

# Romantic Relationship Development in the Age of Facebook: An Exploratory Study of Emerging Adults' Perceptions, Motives, and Behaviors

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## Abstract

Social networking sites are becoming a prevalent form of communication in the escalation of romantic relationships. An online survey ( $n=403$ ) addressed emerging adults' experiences with Facebook and romantic relationships, particularly a unique affordance of Facebook: the ability to declare oneself as "In a Relationship" and actively link one's profile to a romantic partner's, commonly known as going *Facebook official*. Results identified common social perceptions of the meaning of this status (regarding commitment, intensity, and social response) and both interpersonal and social motives for posting it on Facebook. Additionally, sex differences were identified in perceptions of meaning, wherein women felt this status conveyed commitment and intensity moreso than men did. Implications of this discrepancy on heterosexual relationship satisfaction and the prevailing role of technology in romantic relationships are discussed.

## Introduction

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNSs) have become an integral medium for communicating within and about interpersonal relationships. The SNS Facebook has become ubiquitous, with over 900 million users worldwide.<sup>1</sup> College students are particularly heavy users of the site, averaging 1–2 hours on the site each day.<sup>2</sup>

Despite Facebook's growing dominance, limited research has addressed its implications for our romantic relationships, both on- and offline. The public nature of SNSs makes it easier for individuals to share information about their romantic relationships to a wider network of people and to do so much more quickly than via traditional face-to-face communication. Before SNSs, some members of the extended social network (e.g., friends living in other locations) may never have learned that two people are romantically linked unless they talked to the person(s) directly. Now, in mere seconds, Facebook can broadcast the news across the user's network, which according to recent studies of college students averages between 200 and 250 friends.<sup>2</sup>

Given Facebook's ascendancy in social interaction, it is essential to investigate its role in romantic relationships. Particularly, we consider how this technology may be related to the way emerging adults (aged 18–25) experience romantic relationship escalation given they are the most avid users of social media and also at the prime age for romantic rela-

tionship development and exploration.<sup>3–5</sup> Social networks are a key determinant in romantic relationships,<sup>6,7</sup> and recent research has identified how SNSs may influence our well-being.<sup>8</sup> Understanding how romantic relationships unfold on Facebook is essential in understanding the growing role of SNSs in interpersonal communication.

### *Social networking sites*

SNSs are Internet services with the ability for a user to (a) create a public or semipublic profile, (b) identify and connect with other users, and (c) trace these first-degree connections to identify members farther out in the collective network.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to previous forms of online interaction, SNSs like Facebook are anonymous and predominantly used to connect with one's existing offline networks. Because social networks often play a significant role in romantic relationships,<sup>7,10</sup> it is likely that Facebook is affecting the way users initiate and escalate romantic pursuits as well as the way social networks perceive these relationships.

A typical pattern for romantic relationships a decade ago was to meet someone, get his or her phone number, and then call to arrange a date.<sup>3</sup> Although previous research has shown that SNSs play a role in existing romantic relationships,<sup>11–14</sup> there is little information on how SNSs or other technologies facilitate relationship initiation and whether this traditional pattern has changed.<sup>3</sup> Some research has indicated that SNSs

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are replacing traditional methods of communication in the initial steps of relationships, particularly among emerging adults,<sup>14,15</sup> but thus far no quantitative findings have explored how Facebook may be changing the traditional meet, phone call, and date process typical of romantic initiation.

**RQ1: How do emerging adults use Facebook affordances and other communication technologies in the initiation of romantic relationships?**

One affordance of many SNSs is the ability to publicize one's categorical relationship status (e.g., single, dating, or married). Facebook made a significant change in how relationship status is conveyed in an SNS profile: it allows users to identify and link to their romantic partner on their profile. For instance, rather than merely listing Ann's status as "In a Relationship," Facebook enables Ann to connect with her significant other in her relational status as "In a Relationship with Jamie Smith." On Ann's profile will be an active link to Jamie's profile, which in turn would read "In a Relationship with Ann Jones" and provide a link to Ann's profile. Publicizing this relationship status is known among users as going *Facebook official* (FBO).<sup>12,14</sup>

Because this status requires both parties to consent to the posting and thus acknowledge the relationship amidst their social circles, going FBO has significant implications between partners as well as between the couple and the external network.<sup>14</sup> Currently, no quantitative research exists exploring how users interpret FBO relationships and what their motives are for pursuing or proclaiming that status within their own romantic relationships.

