



## Ignore your partners' current Facebook friends; beware the ones they add!



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### ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined two behaviors that could evoke Facebook jealousy and cause relationship problems among romantic partners: (1) Facebook solicitation behaviors (i.e., making or accepting friend requests with romantic interests) while in the current relationship, and (2) having romantic interests on existing Facebook friends lists. In our sample of 148 undergraduates, those who had lower commitment to their partners were more likely to make and accept Facebook friend requests with romantic interests during their relationship. However, commitment was unrelated to the number of romantic alternatives contained on one's Facebook friends list or the frequency of Facebook solicitation while single. Additionally, attachment anxiety predicted Facebook solicitation behaviors, but this relationship was mediated by Facebook jealousy. Our findings confirm that Facebook is used to solicit connections with romantic interests both while single *and* during committed relationships; however, it is only those connections that are made during the relationship that are markers of lower commitment. Moreover, our study adds to a growing body of research that connects face-to-face relationship theories to the virtual environment.

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### 1. Introduction

According to a recent survey by Pew Internet Research, 73% of American adults who use the internet engage in some sort of social networking (Duggan & Smith, 2014). Although social networking is becoming more diversified, with various sites such as LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Instagram gaining popularity, Facebook still dominates the social networking landscape (Duggan & Smith, 2014). Among internet users 18 and over, 71% report using Facebook, (a 4% increase from 2012), and most (63%) access the site at least once per day (Duggan & Smith, 2014). As a result of its prevalence, social networking, and Facebook specifically, has attracted the attention of both media outlets and researchers, who have commented on and studied the effects of this social network platform on relationship formation and maintenance.

Some of this attention has been directed specifically towards romantic relationships, where Facebook has been portrayed mainly as a threat or negative influence on romantic relationships (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). This negative reputation may be well-de-

served, as according to news sources, Facebook has been cited in as many as one-third of divorces in the past few years (e.g., Goldwert, 2012), and recent empirical research has shown that Facebook usage is related to physical and emotional cheating, breakups, and divorce (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). Facebook's role in infidelity is so pronounced that a website entitled [www.facebook-cheating.com](http://www.facebook-cheating.com) has even emerged, and the stories contained on the website served as the basis for Cravens, Leckie, and Whiting's (2013) empirical analysis of Facebook cheating. Not surprisingly, considering its cited role in infidelity, Facebook has also been the subject of research related to jealousy, surveillance behaviors, and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Overall, these studies have shown a significant relationship between Facebook use, Facebook jealousy, surveillance behaviors, and lower relationship satisfaction.

In this study, we extend the previous research by examining two Facebook behaviors that are potential sources of Facebook jealousy and surveillance: (1) having Facebook friends who are sexual/romantic desirables and (2) making or accepting a friend request from a person of potential romantic interest (i.e., Facebook solicitation behaviors). Recent research by Dibble and Drouin (2014) showed that many individuals keep in contact with sexual

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or romantic interests, or “backburners” via computer-mediated means, such as Facebook, and that the number of backburners is positively related to the person’s perception of the quality of their alternatives, as defined by *Rusbult’s* (1980) model of relationship investment. However, in *Dibble and Drouin’s* (2014) study, the number of backburners one communicated with in either a sexual or platonic way was not significantly related to relational commitment ( $r_s$  near 0). Therefore, in this follow-up study we examined whether it is Facebook solicitation behaviors, rather than number of romantic or sexual desirables on Facebook, that are related to commitment to one’s partner.

### 1.1. Facebook jealousy and surveillance

Although the research is relatively new, a fair number of studies have examined Facebook jealousy and the individual and relationship characteristics associated with it. In their seminal study, *Muise et al.* (2009) showed that trust, trait jealousy, and time on Facebook were all predictors of Facebook jealousy. *Muise et al.* (2009) also reported that women were more prone to Facebook jealousy, a finding that was recently supported by *McAndrew and Shah* (2013). *Elphinston and Noller* (2011) extended this work by demonstrating that Facebook behaviors could have real-world relationship consequences. In their study, Facebook intrusion (akin to Facebook dependence) influenced Facebook surveillance behaviors and romantic jealousy, which in turn was negatively related to relationship satisfaction (*Elphinston & Noller, 2011*). More recently, *Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, and Lee* (2013) examined Facebook jealousy and surveillance behaviors within the framework of attachment theory. Their study showed that Facebook jealousy was related to insecure attachment styles; those high in attachment anxiety (i.e., those who fear their partner may leave them) were more likely to engage in Facebook surveillance and experience Facebook jealousy, while those high in attachment avoidance (i.e., those who avoid dependence or intimacy) were less likely to do so (*Marshall et al., 2013*).

