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Making it Facebook official: The warranting value of online relationship status disclosures on relational characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes Walther and Parks' (2002) warranting theory to explore the relationship between online system- and co-generated relational cues and the strength of offline romantic relational characteristics. Differences in respondents' ($N = 170$) relational characteristics were predicted based on their relationship statuses articulated on Facebook. Results indicate individuals who display their relationship status on Facebook are more dependent in their relationship (i.e., more satisfied, committed, invested, and with lower perceived relational alternatives) and used Facebook more. In other words, individuals in relationships that are 'Facebook official' report being in more committed, stronger relationships than non-Facebook official counterparts. Findings are discussed with respect to the relationships among social media, relational attributes, and warranting theory.

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1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) are multi-faceted tools for maintaining contact with old friends, establishing new relationships, keeping up with current events, and displaying individuality. SNSs like Facebook and Twitter are heavily used as means of identity displays, affording users opportunities to display facets of their selves to cross-sections of their relational networks, helping to foster others' perceptions of the individual user (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012). Although computer-mediated communication (CMC) channels were historically heralded as rife for identity experimentation (e.g., displaying typically-hidden facets of one's identity due to perceived stigma or lack of social acceptability) and selective disclosure of limited parts of one's identity (Turkle, 1995), SNSs generally seem to evoke faithful displays of users' personal characteristics (Back et al., 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). Increasingly within the study of self-presentation and interaction, scholarship

has focused on the presentation and conduct of romantic relationships within SNSs.

Recent work has explored relational formation, maintenance, and termination as they manifest in and are influenced by social media (cf. Tong, Kashian, & Walther, *in press*). Among the glut of cues and information available via SNSs, some work has recently focused on (among other things), the act of going 'Facebook official,' or publicly displaying one's romantic relational status to her or his social network via system affordances (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Toma & Choi, 2015). This prior work has primarily viewed going Facebook official as an antecedent to other facets of a romantic relationship, able to predict one's relational characteristics. In this research, we contrarily suggest these relational displays are better-conceptualized as effects, occurring as reflections of present relational attributes rather than heralds of past traits. The present study uses warranting theory to conceptualize and empirically assess the validity of using a small cue—the public display of a romantic relationship on Facebook—on the current state of an individual's relationship.

2. Romantic relationships and SNSs

Prior research has explored the interactions between romantic relationships and Facebook use. Exploring between-partner relational attributes and Facebook use among 58 couples, Papp et al. (2012) found that dating partners reported similar amounts of

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Facebook activity and were likely to interdependently publicly disclose relational statuses (i.e., if one partner disclosed, the other was likely to do so as well). Moreover, Papp and colleagues reported that online disclosures of relational status were predictive of offline characteristics, and that online behaviors such as disagreements contributed to the function of the intimate relationships. Subsequently, Toma and Choi (2015) looked at six Facebook behaviors (relationship listing, dyadic photographs, participant-initiated wall posts, partner-initiated wall posts, joint affiliations, and mutual friends) as predictors of relationship commitment, which is statistically predictive of relationship longevity. Both of these studies are interesting in that they utilize online actions to predict relational characteristics. However, we suggest the directionality of these conclusions may not be reflective of actual relationship and online/offline patterns.

Individuals typically closely guard the state of their romantic relationship among their social networks (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Historically there have been socially accepted ways to publicly demonstrate one's connection to a romantic partner. For example, Rogers and Havens (1960) explain university students in the late 1950s would 'pin' an ad in the campus newspaper declaring with whom they were 'going steady,' only after the relationship had passed a substantive and critical threshold. Such 'pinning' denoted the magnitude and seriousness of the relationship. Today, individuals—particularly young adults—anachronistically practice 'pinning' their relationship by posting a status to popular SNSs that publicize relationship characteristics (Bryant, Marmo, & Ramirez, 2011). Given prior offline practices, it seems less likely individuals engage in the modern practice of going 'Facebook official' (i.e., altering their Facebook profile to publicly assert their relational pairing) as a means of increasing relational commitment, as indeed some individuals are in romantic relationships yet do not update their Facebook profile accordingly. It seems more naturalistic and likely that, rather than an antecedent to relational commitment, making one's relationship official on Facebook may be a cue displayed *post hoc* and only after the relationship and its characteristics have passed a threshold level. In other words, an individual may go Facebook official online only after she or he perceives herself/himself satisfied with and committed to the relationship offline. Given this postulation that the online self reflects, rather than predicts, the actual state of an individual's offline self, warranting theory can serve an effective lens to explore relational processes.