**RQ2: How do emerging adults perceive a "Facebook official" relationship status?**

### *Men, women, and Facebook*

Consistently, research has indicated that men and women perceive romantic relationships differently and maintain different goals for pursuing them. The sociobiological approach to mate selection strategies argues that men and women evolved differently due to selection pressures related to successful mating and continuation of the species, and that sociocultural forces were shaped largely by the perpetuation of these strategies.<sup>16–18</sup> From a biological standpoint, females have the power to create offspring, which then require resources to raise and nurture. Males lack the power to reproduce. To that end, females benefit by being more selective in the mate selection than males because of the commitment and resources required to raise offspring. Males benefit by being less selective and seeking multiple mates to maximize the likelihood that their genes will perpetuate and survive. These differing needs, in combination with sociocultural forces, have yielded dissimilar strategies for men and women in choosing their partners.<sup>16–18</sup>

Though both men and women pursue both short- and long-term mating strategies, emerging adult women place a higher priority on invested romantic relationships than men,<sup>19</sup> and college women prioritize faithfulness and emotional closeness in their dating partners moreso than men do.<sup>20</sup> Thus, women want not only to secure commitment from the man, but also to protect their resources and minimize third party threats; they also want to advertise to other

women that the man is "taken."<sup>21</sup> Going FBO thus enables women to broadcast their committed relationship to others in their social network as a way to secure their resources and ward off other women. In contrast, the sociobiological perspective suggests that men may resist commitment while dating because of a greater interest in pursuing multiple partners.<sup>17,18,22</sup> Men report wanting a larger number of sexual partners than women do,<sup>23</sup> and emerging adult men are more likely than women to prefer casual sex over dating.<sup>24</sup> If men advertise that they are in a committed relationship on Facebook, it limits their potential to date multiple women simultaneously. Like women, however, men may also have motives for going FBO; they may wish to deter women's other potential mates and secure exclusive access to their romantic partners.<sup>22</sup> Thus, men may opt to go FBO to ward off competition.

Compounding these differences in romantic relationships are observed differences in SNS use, possibly due to existing sex role expectations. Women report more frequent use of SNSs than men,<sup>25</sup> perhaps because greater pressure is placed upon women to maintain and nurture relationships.<sup>26,27</sup> U.S. cultural norms suggest that emerging adult men may wish to maintain autonomy and appear single, whereas women want to appear in a committed relationship, because these statuses reflect normative sex roles and yield social rewards.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, college men suggest that they often receive negative feedback from male friends if they go FBO,<sup>14</sup> likely because of the social expectation that men should seek multiple partners. College women, on the other hand, experience positive feedback when they go FBO,<sup>14</sup> perhaps because women are expected to be in a committed relationship. Perhaps also due to these expectations, women are more likely than men to express affection over Facebook, and men find Facebook affection less appropriate than women do.<sup>28</sup> Being FBO may be perceived as such an affectionate expression.

Given these differences in men's and women's perspectives on relationships and SNS use within them, we anticipate that men and women may have different perceptions of and motives for making a public proclamation about their commitment through Facebook. Hence:

**H1: Men and women will report different beliefs about the implications of being "Facebook official."**

**RQ3: What motives do emerging adults have for becoming "Facebook official"?**

**H2: Men and women will report different motives for becoming "Facebook official."**

### **Method**

Participants ( $n=403$ ) were recruited by soliciting from courses at a large Midwestern university and offered extra credit in exchange for completing the survey. They included 129 male and 274 female Facebook users ranging in age from 18 to 25 ( $M=20.79$ ,  $SD=1.41$ ) who identified as White ( $n=306$ ; 75.9 percent), Black/African/African-American ( $n=33$ ; 8.2 percent), Asian/Asian-American ( $n=32$ ; 7.9 percent), Latino/a/Hispanic ( $n=12$ ; 3 percent), multiracial ( $n=11$ ; 2.7 percent), and other ( $n=9$ ; 2.2 percent). Participants identified themselves as heterosexual ( $n=386$ ; 95.8 percent), bisexual ( $n=9$ ; 2.2 percent), or gay/lesbian ( $n=6$ ; 1.5 percent). Thirty-one participants were excluded from analysis due to extensive missing data or being outside of the emerging adult

age range.<sup>4</sup> Participants reported spending an average of over 2 hours ( $M=122.12$  minutes;  $SD=99.55$ ) each day actively using Facebook (i.e., not just logged in, but using the interface).

### Measures

**Romantic relationship initiation behaviors.** Six behaviors used to escalate romantic relationships were identified from previous research (ask for a phone number, call, have a face-to-face encounter, hang out casually in groups, go out on a date, and text)<sup>3</sup> and four Facebook behaviors were added from previous research (seek out the person's profile, send a friend request, Facebook message, and post on the person's wall).<sup>14</sup> Participants were asked to put these behaviors in chronological order starting with the first thing one would do when pursuing a romantic interest.

**Definition and experience of FBO.** Based on previous findings,<sup>14</sup> items were developed to reflect how emerging adults perceived the status and experience of going FBO. Participants indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) their agreement with statements, such as "A Facebook official relationship means both partners are exclusively dating each other," "When a couple goes Facebook official, other people talk about it offline," and "If I see that a person is in a Facebook official relationship, I assume they might still be dating other people" (reverse coded).

**Motives for going FBO.** Derived from previous research,<sup>14</sup> 13 items were developed to reflect motives for going FBO. Participants indicated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) their agreement with reasons for going FBO, such as "To express their commitment to their romantic partner," "Because they want attention," and "To say, 'this person is mine.'"

