



# Relational dialectics and social networking sites: The role of Facebook in romantic relationship escalation, maintenance, conflict, and dissolution



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## ABSTRACT

Due to their prevalence and unique affordances, social networking sites such as Facebook have the potential to influence offline relationships. This study employed Baxter's (2011) refinement of relational dialectics theory to explore Facebook's role in emerging adults' romantic relationships. Data from ten focus groups revealed that Facebook contributes to and provides a forum for discursive struggles related to the integration–separation, expression–privacy, and stability–change dialectics. Romantic partners are able to connect with each other and integrate their social networks on Facebook, but some struggle to maintain privacy and independence. As such, SNSs can be a site of and trigger for romantic conflict. Participants' responses indicated that Facebook is interwoven with the experience of these dialectics due to its affordances, specifically the semi-public nature of relationship activities on Facebook and the shift in control over relational information from individuals to network members.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past 50 years, researchers have devoted significant time and attention to understanding the multitude of factors that affect romantic relationships. One area that has been comparatively understudied is the influence of various communication technologies on romantic relational processes. One current technology that has become pervasive is the use of social networking sites (SNSs). The largest of these, Facebook, hosts more than 1 billion active users worldwide, nearly half of whom visit the site at least 6 days a week (Facebook, 2013). Thus, it is unsurprising that recent research indicates that SNSs play a crucial role in the enactment of relationships (e.g., Carpenter & Spottswood, 2013; Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Trepte & Reinecke, 2013; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

Facebook enables users to post pictures, comments, website links, and even their romantic relationship status for viewing by everyone in their Facebook network. In essence, Facebook has given people the ability to broadcast their relationships—and virtually all other aspects of their lives—to a much wider audience

than ever before. This shift has the potential to significantly alter romantic relational processes by fundamentally redefining privacy in relationships, allowing social network members greater access to the relationships of others, and diversifying the ways communicative struggles play out both between individuals and between couples and their networks, online and offline. As the adoption of SNSs such as Facebook continues to grow, understanding these processes and struggles represents an important component in understanding the complex, changing landscape of romantic relationships. Investigating how dialectical tensions are experienced in new mediated contexts will test the applicability and relevance of relational dialectics theory to social media environments as well as provide further insights into evolving relationship processes in a technologically-mediated world.

## 2. Social networking sites and romantic relationships

Social networking sites (SNSs) allow users to maintain an individual profile, connect with other users, and observe the extended network through linked users (Papacharissi, 2011). SNSs have specific affordances that enable the actions one can take within the site (Fox, *in press*; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). *Connectivity* or *association* enables network members, no matter how disparate or geographically distant, to recognize each other's presence and

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often view each other's content through the common node or "friend." *Visibility* means that information that was not easily accessible or publicized previously is now shared among the network (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Given that social network members often have a significant influence on an individual's romantic relationships (Lehmiller, 2012), SNSs may maximize the network's influence on—or meddling in—a romantic relationship. *Persistence* and *replicability* are tied to the digital nature of the text, pictures, and other content posted to an SNS. Because digital material is easily captured, saved, duplicated, and recirculated, information shared online may be accessible long after the initial post and difficult to remove permanently (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

Several of Facebook's specific affordances are relevant to this study. Facebook affords communication between partners privately (through messaging) or publicly (through posts to each other's pages or tagging in status updates or pictures), yielding a new form of relationship maintenance (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; McEwan, 2013). Because of visibility and connectivity, Facebook is also used to convey information about the state of the relationship to the social network. For example, users can advertise their relationship status and even visibly link their profile to their partner's profile (Fox & Warber, 2013; Papp et al., 2012). When both partners have listed the other in their relationship status, the couple has become *Facebook official* or *FBO* (Fox & Warber, 2013), making the romance visible to each partner's network.

Because of visibility, connectivity, and persistence, SNSs like Facebook are also commonly used to monitor one's partner or ex-partner (Fox & Warber, 2014; Marshall, 2012; Tokunaga, 2011). Because Facebook allows both self-generated and other-generated information to be tied to one's profile via posting, tagging, and apps, there are multiple sources of information conveniently amalgamated in one easily accessible location. A user may be able to track his or her partner by looking at posts, events, or location check-ins. Network members might tag the partner in posts. Photographs are perhaps the greatest source of information as they may reveal considerable detail about where a partner is, who the partner is with, and what the partner is doing. Their persistence and replicability can make it difficult to hide relational indiscretions or otherwise suspicious behaviors if they are posted to an SNS. Thus, SNSs often serve as an indirect source for knowledge about romantic partners (Tokunaga, 2011) and may inform feelings or decisions about the relationship.

