



Review

“It's complicated.” A systematic review of associations between social network site use and romantic relationships



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ABSTRACT

Social network site (SNS) use may have important implications for romantic relationships. This systematic literature review aims to (a) identify theory-based approaches for studying associations between SNS use and romantic relationships, (b) identify key romantic relationship constructs measured in relation to SNS use, (c) synthesize the mechanisms by which SNS use may influence and be influenced by romantic relationships, and (d) discuss improved methods for guiding future research. Twenty-six peer-reviewed articles published in English from 2000 to 2015 that include measures of a romantic relationship construct as an outcome or predictor of SNS-related behavior for someone in a romantic relationship comprise this review. Studies are categorized as focusing on individual characteristics, relationship characteristics, or behavioral actions. Overall, findings indicate underdevelopment of SNS-related theory, and suggest that SNS behaviors may both influence and be influenced by individual and relationship characteristics such as adult attachment style, SNS-induced jealousy, relationship satisfaction and commitment, and partner identity overlap. Gender appears to influence associations between SNS use and relationship constructs, particularly in relation to interpreting ambiguous information about a partner. Further, SNSs may serve a maintenance function within romantic relationships. Directions for future research include assessing multiple SNSs in diverse samples and standardizing measurement of SNS behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Social media is changing the landscape for interpersonal communication. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter attract hundreds of millions of daily users (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015) and continue to inspire behavioral research in various areas. Studies have ranged in interest from predicting use from personality (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010), to social media as a health information context (Moorhead et al., 2013), to assessing the general impact of social media use on well-being and mental health (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Pantic, 2014). Although social media is more commonly used to maintain friendships (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada, 2012), it also plays an important role in romantic relationships (Smith & Duggan, 2013). Several affordances of social network sites (SNSs) (e.g., high visibility within and constant access to one's social network, including romantic alternatives) may have important implications for romantic relationships. This article provides a systematic review of research concerning associations between SNS use and romantic relationships as well as provides suggestions for future research directions.

1.1. Social network sites

The terms “social media” and “social network site” are often interchangeably used; however, distinction is necessary for framing review of this literature. Social media is a blanket term for defining Internet applications that allow for the exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This term describes a variety of communication forms including blogs, message boards, videos sharing platforms (e.g., YouTube), and SNSs. Social network sites are a type of social media that may best be defined as web-based services that allow for maintenance of social relationships within one's publicly visible social network (Ellison, 2007). Given the global popularity of SNSs, recent research focusing on computer-mediated communication most commonly focuses on SNS use rather than social media use in general. Recent reports suggest that SNS use transcends major demographic variables including gender, age, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status, with over 65% of adult Internet users from each major category reporting use

(Duggan et al., 2015). To date, Facebook remains the most popular SNS, with over 1 billion worldwide users (fb.com, 2015) and 71% of online adults naming it as their preferred platform (Duggan et al., 2015). Accordingly, the vast majority of SNS research is specific to Facebook use.

1.2. Romantic relationships in the age of social network sites

Romantic relationships can be defined as relationships based on emotional and physical attraction that could potentially lead to long-term intimate relationships (World Health Organization). During early adulthood, romantic relationships have important individual and societal implications for promoting personal well-being and providing a framework for future relationships (Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998; Fox & Anderegg, 2014). The Internet plays an increasingly important role in romantic relationships. Recent years have shown a two-fold increase in the number of couples who met online (Madden & Lenhart, 2006; Sprecher, 2011). Following trend, Hall (2014) found that close to 35% of all couples married between 2005 and 2012 initiated their relationship online. Although not the primary function, SNSs are a common online location for meeting a partner (Hall, 2014), and appear to play a role in all phases of romantic relationships including initiation, escalation, maintenance, dissolution, and even post-dissolution ex-partner monitoring (Smith & Duggan, 2013). A landmark study (reviewed below) by Muise, Christofides and Desmarais (2009) found that general Facebook use predicted romantic jealousy. Since then, research has evolved in considering the complex associations between SNS use, individual differences, and romantic relationship constructs such as attachment style, satisfaction, commitment, partner identity overlap, relationship maintenance strategies, and infidelity.

Although use is expanding to different age demographics, 18- to 24-year-olds remain the primary SNS audience (Duggan et al., 2015). Defined as *emerging adulthood* (Arnett, 2000), this distinct developmental period encompasses a time of identity exploration relevant to romantic relationships. In particular, young people in this age range are more likely to participate in transitory relationships of short duration (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Given that the majority of SNS use research has been conducted on emerging

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