3. Warranting and social network sites

3.1. Warranting theory

Walther and Parks (2002) re-introduced the concept of warranting theory to computer-mediated communication (CMC) from Stone's (1996) original explication of the concept. Warranting theory examines this connection between a person's actual self and their idealized presentation afforded by media online through the use of warranting cues (DeAndrea, 2014). Whereas previous work has considered the physical and online self as two separate identities, warranting theory conceptualizes information posted online as a continuum of association between an individual's online self and physical self (Walther & Parks, 2002). In short, online information increases impression-formation value as it can be linked to the target person in the physical world. Parks (2011) advanced three boundary conditions of warranting theory: "First, the source must make an identity claim and, second, a third party must comment on that claim in a way that others can observe. And finally, it must be possible for observers to compare the claim and comment in practical and meaningful ways" (pp. 559–560).

Warranting value refers to the legitimacy and validity of information about a person in a CMC context as it relates to offline characteristics (Walther, 2011). Contrary to Parks' second boundary condition, Gibbs, Ellison, and Lai (2011) note that because explicit third party claims are not always present or available online, more implicit means can be used to increase the warranting value of a claim. The mere ability of third parties to verify an identity claim increases the claim's warranting value, even if the opportunity is not used (Hayes & Carr, 2015).

Though the greatest warranted value is derived from other-generated content, self-generated content still demonstrates value in perceiver's evaluation of SNS profiles: information gains warranting value if it can be verified by the person's network (Walther, 2011; Walther & Parks, 2002). Specifically, Walther (2011) argues individuals are less likely to alter their self-presentation when the receiver of the message has the ability to corroborate information either through access to the sender's social network or through other means that hold the individual accountable for misrepresentations. Thus, one's relational status should serve as a high-warrant cue in social network sites, strongly connecting one's online identity display to offline attributes.

3.2. Warranting relational status

Individuals who post pictures containing a relational partner to social media report both greater satisfaction and relational commitment (Saslow, Muise, Impett, & Dubin, 2013; Toma & Choi, 2015), perhaps as these photos are presented in a forum publicly-accessible to a broad cross-section of both relational partners' social networks. Likewise, when individuals post that they are "in a relationship" on Facebook, they are making a verifiable public commitment to that information and (in turn) that relationship. Though public commitment can increase one's own self-perceptions (Bem, 1972; Gonzales & Hancock, 2009), public commitment to one's self—either attributes or status—additionally serves as a high-warrant cue in social media. Individuals are able to make identity claims that can be vetted by others in these innately interactive channels (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009).

The relational status in many SNSs comes from system-generated categories and is vetted by third parties (i.e., romantic relationship partners) who may validate or refute the display of a relational status. Moreover, should others know the relationship to be real, they can legitimate the claim either through agreement (e.g., posting, "liking," or otherwise endorsing the relational claim) or not refuting it. In contrast, should others know the relationship to be fake or overstated, they can publicly contest the claim and presentation. On Facebook, an individual's relationship status is limited to several pre-populated categorical options (e.g., single, in a relationship, engaged) and can be displayed with detailed information (e.g., tagging a relational partner to provide greater corporeally anchored credibility). Thus, we conceptualize a SNS relationship status as a cue high in warranting value. Given the dynamics of relational characteristics, the high-warrant cue of a SNS relational status should warrant both relational commitment as well as its antecedents.

4. Relational investment and characteristics

4.1. Investment model

Rusbult's (1980) investment model (IM) provides a theoretical grounding to understand factors associated with relational commitment—a foundational construct within romantic relationships. The IM succinctly describes the effect of relational

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