Given these affordances, the social interactions of SNSs users are played out in a much more public arena than ever before. Although research has delved into the various uses and effects of SNSs (e.g., DeAndrea, Shaw, & Levine, 2010; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Peña & Brody, 2014; Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, & Schumaker, 2012), fewer studies have examined the implications of this new environment for offline romantic relationships. On one hand, the glut of public information on SNSs allows people to accomplish significant information seeking and uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) without engaging in direct interaction with their partner. It also introduces new sources of jealousy and potential conflict into relationships (Fox et al., 2013; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011), may create undesirable uncertainty (Tokunaga, 2011), and gives other social network members much greater access to partners' information (Fox, in press; Waters & Ackerman, 2011). Given that social network members often have a significant influence on an individual's romantic relationships (Lehmiller, 2012), Facebook's affordances may maximize the network's power to intervene by providing unprecedented levels of social feedback. Thus, Facebook may foster discursive struggles within, around, and about the couple.

### 3. Relational dialectics theory

Relational dialectics theory (RDT; Baxter, 1990, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) is well-suited to understanding the potential influence of Facebook on romantic relationships because of its flexibility, openness, and focus on discourse in interpersonal and social processes. According to RDT, partners must try to balance the effects of forces acting to simultaneously bring them together and pull them apart. These forces manifest as discursive struggles known as *dialectics*, and every relationship is defined by a unique set of interrelated dialectics. Furthermore, dialectics occur both *internally* (within the couple) and *externally* (between the couple and their social networks; Baxter, 1990) and are continuously in flux.

Baxter (2011) offered a revision of RDT significant enough to lead her to label the two iterations of the theory as "RDT 1.0" and "RDT 2.0." In RDT 2.0, Baxter (2011) elaborates that "relationships achieve meaning through the active interplay of multiple, competing discourses, or voices" (p. 5). Discourses are reflective of different meaning systems formed at both the sociocultural and interpersonal levels, and every interaction is animated by multiple competing discourses. Sociocultural discourses generally reflect broad social norms whereas interpersonal discourses are reflective of the more idiosyncratic meanings negotiated within a specific relationship. Over time, some discourses gain centrality (*centripetal*) and become normalized or privileged while other discourses become marginalized (*centrifugal*).

In RDT 2.0, Baxter (2011) explained that these discourses are given voice through utterances that ultimately exist as part of larger utterance chains. Utterances do not stand alone as independent units, but rather are shaped by both previous links in the chain (utterances already spoken) and future links in the chain (anticipation of future utterances). These links take both proximal and distal forms. *Proximal* utterances are those voiced directly by relational partners and *distal* utterances are those reflected in sociocultural norms and discourses.

The final core element of RDT that is important to this study is praxis. Praxis reflects the sense-making process of "constructing meaning from the interplay of competing discourses" (Baxter, 2011, p. 121). This process often takes the form of repeated enactments known as *praxis patterns*, which vary widely in the degree to which they facilitate functional communication in a relationship (Baxter, 1990). For example, *denial*, a particularly nonfunctional pattern, is characterized by discourse in which the parties attempt to select only one pole of the dialectic (e.g., a couple who deals with integration–separation by saying they want to be together every minute of the day; Baxter, 1990). Conversely, *segmentation* is a more functional pattern that involves identifying the appropriateness of a pole for different topics (Baxter, 1990). For example, in managing expression–privacy a couple might agree to full disclosure in the area of finances but maintain privacy where information on past relationship partners is involved.

In terms of specific discourses and sites of struggle, dialectics vary by relationship. Three primary dialectics have been identified consistently in interpersonal research. *Integration–separation* (i.e., autonomy–connection) captures the basic struggle between interdependence and individuation. *Stability–change* (i.e., predictability–novelty) refers to the fundamental opposition between continuity and discontinuity. Finally, *expression–privacy* (i.e., openness–closedness) captures the struggle between what is said and what is left unsaid (Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The poles of the different dialectics represent seemingly contradictory yet equally important needs that individuals and couples possess.

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