Relational maintenance on social network sites: How Facebook communication predicts relational escalation

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ABSTRACT

Social network sites are popular communication tools that help people maintain relationships with their friends, yet there has been little research examining how people use these tools to enact relationship maintenance. By analyzing communication between individual friendships on a popular social network site, Facebook, this research examines types of maintenance behaviors enacted on the site, and how they predict relational escalation of Facebook friendships. Results show that most relationships go through a gradual rather than an extreme change and that these changes reflect both relational escalation and de-escalation. Temporal patterns—more recent and more frequent communication—predict relationship escalation, as does use of more different types of communication within Facebook, particularly private messages and photo tags. However, enactment of traditional relationship maintenance strategies as captured by the linguistic analysis of Facebook communication content using LIWC does not predict relationship escalation. These findings contribute to our theoretical understanding of the ways that the functionality of social network sites can help users engage in new types of relationship maintenance.

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1. Introduction

The most common first answer to "what is it that makes your life meaningful?" is close and satisfying relationships (Berscheid, 1985), but like all good things in life, they are not free. They require "relationshipping", or work to keep them in "good working order" (Duck, 1985). Social network sites (SNSs) are powerful tools for facilitating this relationship work because they afford quick interaction with many others and with relatively low costs (Tong & Walther, 2011; Vitak, 2012). In particular, maintaining relationships is one of the primary uses of Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Joinson, 2008; Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012), a popular SNS that boasts over one billion monthly active users.

Despite the popularity of Facebook as a tool to maintain relationships, with few exceptions (e.g., Bryant & Brody, 2010; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, in press), there is still "little empirical research that describes the specific communication-based relational activities that occur on these sites" (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 2). SNS platforms like Facebook afford different types of interaction and present "a dramatically new way to enact relational maintenance" (Walther & Ramirez, 2009, p. 302), but their utility in preserving a relationship in a desired state, the main function of relational

maintenance, is yet to be explored. Along with the multiple affordances of SNS platforms, users manage multiple types of relationships on SNSs. For example, while all Facebook connections are referred to as "friends", people use the site to interact with "friends" ranging in closeness, from "Close Friends" to "Friends of Others" (Parks, 2010). This implies that Facebook users are making use of different types of interaction afforded by Facebook to do different types of relationship work within the site.

Further, while it has long been pointed out "that the maintenance and stability of relationships are also processes" (Duck, 1985, p. 671), most research on relational maintenance gives a one-shot assessment of the process (see for review, Stafford, 2003), and does not address how maintenance behaviors contribute to change, or lack thereof, in relationships. As Facebook allows people to reconnect by reestablishing lost connections and strengthening weak social ties (Bryant & Marmo, 2012), it is possible that Facebook relational maintenance does not only aid in preserving relationships in a certain state, but can also contribute to their escalation. Conversely, creating and maintaining "friends" on Facebook is easy, and these links may persist even when relationshipping does not occur and relationships de-escalate. Thus, this paper asks whether Facebook relationships remain stable or whether they change over time, and what types of Facebook maintenance behaviors are associated with change in Facebook relationships.

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Finally, because most studies on relationship maintenance rely on self-report surveys of maintenance behaviors, the question they focus on is "not the one of what people do to maintain their relationships? But rather: What is it that people think they do, or report they do, to maintain their relationships?" (Stafford, 2003, pp. 70–71). An additional contribution of this paper is to move beyond analyses of perceptions of relationship maintenance behaviors, to analyses of actual enacted maintenance behaviors.

1.1. SNSs as a new context for relational maintenance

The majority of time that partners have in a relationship is spent maintaining it (Duck, 1988), or engaging in activities that keep it in existence, in a specified or satisfactory condition, or in repair (Dindia, 2003). Most important of these activities are strategic and routine communication behaviors such as openness, positivity, and assurances (Dainton & Stafford, 2000; Stafford & Canary, 1991). The perceived use of these communication strategies is associated with relational stability and escalation, and a lack of perceptions of them can signal a relationship headed toward de-escalation. Thus, relational maintenance is a process through which relationships unfold, stabilize, or change, and it is enacted through both mediated and unmediated communication (e.g., Ledbetter, 2010; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009).

Recently, SNSs like Facebook have received much attention as increasingly popular platforms for maintaining personal relationships (Bryant & Marmo, 2012; Ellison et al., in press; Vitak, 2012), which offer a variety of affordances and resources that may extend and change relational maintenance performance (Tong & Walther, 2011). Furthermore, SNSs' relational contexts differ from typical offline relational contexts in their size (Parks, 2010) and composition—by combining different relational types within the same communication context (boyd, 2006)—also suggesting that relational maintenance may acquire new functions and forms on SNSs.

