Exploring the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships and dating experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how adolescents perceive the ways in which romantic relationships are experienced and expressed through social networking sites. Eleven focus group conversations among 57 adolescents between 15 and 18 years old in Flanders, Belgium were analyzed. The findings demonstrate that social networking sites play an important role in relational information seeking. Pictures and status updates are regarded as the most important source of information about a potential romantic partner. In order to express romantic interest respondents indicated that they would *like* pictures and status updates from several years ago or that they would initiate a conversation through private messages. The respondents in our sample did not consider being Facebook Official as an important part of a romantic relationship. The adolescents recognized the potential of social networking sites to elicit jealousy and identified forms of controlling behavior such as sharing passwords or monitoring the partners' profiles. A romantic break-up often led to removing ex-partners from one's profile pages and adolescents most frequently observed the posting of emotional status updates by ex-partners as a result of the relationship dissolution. The discussion includes suggestions for future research and implications for practice.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites have profoundly changed the way in which romantic relationships are experienced. They make it, for instance, simpler to find information about one's (potential) romantic partners and to communicate with them. Furthermore, social networking sites enable their users to disseminate information about their romantic relationship, such as pictures or public displays of affection, to a broad audience of online contacts such as family members, friends and acquaintances (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012). After a romantic break-up, social networking sites can be used to keep in touch with an ex-partner or to communicate one's feelings about the relationship dissolution (Fox et al., 2013). However, social networking sites have also been found to elicit jealousy and facilitate abusive behaviors such as partner monitoring (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2013).

The impact of social networking sites on how its users experience their romantic relationships, has only recently gained academic interest. Most of the present research focuses on the experiences of adults (e.g., Fox & Warber, 2013a; Fox & Warber, 2013b; Fox et al., 2013; Papp et al., 2012; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Surprisingly, there has been limited research on how social networking sites affect romantic relationship development among adolescents (Rueda, Lindsay, & Williams, 2014).

This is especially noteworthy, given that adolescents are avid users of social networking sites (Van Gool, Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2015). A recent study found that 71% of American teenagers use more than one social networking site, with Facebook being the most popular social networking site (Lenhart, 2015). Moreover, adolescence is an important period in which young people start to experiment with romantic relationships and start to spend more time with peers from a different gender (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Adolescents mostly begin dating at the

ages of 15 and 16 (Phinney, Jensen, Olsen, & Cundick, 1990). Love and romantic relationships are also an important topic of conversation among teenagers and within adolescent popular culture, such as music lyrics or television series (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins, 2003; Ward, 1995), which stresses their importance within adolescents' lives.

Given the unique context in which adolescent romantic relationships take place, findings on the impact of social networking sites on the romantic relationships of adults might differ from adolescents' romantic encounters. Research into the influence of digital media on their experiences is therefore warranted. To the best of our knowledge, only two qualitative studies on the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships exist (Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden, & Lucero, 2014; Rueda et al., 2014). Both studies mainly focused upon the role of social networking sites within relational conflict and abusive behaviors. Rueda et al. (2014) found among Mexican American adolescents that the ability to connect with previously unknown peers and the flirtatious nature of interactions on Facebook contributed to the feelings of jealousy that adolescents experienced. The respondents further described that they monitored their partners by sharing passwords and logging into their accounts and that some boys tried to stop girls from adding other male contacts to their profile pages (Rueda et al., 2014). Similar results were found by Lucero et al. (2014) who noted that teenagers regarded password sharing as a sign of trust and of a committed relationship and that the monitoring of social networking accounts was common among male and female respondents. Our current study extends the findings of both studies by focusing on the use of social networking sites throughout all stages of a romantic relationship. Rather than investigating the role of digital media within relational abuse and conflict, our study takes a larger perspective and also concentrates on the positive experiences that social networking sites may provide during adolescents' romantic relationships.

