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Life course similarities on social networking sites

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ABSTRACT

Dyadic social relations are known to exhibit homophily – attraction and bonding between similar individuals – and recent studies have detected homophily also on the social network level. Here, we investigate whether social media networks exhibit signs of homophily with regards to life stages. Using a large and global database (N = 111,863) of social media profile pictures, we investigate proportions of picture types in an individual's social network. Typical stages of young adulthood include peer group formation, mate searching, union formation, and parenting. We studied to what extent different association categories with pictures of one or several individuals correlated with each other. Results showed that users with a profile picture of a single individual were more likely to have other profile pictures of single individuals of the opposite sex, but not of the same sex, in their social media network. Profile pictures of heterosexual couples were more likely to appear with other heterosexual couple pictures, and profiles with baby pictures were strongly associated with the frequency of other baby pictures within the same network; both of these types were negatively associated with the frequency of pictures of singles. Pictures of two females together were positively linked with the largest number of other association types. The results probably reflect both selection and contagion effects. We conclude that contemporary social media networks appear to exhibit homophily in displays related to mate searching, pair bonds, and the transition to parenthood.

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1. Introduction

Homophily is the tendency for people to cluster with those that are similar to themselves and has been studied for over 50 years in experimental psychology and the social sciences (e.g., Byrne, 1961; Byrne, 1997; Montoya & Horton, 2013). People prefer to associate with others who share a whole variety of traits, from mostly stable demographic traits (e.g. generation, gender, ethnicity: Ibarra, 1992; Lee & Gudykunst, 2001), to those that could be more flexible over one's lifespan (e.g. social status: Descioli & Kurzban, 2009, education and occupation: Kalmijn, 1994; Mare, 1991 or ethical views: Byrne, 1962; Park & Schaller, 2005).

Social similarity is known to occur through a number of different causes, both proximal (e.g. having positive associations with one's own interests which lead to positive associations with those with similar interests: Byrne et al., 1971; Kaplan & Anderson, 1973) and distal (identifying similarities with another person might suggest they are kin or come from a similar ethnic or cultural group, making them a useful and trustworthy ally in future interactions: Launay & Dunbar, 2015; Mcelreath, Boyd, & Richerson, 2003). Social similarity can denote both a psychological preference, the "love of the similar", and/or a structural network characteristic, equal to homogeneity (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010).

For most individuals today, school is the first life stage in which they are grouped with people of a similar age. As we get older, age and institutional settings continue to shape network characteristics (e.g. the influence of colleagues). Homophily can also be expected to include the central events and transitions (e.g. getting married, having a first child) shaping an individual's life course (Elder, 1994; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Wrzus, Hanel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). However, relatively few studies have investigated similarities in life stages within social networks.

In this regard, the concept of life stages is central to both life history and life course theory. Based on life history theory as first developed in evolutionary biology, individuals are assumed to

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allocate resources to three main processes: growth and development, mating, and reproduction and parenting (e.g. Hill & Kaplan, 1999). In the human life cycle, these domains are differently prioritised depending on various factors including the individual's life stage and socioeconomic status (David-Barrett et al., 2016; Virpi, 2009) and require different kinds of support from available kin and peer social networks (Geary & Flinn, 2001; Geary, Byrd-Craven, Hoard, Vigil, & Numtee, 2003; Hall, 2011; Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Typically, bodily and cognitive growth are crucial in childhood and adolescence, when received parental investment and peer relations are central to social life. Most mating efforts are made in adolescence and young adulthood, with their focus on peer relations, followed by a focus on the chosen romantic partner and spouse (Jo, Saramaki, Dunbar, & Kaski, 2014). This is followed by a shift to parenting effort by middle adulthood, possibly followed by a return to the "mating market" at some stage. Sociological studies of the human life course have made similar distinctions based on age and life stage (e.g. Elder, 1994; Hutchison, 2015) as the ones used in life history theory. The five central principles of life course theory emphasize lifelong development, human agency, the importance of temporal and spatial context, the effect of timing of life events, and – crucially – the concept of linked lives (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Linked lives refers to the interdependence embedded in human sociality. It also suggests that individual life transitions may reflect on the transitions of other individuals, e.g. so that a woman's transition to parenthood entails her own mother's transition to grandparenthood (ibid., pp. 13–14). However, life course studies do not directly link mating and parenting resource investments to different life stages, nor do they explicitly consider trade-offs between these different types of investments at different life stages in the way life history theory does (Alwin, 2012).