One of the key points of this recent research is that some individuals engage in Facebook surveillance behaviors, through which they gather information about their romantic partners via Facebook (*Darvell et al., 2011; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Muise et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2011*). According to *Muise et al.* (2009), this information is incomplete, which could lead to false conclusions, increased Facebook jealousy, and increased Facebook surveillance. These Facebook behaviors also could lead to negative real-world relationship consequences as those who have less trust in their partners engage in more Facebook surveillance (*Darvell et al., 2011; Muise et al., 2009*), which, in turn, could lead to a continual loop of Facebook surveillance, jealous feelings, and relationship dissatisfaction (*Elphinston & Noller, 2011*).

What types of behaviors are considered Facebook surveillance? Many surveillance behaviors are contained within the Facebook Jealousy scale (*Muise et al., 2009*). Some center on Facebook activity, (e.g., “Become jealous after seeing that your partner has posted a message on the wall of someone of the opposite sex.”), some relate to existing Facebook friends (e.g., “Question your partner about his or her Facebook friends”), and others relate to soliciting new “friends” (e.g., “Become jealous after seeing that your partner has added an unknown member of the opposite sex to Facebook.”). We chose to focus our study on the latter two behaviors related to Facebook friends (current and newly acquired), as they are easily observable by a partner and provide the basis for other types of behaviors (e.g., posting a message on another’s wall, liking another’s status updates). Moreover, with applications springing up like Down™, which helps Facebook friends connect anonymously

for sex or dating, the Facebook friends list is becoming an easy-to-access resource for initiating romantic and sexual activity.

### 1.2. Commitment, Facebook friends, Facebook jealousy, and attachment

According to *Rusbult* (1980), relational commitment is a balance between the person’s investment in the relationship and the quality of available alternatives. When investment is higher and quality of alternatives is lower, relational commitment should be greater (*Rusbult, 1980*). In turn, when commitment is greater, the risk of infidelity in the relationship is lower (*Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; McNulty & Brineman, 2007*). One of the reasons for this lower risk of infidelity is that those high in commitment tend to devalue potential romantic interests and are less likely to want to approach or be approached by romantic alternatives (*Johnson & Rusbult, 1989*). Interestingly, those high in commitment are most likely to devalue very attractive romantic alternatives, rather than those who are low or moderate in attraction, as they pose a greater threat to existing relationships (*Johnson & Rusbult, 1989*).

Applying *Johnson and Rusbult’s* (1989) findings to modern-day Facebook use, it would follow that those who are higher in commitment in their current relationship would be less likely to befriend or accept friend requests from potential romantic interests. However, *Johnson and Rusbult’s* (1989) findings relate only to behavior within relationships; they do not apply to a person’s desire to approach or be approached by romantic alternatives while single. In other words, those high in commitment in their current relationships may have used Facebook for solicitation of relationships while single, during which time they could have amassed a high number of romantic alternatives on their Facebook friends lists. Therefore, we hypothesized:

**H1.** Commitment would predict Facebook solicitation behaviors in the current relationship (in the negative direction) but not Facebook solicitation while single nor number of romantic alternatives on Facebook friends list.

Additionally, we wanted to examine whether Facebook jealousy was related to Facebook solicitation behaviors and, as an extension of the work by *Marshall et al.* (2013), to what extent both were related to insecure attachment. There is a wide body of research linking anxious attachment or preoccupied attachment with trait jealousy (e.g., *Buunk, 1997; Guerrero, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987*). Collectively, these researchers contend that those with an anxious or preoccupied attachment are more likely to fear losing their partners to rivals; hence, they experience greater levels of jealousy in the face of real or perceived threats to their relationships. *Marshall et al.* (2013) tested this theory with regard to Facebook jealousy specifically and found the same pattern: those with higher levels of attachment anxiety reported more Facebook jealousy. We suggest that this jealousy might lead to Facebook solicitation behaviors because making and accepting friend requests could: (1) serve as a manipulation attempt to incite jealousy in a romantic partner (see *Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995*) or (2) allow one to line up romantic alternatives in case the current relationship fails. Thus, it is likely that the relationship between anxious attachment and Facebook solicitation behaviors is at least partially mediated by Facebook jealousy (see *Fig. 1*). Our second hypothesis was:

**H2.** Attachment anxiety would predict Facebook solicitation behaviors while in the current relationship, and Facebook jealousy would mediate this relationship.

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