When developing relationship and sex education lessons, aimed at teaching teenagers about how to develop healthy romantic relationships, practitioners might need to include scripts and examples that are relatable to adolescents and that are relevant to their experiences. Therefore, a deeper understanding of adolescents' use of digital media in their romantic relationships is warranted, as accounts from adults might not yet align with adolescents' experiences. In order to better understand the opportunities and risks adolescents' use of digital media poses to the development of adolescents' romantic relationships, our study aims to investigate young people's experiences by means of focus group research. The results of this study can better inform relationship and sexual education efforts and can offer guidance for a future more theory-driven approach in the studying of the role of digital media in adolescents' romantic relationships.

For orientation, we will first review the existing research on how social networking sites influence its users' romantic experiences during the initiation stage of a romantic relationship, during the romantic relationship and after a romantic break-up. Given the current state of research, our literature review summarizes research that was mainly conducted among adults. We then report on our own study in which we have incorporated young people's voices about how they perceive the use of social networking sites within adolescents' romantic relationships.

1.1. The role of social networking sites during the initiation stages of romantic relationships

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, play a key role during the initiation stage of a romantic relationship. When experiencing romantic interest and during the early phases of a relationship, they enable their users to flirt and to communicate with their dating or romantic partner. Additionally, social networking sites can play a central role in the process of relational information seeking (Fox et al., 2013).

Social networking sites offer several options to keep in touch and interact with each other through the chat function, e-mail, status updates, liking, commenting and posting on each other's profile pages (Fox et al., 2013). In a qualitative study among adults, respondents perceived Facebook as a casual and less threatening way to contact each other (Fox & Warber, 2013a,b), a rejection would be perceived as less painful than in a face-to-face context. A recent study among American adults from the Pew Research Center (Smith & Duggan, 2013) found that 15% of respondents had already used a social networking site to ask someone out for a date and 24% of internet users had flirted with someone online. Among the 18–24 year old age group, 47% of internet users had used the internet for flirtatious purposes.

Social networking sites are not only an informal channel of communication. They also play a key role in the relational information seeking process. During the initial stages of a romantic relationship, a lot of information that potential partners share during face-to-face conversations about their hobby's, interests and social circle, can also be found on their profile pages (Fox et al., 2013; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Profile pages bring multiple sources of self-generated content and content of friends together in one central location (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Fox et al., 2013). Moreover, the list of friends that is provided by a social networking site is regarded as an important source of information. Next to providing a list of common friends, it further allows users to identify individuals that can be approached offline to obtain more information about a love interest (Fox et al., 2013). By supplying this information, social networking sites speed up the process of self-disclosure compared to traditional offline conversations (Fox et al., 2013). Previous studies showed that adults had a particular interest in the photos of their love interests. According to the respondents, pictures uploaded by a friend were particularly of interest because they were believed to be more honest and to contain less manipulated information (Fox et al., 2013). This finding is, as Fox et al. (2013) noted, in line with the warranting principle, which states that internet users will be more inclined to trust information about a person, if they perceive the information to be difficult to manipulate by the individual to whom it refers (Walther & Parks, 2002).

1.2. The role of social networking sites during a romantic relationship

1.2.1. Positive aspects of social networking sites during romantic relationships

Facebook provides its users with the opportunity to advertise their relationship status (e.g., single, in a relationship, it's complicated or engaged). When entering a romantic relationship, a couple can broadcast this status to their acquaintances, friends and family, who can then show their approval and support by liking or commenting on this update. Announcing the relationship status on Facebook is colloquially called being 'Facebook Official' (Fox et al., 2014; Fox & Warber, 2013a,b; Papp et al., 2012). Many adult couples regard being Facebook Official as an important step in their romantic relationship (Fox et al., 2014, 2013). Through this feature they formally confirm and announce their romantic relationship to all their online friends (Fox & Warber, 2013a,b). This act has been linked to higher relationship satisfaction (Mod, 2010; Papp et al., 2012). However, it could also be a potential source of relational conflict, as some studies also found that men and women have differing perceptions of what it means to be Facebook Official (Fox