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Relationship social comparisons: Your facebook page affects my relationship and personal well-being



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ABSTRACT

People frequently share information about their intimate relationships on Facebook and this information can be used by other users as material for romantic social comparisons. In a pilot study, participants indicated that photos, communication between the individuals in the couple, and indications of support were important for relationship comparisons. How individuals interpret relationship comparisons when exposed to a friend's or acquaintance's Facebook profile can impact the self and one's relationship. Two experiments manipulated upward and downward relationship comparisons using mocked-up Facebook profiles of a young, attractive, heterosexual couple. That is, participants were exposed to the equivalent of an acquaintance's Facebook profile. Manipulated comparison direction predicted individual's relationship social comparison interpretations (RSCI). Direct effects of the RSCI and indirect effects of the manipulated comparison direction through RSCI on relationship quality, attention to alternatives, and personal well-being were found indicating that how individuals interpreted the relationship comparison was important. Individuals may react more strongly to comparisons with close others as opposed to distant others (Tesser, 1988), suggesting that comparisons with actual friends on Facebook could have a larger impact. Future research will continue to examine how online relationship comparisons to friends may influence long-term consequences of these interpretations (e.g., stay/leave decisions).

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1. Introduction

Individuals often make social comparisons by comparing the self with similar others when they are unsure of how they are doing in a particular area (e.g., desirability, accomplishments; Festinger, 1954). One way that individuals use social comparisons is in regards to their own relationships. For instance, people may wonder whether their relationship is doing well compared to their friend's relationships. These relationship social comparisons can be the result of rumors about other peoples' relationships or discussions regarding friends' and acquaintances' relationships. In North America, social comparisons related to opinions, abilities, or emotions often occur from viewing social media such as Facebook (Lee, 2014; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014), suggesting that

relationship social comparisons may also occur through social media. Most (90%) American college students are members of social networking sites (Perrin, 2015). Moreover, Facebook has more than 2 billion users (Statista, 2017) and average usage across all ages is estimated at 34 min per day (Asano, 2017). These social network sites are used by individuals to present a public self image (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). For instance, Facebook users construct their own profile pages to include aspects of their relationship such as profile pictures featuring their romantic partner, posted relationship status (e.g., in a relationship with ...), and mentioning one's partner in status updates. In fact, sharing relationship information is normative as this information is explicitly asked for when creating a profile (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012). Little is known however about the impact of online behaviors, such as posts on Facebook, on offline relationships (see Elphinstone & Noller, 2011 for an exception). As such, Facebook may provide numerous opportunities online for relationship social comparisons that may influence ongoing romantic relationships offline.

In Western cultures, previous offline research indicates that social comparisons with friends' dating relationships are common

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(Morry, 2011) and these comparisons affect relationship satisfaction (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991). Individuals can compare their relationship *downward* to relationships presumed to be worse off than one's own or *upward* to relationships presumed to be better off than one's own. How an individual interprets the upward or downward comparison has important implications for the self and one's relationship (Morry & Sucharyna, 2016). For example, after learning that Mary's friend Jane just got engaged, Mary can interpret this upward comparison to Jane's relationship as either hope for the future for her own relationship (e.g., "If they can make this big relationship milestone, so can we!") or an indication that her own relationship is not doing well (e.g., "If we were as happy as they are, we'd already be engaged."). These interpretations have a variety of consequences affecting relationship quality, affect, and behavior (Morry & Sucharyna, 2016).

Previous research on relationship social comparisons (e.g., Buunk, 2001; Buunk, Oldersma, & de Dreu, 2001; Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991) explicitly asked individuals to make a comparison to a friend's relationship and the limited relationship social comparison interpretation research (Morry & Sucharyna, 2016) followed the same pattern. In contrast to these explicit comparisons, Gilbert, Giesler, and Morris (1995) indicated that social comparisons are effortless, unintentional, and relatively automatic. Viewing other people's Facebook profiles may be one place that a more relatively automatic relationship social comparison is likely to occur. To date, the associations between relationship social comparisons and these interpretations have not been studied using social media platforms such as Facebook. Our research contributes to the literature by first conducting a pilot study to examine which components of Facebook individuals report are important for relationship social comparisons. Across two studies, we then manipulated a mocked-up Facebook profile of a young, attractive, heterosexual couple to produce an upward or downward relationship comparison and measured the effects of this social comparison on perceivers' relationship cognitions, affect, and behavior. Expanding on previous relationship social comparison research, we also examined whether the relationship cognitions mediated the effects of the social comparison on relationship quality (e.g., satisfaction), behaviors (i.e., attention to alternatives), and personal well-being (e.g., happiness).