These relationships may stay stable or change by escalating or de-escalating. For example, the large proportion of lapsed friendships and familiar strangers on Facebook suggests their latent value and a possibility for them to be reactivated and escalated as needed (Parks, 2010). Although recent research has examined a relationship between Facebook maintenance behaviors and various relational outcomes (e.g., Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012; Vitak, 2012), the question of stability and change in relational types on Facebook remains largely unexplored. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: How stable are relationships on Facebook?

1.2. New ways to maintain relationships on Facebook

The differences in the size and composition of SNS networks compared to offline interactions raise questions about which maintenance strategies people rely onto preserve or change these relationships, and whether these strategies are different than those in face-to-face interactions. Tong and Walther (2011) propose that SNSs' affordances reduce relational transaction costs for partners, which enable them to perform relational maintenance within large networks. In turn, the reductions in relational maintenance costs may bring about new functions of relational maintenance on SNSs, which Tong and Walther describe as (a) presence, (b) tie signs, and (c) mundane communication. Next, we consider specific types of SNS behaviors that may align with the aforementioned functions, and how they can predict escalation of Facebook relationships.

Presence refers to partners' awareness of each other, a sense of emotional connection and closeness, and a feeling of staying in touch. We propose that a partner's presence as a function of relational maintenance will be most prominently reflected in fre-

quency and temporal patterns of SNS communication. These dimensions are important because frequent contact renders "the interactional co-presence" of relationship partners helping them to create a relationship continuity, even when they are not physically co-present (Sigman, 1991). Indeed, previous research has linked temporal characteristics and frequency of communication between partners to their relational closeness or tie strength both in offline settings (Granovetter, 1973; Mansson & Myers, 2011; Marsden & Campbell, 1990) and on Facebook (Bryant & Marmo, 2010; Bryant & Marmo, 2012; Donath, 2008; Ellison et al., in press; Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009).

Along with higher frequency, closer relationships tend to make use of more media types of communication, as consistent with media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005). As Facebook is a platform that affords several media types of communication in itself (e.g., status updates, comments on others' posts, photo posting and tagging, chat, etc.), this trend is also present when analyzing communication on the site (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Thus, amount, frequency, and media types of Facebook communication can serve as attention signals to a partner and interest in and commitment to a relationship (Donath, 2008), helping to sustain a feeling of interaction co-presence and relationship continuity. Consequently, some of these Facebook dimensions may be related to relational escalation and de-escalation leading us to pose the following question:

RQ2: What frequency and temporal aspects of Facebook communication between relationship partners predict relational escalation?

A tie sign refers to "public displays of connection" (Donath & boyd, 2004) that serves both to signal a relational bond to an external audience and to reinforce it for the partners themselves. Facebook is a multi-media platform offering various ways to communicate with relational partners ranging in the degree of publicness, media richness, and effort costs, and the types of Facebook communication that one chooses to use can be meaningful. Public forms such as posting on a friend's wall can signify to the friend, and others, that these partners share a relationship, a process referred to as "social grooming" (Donath, 2008). Private Facebook communication can help maintain relationships by signifying to a partner that sensitive information is being shared with him/her alone (Bazarova, 2012).

Different types of Facebook communication also come at different costs to the sender. For example, it takes less time to click the "like" button than to compose and post a comment on a friend's photo. As such, "likes" are less likely to express affection compared to messages and photo comments (Mansson & Myers, 2011). In this way selection of one type of media over the other can be a "signal of the resources one is willing to commit to [the] relationship" (Donath, 2008, p. 238), which can impact perceptions of equity within the relationship (Tong & Walther, 2011).

Likewise, Facebook users describe using certain types of communication to enact maintenance strategies; posting and commenting on photos is a way to share experiences and reflect on shared memories of events (Bryant & Marmo, 2010), while posting photos and tagging a friend can express affection through Facebook (Mansson & Myers, 2011). These differences between the various types of Facebook communication and the signals that they send in relational maintenance lead to our third research question:

RQ3: Usage of what types of Facebook communication between relationship partners predicts relational escalation?

Finally, the role of mundane activities and observations in relational maintenance, while important in offline communication (Duck, 1988), may be even more salient with SNSs as the systems