



Social network sites, marriage well-being and divorce: Survey and state-level evidence from the United States



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between using social networks sites (SNS), marriage satisfaction and divorce rates using survey data of married individuals and state-level data from the United States. Results show that using SNS is negatively correlated with marriage quality and happiness, and positively correlated with experiencing a troubled relationship and thinking about divorce. These correlations hold after a variety of economic, demographic, and psychological variables related to marriage well-being are taken into account. Further, the findings of this individual-level analysis are consistent with a state-level analysis of the most popular SNS to date: across the U.S., the diffusion of Facebook between 2008 and 2010 is positively correlated with increasing divorce rates during the same time period after controlling for all time-invariant factors of each state (fixed effects), and continues to hold when time-varying economic and socio-demographic factors that might affect divorce rates are also controlled. Possible explanations for these associations are discussed, particularly in the context of pro- and anti-social perspectives towards SNS and Facebook in particular.

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1. Introduction

On May 17, 2012 Facebook became the first social network site to hold a public offering, valuing the company at \$104 billion, the largest valuation to date for a newly listed public company (Tangel & Hamilton, 2012). Few months later, Facebook—created with the vision to make the world more connected and help users to discover what's going on in their world—announced to have more than one billion active users (Facebook, 2013). Despite its professed mission to help people to connect each other, the company has been accused of damaging the relationship of thousands of couples. Circumstantial evidence, including information described in the popular media and law firms, suggests that Facebook may be responsible for causing divorce in one out of five divorces in the U.S. (Gardner, 2013).

The first report was in 2009, when an executive of Divorce-Online in the U.K., Mark Keenan, found that the word “Facebook” appeared in 989 of the company's 5000 most recent divorce petitions (Keenan, 2009). Similarly, a 2010 survey by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) found that four out of five lawyers reported an increasing number of divorce cases citing

“evidence” derived from Facebook (AAML, 2010). Further, websites have been developed to aid in detection of cheating on the social network site. FacebookCheating.com, for instance, provides tips on how to catch a spouse having an extramarital affair using the social network site.

Anecdotal evidence notwithstanding, the issue of whether Facebook affects negatively marriage satisfaction and increases the likelihood of divorce is an empirical claim that to our best knowledge has not been put to test yet. This study is a first step towards meeting that goal. It does so in two ways. First, it analyzes the aggregate-level relationship between Facebook penetration and divorce rates across 43 U.S. states between 2008 and 2010 controlling for a host of variables, including stable differences across states. Second, using individual-level survey data of a representative sample of married individuals in the U.S., it examines the relationships between using social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook and indicators of relationship satisfaction, also controlling for potential confounds.

To be clear, both data sets can provide solid evidence of the existence of an association between Facebook use and marriage quality and, in the case of the state-level data, some evidence of the temporal ordering of the variables. However, the study does not establish a cause-and-effect relationship because that would require longitudinal and/or experimental data. In fact, as we explain below, a negative correlation between Facebook and

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marriage well-being can be explained by either a causal link or through self-selection. Therefore, the current study is a necessary, though not sufficient, step towards understanding the role of SNS, especially Facebook, in marriage well-being.

Following, we review extant claims on the relationship between SNS and marriage quality. Afterward, we present the data and methods employed to test this association. Further, we report the findings of the individual- and aggregate-level statistical analyses. Finally, we discuss the implications and limitations of the study, and present directions for future research.

1.1. Theoretical overview

A negative relationship between SNS use and marriage well-being could be explained by two, very different, perspectives: (1) Using SNS weakens marriage and causes divorce (the negative effect hypothesis); or (2) divorcees and people in troubled relationships use SNS such as Facebook more often (the self-selection hypothesis). Whereas both views predict an association between using the social networks site and marriage dissatisfaction, their implications for the social effects of Facebook and other SNS are opposite. In the first case, SNS are conceived as an anti-social media. In the second, SNS are perceived as a pro-social force that helps people with a bad marriage experience to find social support. In the next two sections, we review the rationale of each perspective.

1.2. The case for negative effects

Before trying to explain why using sites like Facebook may be negatively associated to marriage satisfaction, it is relevant to summarize prior research on the basis of strong, satisfying marriages (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Davis, 1985; Roberts, 1982). Manning (2006) has noted that a long-term romantic relationship entails seven characteristics: (a) investment in the well-being of the beloved, (b) respect, (c) admiration, (d) sexual desire, (e) intimacy, (f) commitment, (g) exclusivity, and (h) understanding. Bergner and Bridges (2002) hold that when one or more of these aspects are violated by a romantic partner, the other partner is likely to feel unloved, causing that spouse to reevaluate the relationship.