1.1. Relationship social comparisons

Festinger (1954) indicated that people are motivated to evaluate their opinions, abilities, personal characteristics, and so on. When uncertain about how the self is doing, individuals often look to others to evaluate their situation, resulting in a social comparison. In Western cultures, individuals not only compare themselves to others (e.g., Lockwood, 2002; Tesser & Collins, 1988) and to their dating partner (e.g., Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004), but they also compare their romantic partner and the state of their relationship to others (Buunk, 2001; Buunk et al., 2001; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016). These relationship social comparisons can be used to assess the suitability of the partner; feelings and experiences in the relationship (Surra & Milardo, 1991); or to evaluate one's beliefs about close relationships (e.g., divorce; Stalder, 2012).

Most research comparing one's relationship with someone else's relationship examines marital relationships (e.g., Buunk, 2001; Buunk, Van Yperen, Taylor, & Collins, 1991). Periods of uncertainty such as during change and stress activate the tendency to make social comparisons (e.g., Butzer & Kuiper, 2006). Morry and Sucharyna (2016) argue that dating, as compared to marital relationships, are imbued with higher levels of uncertainty as they lack external forms of commitment such as marriage. A variety of

events may also activate uncertainty such as one's self or a friend contemplating ending the relationship, getting married, or receiving attention from an attractive alternative. Given the pervasive use of Facebook among college students, exposure to a "friend's" Facebook profile may also increase uncertainty through the friend's overly positive comments and photos (Chou & Edge, 2012). Currently, Facebook users have on average 338 Facebook friends, although the median is 200 "friends" (Mazie, 2015) providing frequent opportunities to make social comparisons. Facebook profiles may also expose individuals to more upward comparisons than in an offline context because social network sites allow people to present themselves in ways that reflect their ideal self-views by emphasizing desirable traits (Rosenberg & Egber, 2011).

Only a few studies have examined relationship social comparisons with dating individuals (Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016; White, 2011) and none to our knowledge have examined relationship social comparisons on Facebook. Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, (2008) developed a relationship social comparison orientation measure to examine individuals' general or dispositional tendency to compare their relationship to that of others. Across three studies using mostly dating individuals, they found that a greater relationship social comparison orientation was associated with greater attachment anxiety and avoidance, and lower self-esteem, intimacy, relationship satisfaction and commitment, and perceptions of more relationship alternatives. White (2011) used Smith LeBeau and Buckingham's orientation measure and found that dating individuals, compared to married individuals, reported more frequently engaging in general relationship comparisons and relationship comparisons involving negative affect. In addition, both types of relationship comparisons were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Although not examining relationship social comparisons, Hand (2010) found that online social network use predicted overall relationship satisfaction, but this effect was mediated by intimacy. Together these studies indicate that in Western cultures relationship social comparisons are important predictors of relationship quality, and that online social networking sites are one medium that can impact relationship quality.

1.1.1. To whom individuals compare

When asked about relationship social comparisons in general (i.e., no reference to social media), Morry (2011) found that within a given three months, dating individuals made 9.64 relationship comparisons to 3.76 other couples. Morry did not specify whether participants should focus on online or offline relationship comparisons, and so participant's responses likely encompassed both types of comparisons. Given the high prevalence of college students that are members of social networking sites (Perrin, 2015), the amount of time spent on Facebook each day (Asano, 2017), and that sharing relationship information is normative on Facebook (Christofides et al., 2012), it is highly probable that individuals make relationship social comparisons on Facebook.

1.1.2. Relationship social comparison interpretations

Buunk et al. (2001) suggest that how an individual interprets a comparison can have important implications for the self and one's relationship. Other researchers also suggest that the impact of social comparisons on one's own sense of self, perceptions of the partner, or the relationship depends on both the comparison direction and the individual's interpretation of what this comparison means for the self (Lockwood & Pinkus, 2008). Drawing on this research, Morry and Sucharyna (2016) developed the relationship social comparison interpretation (RSCI) scale to measure these interpretations related to dating relationship social comparisons and

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