelings of passion and intimacy, and less

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disclosure. Additional research has found that monitoring an ex-partner's Facebook profile, such as viewing photos, statuses, and check-ins, is associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in other obsessive behaviors.³

SNSs enable romantic partners to have access to more information about their significant other.¹¹ Tokunaga¹² found that interpersonal electronic surveillance is more likely to occur in younger people, perhaps suggesting that younger individuals who are in shorter or newer relationships may use surveillance strategies as an information-seeking technique toward their partners. While this may serve as a positive influence in getting to know one another and learning about each other's past, it may also provoke feelings of jealousy that could enter into the relationship. Muise¹³ found that Facebook use increases jealousy amongst romantic partners in which ambiguous information discovered on a romantic partner's profile page induced romantic jealousy. Therefore, it may be possible that Facebook induced jealousy may serve as a feedback loop in which a romantic partner uses Facebook excessively to uncover additional information about their partner in order to reduce ambiguity in the information they have uncovered.

Furthermore, research has been conducted to examine relationship satisfaction through the use of Facebook amongst dating partners and how they portrayed their intimate relationship and relationship status on their Facebook profiles.¹⁵ Results revealed that disagreements over Facebook statuses were associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction, but only for females.¹⁵ In addition, Elphinston and Noller¹⁶ discovered that Facebook intrusion, by means of surveillance behaviors and jealous cognitions, was associated with relationship dissatisfaction for undergraduate college students who were currently in romantic relationships.

The Current Study

The current research study hopes to add to the body of literature pertaining to the effects of Facebook use on relationship outcomes. The researchers conceptualize Facebook-related conflict as whether Facebook use increases relationship complications in intimate romantic relationships. Negative relationship outcomes were conceptualized as whether Facebook use influences likelihood for emotional cheating, physical cheating, relationship breakup, and divorce. As a result, the researchers predicted that Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes will be positively related, Facebook-related conflict and negative relationship outcomes will be positively related, and that Facebook-related conflict will mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes.

Given the prior research mentioned by Tokunaga,¹² the researchers predicted that the length of relationship will moderate the meditational effect of conflict such that this mediated effect will only hold for those who are in shorter duration relationships, since these relationships are those considered to be most unstable and hence the most susceptible to conflict.

H1: Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes will be positively related.

H2: Facebook-related conflict and negative relationship outcomes will be positively related.

H3: Facebook-related conflict will mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes.

H4: Length of relationship will moderate the meditational effect of Facebook-related conflict such that this mediated effect will only hold for those who are in shorter duration relationships.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 205 Facebook users. To obtain participants, the researchers updated their own Facebook profile statuses with an online survey link created on www.qualtrics.com. The convenience sample included, but was not limited to, college-aged students. The researchers included a preface to the survey link with a description of the study. The preface included a statement informing participants that participation in the study was voluntary. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 82 years old ($M=33$, $SD=14.26$). Most participants (89%) were Caucasian, 7% were Hispanic, 2% were African American, and 2% were Asian American. The majority of participants (62%) were female.

Materials

Materials included a 16-question survey. The survey included demographic questions, as well as questions about participants' perceived levels of Facebook use. Additionally, the survey asked participants if they had encountered relationship conflict with their partner or former partner as a result of high levels of Facebook use. Lastly, the survey asked participants if high levels of Facebook use led to a breakup or divorce, emotional cheating, and physical cheating with a current or former partner.

Relationships. In order for the researchers to understand to whom the participants' answers were directed, the survey instructed participants to answer the question, "Are you currently in a romantic relationship?" If the participants answered "Yes," they were then asked to type how many months or years they had been in that relationship. If the participants answered "No," the researchers analyzed their data in correspondence to the former partner. In total, 144 participants (79%) responded that they were currently in a romantic relationship, while 59 (21%) reported being currently single. The average relationship length for those who reported being in a relationship was 103 months ($SD=144$ months).

Facebook use. High levels of Facebook use was operationally defined, in regards to the current study, as the average of two questions developed by the researchers. The questions asked, "How often do you use Facebook?" and "How often do you view friends' profiles on Facebook?" Data were gathered using a Likert-type scale: A="never," B="monthly," C="weekly," D="daily," and E="hourly." These questions were highly correlated, $r(203)=0.48$, $p<0.001$, and were therefore combined into a single variable.

Facebook-related conflict. The researchers developed six questions to measure negative relationship outcomes as a result of Facebook use as a mediator variable. The six questions included such items as "How often do you have an argument with your significant other as a result of excessive Facebook use?" and "How often do you have an argument

with your significant other as a result of viewing friends' Facebook profiles?" The questions were answered by using a Likert-type scale: A="never," B="monthly," C="weekly," D="daily," and E="hourly." Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.85.

Negative relationship outcomes. The researchers developed three questions to measure the criterion variable in the current study, such as "Have you physically cheated on your significant other with someone you have connected or reconnected with on Facebook?" The researchers condensed the answers into dichotomous yes/no answer choices. Once averaged, the Kuder Richardson (KR-20) measure of reliability was 0.70.