There are many reasons why Facebook and SNS in general might be negatively affecting one or more of these characteristics and, consequently, marriage quality. First, excessive use of social media has been associated with “dependency” or compulsive use (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008), creating psychological, social, school and/or work difficulties in a person’s life (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Lee, Cheung, and Thadani (2012) describe social features that could be highly problematic. Citing research by Sickfacebook.com, an anti-Facebook blog, the authors argue that over 350 million users suffer of Facebook Addiction Disorder (FAD). The term, introduced by American psychologists, has been considered by some an addiction since individuals who use social network sites (SNS) excessively present several addictive symptoms such as neglect of personal life, mental preoccupation, escapism, mood modifying experiences, tolerance, and concealing the addictive behavior (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

Second, SNS create an environment with potential situations that may evoke feelings of jealousy between partners, harming the quality of their relationship (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Moreover, SNS facilitate users reconnecting with a variety of people with whom they have had a past relationship (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), creating the potential for jealousy in current relationships. Similarly, SNS also support users’ maintenance of relationships that may otherwise be only transitory, but could become problematic when juxtaposed to the marital relationship. Elphinston and Noller (2011) explain that exposing one’s partner to all of these individuals, many of whom may be unknown to

the partner, may increase the potential for jealousy and suspicion. Further, Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais (2009) corroborated empirically this jealousy-provoking information between partners using Facebook, which instead creates a feedback loop whereby heightened jealousy leads to increased surveillance of a partner’s Facebook page, causing even more suspicion between the partners, which ultimately affects negatively the relationship (for online surveillance behaviors within married couples, see also Helsper & Whitty, 2010).

Third, previous research has noted that substantial decline in partner search costs could lead to higher levels of divorce (Kendall, 2011). Kendall explains that when people manage more information about others and it is easy to search for partners after marriage, the expected benefit from a new match may outweigh the cost of dissolving the old one, fuelling divorce rates. Facebook in particular has a series of unique affordances that has helped to reduce these searching costs and consequently may contribute to cheating. First, Facebook’s search options and capabilities make cheating easier. If someone is trying to find another person, it is possible to search by name, email address, company/workplace, or common friends, and even get narrow results by indicating only hometown or school, making it still easier to find, for example, an ex. Similarly, with the “event” invitations feature, it is easy for users to monitor and determine if a certain person of potential interest will be attending a particular event.

The mutual and suggested friends features may also facilitate potential cheating since users can search through their friends’ friends to find someone in whom they may be interested. Facebook also suggests friend based on mutual friends and interests, consequently, if the user is already predisposed to being interested in someone else, it is more likely they will become close friends with them and open a venue for an extramarital or separation.

In addition, Facebook allows users to have multiple profiles: a person could have a profile for family and friends which lists them as married but also a secondary profile which lists them as single and being interested in forming relationships. Consequently, Facebook and other SNS make easier finding another romantic partner for those so inclined to do so.

1.3. The case for self-selection

The discussion summarized earlier is consistent with a causal relationship between SNS and marriage quality. But there is a counterargument: individuals in unhappy marriages may use SNS such as Facebook more often because it proves beneficial to them and, thus, it is self-selection what would explain the negative correlation between SNS use and marriage well-being. In this instance, individuals may turn to services like Facebook more frequently after they get divorced for social support and/or to enhance their (newly single) social lives. Thoits (1982) defines social support as the degree to which a person’s basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others. Consistent with this definition, several studies suggest that groups formed in Facebook are acting as these “support” places where users go to find emotional support (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011), sense of belonging (Bender, Jimenez-Marroquin, & Jadad, 2011), and encouragement (Greene, Choudhry, Kilabuk, & Shrank, 2011), in addition to instrumental aid (Newman, Lauterbach, Munson, Resnick, & Morris, 2011). Other research suggests that online services, in general, can provide social support when a personal or family transition occurs (Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013).

Previous research has also associated SNS use with bonding social capital (i.e., emotional support from close friends). Ellison and her colleagues (2007) argue that given the searching capabilities afforded by SNS to form groups based on individuals with related interests and needs, Facebook makes it easier to find others in

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