Homophily may result from selection or contagion as well as different combination or feedback loops of these two processes. Regarding the life course, selection means that individuals either actively or passively acquire others in similar life stages into their social network, as e.g. when young parents befriend each other at the playground (Mcpherson & Smithlovin, 1987). Contagion refers to the fact that as members of a friendship circle get married or have children, this behaviour is likely to encourage spread, putting social pressure or incentives on others within that group to move into the same life stage, alternatively to leave the group in order to affiliate with another (Christakis & Fowler, 2007). This distinction is related but not identical to the tendency of familiarity to breed similarity and vice versa: close people tend to become more similar over time (Lewis, Gonzalez, & Kaufman, 2012) and maintain friendships better with those who are similar (Burt, 2000; Tuma & Hallinan, 1979). Additionally, friendship itself is both selective and contagious: friendship networks may merge, so that people easier become friends with the friends of a friend, which further enhances the similarities between the original friend dyad (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010).

Life stage homophily is often assumed to happen in relation to marrying and parental status (e.g. Lois & Becker, 2014). However, there is to date surprisingly little evidence to support this with data from actual social networks. Thus a classic study on homophily in social networks (Mcpherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) mentions similarity in "family roles" only in passing. Several important studies have tracked the changes in social networks across the life course (e.g. Kalmijn, 2003; Kalmijn, 2012), and recent investigation using social network analysis has started to reveal how diverse the traits that spread amongst friendship groups can be in relation to health-related measures (Christakis & Fowler, 2007; Schafer, 2015) or marital behaviour (Mcdermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013). We know of no previous large-scale study investigating how mating, union formation and having children relate to social network similarities. Among existing research, most have studied network changes in relation to the transition to parenthood. One early study found that after having a child, parents increased contact frequency with some kin and also with other parents of small children (Belsky & Rovine, 1984). Some existing large-scale studies have also explored the transmission of fertility behaviour, finding that childbearing among friends, neighbours (ibid.), and especially strongly among siblings make the individual more likely to become a parent (Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010).

Mating behaviour is less studied than parenting (but see: Christakis & Fowler, 2007; Kalmijn, 2012; Mcdermott et al., 2013; Munch-Rotolo, 2000) and previous studies tend to focus on the "contagiousness" of e.g. marrying or divorcing, rather than on the social network composition in relation to marital behaviour or childbearing. A notable exception is the study of dating sites by Fiore and Donath (2005), which found that the potential partners preferred interacting with others of similar demographic characteristics and similar perceived attraction value.

Here, we use a large and global data set of social media networks in order to explore assortative associations in social networks. We investigate whether different picture categories appear assortatively within individual user networks. We are especially interested in whether picture types that can be interpreted as related to life stages related to mating and parenting exhibit homophily.

While we expect homophily to arise between picture categories, it is clear that similarity is not necessarily the preferred or most advantageous at all stages (Rivera, Soderstrom, & Uzzi, 2010). For instance, when a single heterosexual person is looking for a spouse it does not make sense to team up only with other same-sex individuals. In certain key stages, by contrast, such as forming a romantic union or raising a small child, it would make intuitive

Table 1
Coding categories adapted from (David-Barrett et al., 2015).

Code	Description	%
NH	Not human picture: e.g., object, landscape, monster, car, or any picture with an animal	12.9
NA	Not publicly available (or Facebook default profile)	1.5
NP	Multiple people but not peer: e.g., mother-child, a family	2.5
CB	Child or baby	3.2
MP	Multiple pictures, collage	1.8
CTG	Can't tell gender	2.3
1F	1 female	30
2F	2 females	3.3
1M	1 male	28.4
2M	2 males	2.2
1F1M	1 female + 1 male (e.g. a heterosexual couple)	6.3
3+	Three or more people in the picture	5.9

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