Results

Mediation

The mean for the Facebook-related conflict scale was 1.34 ($SD=0.49$), and the mean for the negative relationship outcomes scale was 1.84 ($SD=0.29$). The mean of the Facebook usage variable was 3.60 ($SD=0.70$). In order to test the hypothesis that Facebook-related conflict would mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes, regression analyses were conducted according to the specifications set out by Andrew Hayes' PROCESS for SPSS using model four.¹⁷ Facebook usage was entered as the independent variable (X) and negative relationship outcomes was entered as the outcome variable (Y). As a test of mediation, Facebook-related conflict was entered as the mediator variable (M). A significant relationship emerged ($b=0.24, p<0.001$), demonstrating a positive relationship between Facebook usage and Facebook-related conflict. A second significant relationship emerged ($b=0.37, p<0.001$), demonstrating a positive relationship between Facebook-related conflict and negative relationship outcomes. Finally, the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes became nonsignificant ($b=0.02, p=0.370$). This pattern of results demonstrates that Facebook-related conflict does mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes.

Moderation

In order to test the moderating effect of relationship length, the sample was divided based upon a median split (median=36 months). Those participants who reported being in a relationship of 36 months or less were categorized in the shorter length group ($n=133$), whereas those who reported being in relationships of longer than 36 months were placed in the longer length group ($n=72$). A regression analysis was conducted according to the specifications set out by Andrew Hayes' PROCESS for SPSS using model five.¹⁷ For the shorter length group, Facebook usage predicted Facebook-related conflict ($b=0.13, p<0.001$), and Facebook-related conflict predicted negative relationship outcomes ($b=0.34, p<0.001$). The relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes became nonsignificant ($b=0.08, p=0.366$). This pattern of results demonstrates that Facebook-related conflict does mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes for those in relatively shorter relationships. For the longer length group,

the relationship between Facebook usage and negative relationship outcomes was nonsignificant ($b=0.05, p=0.726$). Therefore, further mediational analyses were not run for this group.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between high levels of Facebook use and negative relationship outcomes. The researchers hypothesized that when an individual engages in high levels of Facebook use, the effects of doing so may be damaging to the individual's interpersonal relationships. The researchers further proposed that high levels of Facebook use could be attributed to Facebook-related conflict and breakup/divorce. The results indicated that high levels of Facebook usage is associated with negative relationship outcomes (i.e., breakup/divorce and cheating) and that this relationship is mediated by Facebook-related conflict. However, these correlations only hold for those who are in newer relationships.

The researchers hypothesized that high levels of Facebook usage may be damaging to an individual's interpersonal relationships. "According to an article on PRNewswire, roughly 81 percent of the United States' most elite divorce attorneys believe that the SNS Facebook plays a role in divorce trials."^{18(p4)} The current study's results support this belief. Individuals who are on Facebook may often be indirectly neglecting their partner, directly neglecting their partner by communication with former partners, and developing Facebook-related jealousy or constant partner monitoring, which may lead to future relationship conflict or separation.

High levels of Facebook use may also serve as an indirect temptation for physical and/or emotional cheating. Conflict or jealousy may arise from an individual learning that his or her partner added an ex-partner or spouse as a friend on Facebook. Moreover, conflict may arise if the user is excessively viewing pictures of an ex-romantic partner or begins to communicate via Facebook chat or messages with a past romantic partner. As a result, Facebook may lead to arguments between couples where one or both of the individuals in the relationship are on Facebook often, which may ultimately lead to cheating or breakup.

The results of the current study indicate that individuals who are currently in a relationship of 3 years or less are more likely to experience negative relationship outcomes as a result of Facebook-related conflict. This finding suggests that Facebook may be a threat to relationships that are not fully matured. On the other hand, participants who have been in a relationship for longer than 3 years may not be as likely to be on Facebook as often. Therefore Facebook may not be a concern. The researchers also suspect that these findings may be a generational issue given that older couples may not have Facebook accounts. Due to the amount of accessibility to connect with past partners using Facebook, and with the current study's findings, the researchers suspect that Facebook may attribute to an increase in divorce rates and infidelity in the future.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

The findings of the current study must be considered in the context of several limitations. The sample included participants who were told before starting the survey that they

would be answering questions regarding Facebook use and relationship outcomes, and this may have skewed the data. An additional limitation was that some items were left to participants' interpretation, such as the word "excessive" when answering questions about Facebook-related conflict. Moreover, social desirability is an unavoidable issue when it comes to self-reported data, particularly when the issues under investigation are sensitive as in the current study. Therefore, it is possible that social desirability effects may have skewed the results of the study. The results should be interpreted in light of this possibility. Since the online survey link was distributed via the researchers' Facebook statuses, the current study's sample is limited to only those who use Facebook and who are Facebook friends (or friends of friends) with one of the three researchers. This limitation significantly limits the generalizations of the findings from the current study. The scales used in this study had not been previously validated, and although each scale reported an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.70 or greater, previously validated scales would have been preferred.

Future research should investigate whether engaging in high amounts of other SNSs also predicts negative relationship outcomes. Additional future research should explore other mediators in the current study's model. Although a Facebook Connection Strategies scale exists, which measures how individuals connect with others using Facebook,¹⁹ future research should explore connection strategies as they relate to romantic relationships and what behaviors are occurring on Facebook that may predispose Facebook-related conflict.

Conclusion

To conclude, our results indicate that high levels of Facebook use, when mediated by Facebook-related conflict, significantly predict negative relationship outcomes. The current study adds to the growing body of literature investigating predictors of Internet use and relationship outcomes. Lastly, the current study may be a precursor to further investigation of whether Facebook use attributes to the divorce rate, emotional cheating, physical cheating, and breakups.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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