### Results

For RQ1, an application of Friedman's test revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the perceived order of these behaviors, indicating distinct steps in the romantic initiation process [ $\chi^2(9, n=386)=1501.76, p<0.0005$ ]. A *post hoc* analysis was conducted using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with a Bonferroni correction and six ordered steps were identified. Participants indicated that the following sequence represented the typical romantic escalation: first, they met the target face to face; second, they went to Facebook to inspect the target's profile and friend request them; third, they requested the target's phone number; fourth, they began texting the target and inviting the target to hang out in group settings; fifth, they began to post on the target's Facebook wall and engage in Facebook messaging; and finally, they would call the person or go out on a date with them.

To address RQ2 regarding the meaning of FBO, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis. A principal components analysis was conducted using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. A scree test was administered and three factors were identified: *commitment*, *intensity*, and *social response*. Two items failed to load and were dropped. Items and factor loadings can be viewed in Table 1.

H1 suggested that men and women would perceive "Facebook official" differently. Men and women were compared

TABLE 1. PERCEPTIONS OF FACEBOOK OFFICIAL

Items	Components		
	1	2	3
Social response ( $\alpha=0.71$ )			
FBO becomes news in social circles	<b>0.611</b>	0.127	0.047
People talk about FBO offline	<b>0.607</b>	0.100	0.250
People comment on FBO status	<b>0.783</b>	0.033	-0.004
People "like" FBO status	<b>0.779</b>	0.127	0.136
No one notices when a couple goes FBO (R)	<b>0.560</b>	0.005	0.194
Intensity ( $\alpha=0.67$ )			
FBO is another step after exclusivity	0.110	<b>0.665</b>	0.073
Relationship has stabilized	0.191	<b>0.599</b>	0.174
Couples are sure relationship will last	-0.095	<b>0.778</b>	0.025
FBO means a couple is serious	0.139	<b>0.773</b>	0.112
Commitment ( $\alpha=0.69$ )			
Dating exclusively	0.124	0.083	<b>0.919</b>
Refer to each other as "boyfriend"/"girlfriend"	0.192	0.107	<b>0.882</b>
Are still dating other people (R)	0.115	0.127	<b>0.507</b>
Variance explained (%) (total 54.58%)	20.14	17.35	17.04

Factor loadings based on a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation.

on the three identified factors. Women ( $M=4.49, SD=0.64$ ) were more likely than men ( $M=4.24, SD=0.64$ ) to endorse the idea that going FBO means a relationship is exclusive and that partners are not dating other people [ $t(400)=3.68, p<0.0005$ , Cohen's  $d=0.37$ ]. Women ( $M=3.57, SD=0.68$ ) were also more likely than men ( $M=3.42, SD=0.70$ ) to believe that FBO represented a serious step in the relationship that indicated long-term stability [ $t(401)=1.96, p=0.05$ , Cohen's  $d=0.20$ ]. Women ( $M=4.11, SD=0.51$ ) were also more likely than men ( $M=3.98, SD=0.52$ ) to feel that going FBO was a social act that would garner attention both online and offline [ $t(401)=2.46, p<0.05$ , Cohen's  $d=0.25$ ]. H1 was supported.

To address RQ3, motives for going FBO were submitted to an exploratory factor analysis. A principal components analysis was conducted using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization. A scree test was administered and two factors were identified: *interpersonal motives* and *social motives*. Two items failed to load and were dropped. Items and factor loadings can be viewed in Table 2.

H2 suggested that men and women would cite different reasons for going "Facebook official." No differences emerged between men and women for interpersonal motives [ $t(401)=0.87, p>0.05$ ] or social motives [ $t(401)=1.03, p>0.05$ ]. H2 was not supported.

### Discussion

Building on previous work,<sup>11-14,28</sup> this exploratory study offers new insights into the role of technologies, particularly Facebook, in emerging adults' romantic relationship development. Emerging adults' interpersonal and social beliefs about FBO relationship statuses were elaborated and sex

TABLE 2. MOTIVES FOR GOING FACEBOOK OFFICIAL

Items	Components	
	1	2
<b>Social (<math>\alpha=0.82</math>)</b>		
Because they want attention	<b>0.703</b>	-0.275
To brag about the relationship	<b>0.761</b>	-0.154
To show others the partner is taken	<b>0.607</b>	0.249
To say "this person is mine"	<b>0.692</b>	0.211
So that others can see they are in a relationship	<b>0.774</b>	0.062
To get revenge on others	<b>0.722</b>	-0.078
Because they need validation	<b>0.623</b>	0.276
<b>Interpersonal (<math>\alpha=0.75</math>)</b>		
To express commitment to their partner	-0.068	<b>0.818</b>
To let both partners know it is serious	0.053	<b>0.803</b>
To help define the relationship	0.136	<b>0.579</b>
To show the partner that they care about them	-0.014	<b>0.744</b>
Variance explained (%) (54.10%)	31.43	22.68

Factor loadings based on a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation.

differences emerged: women believe more strongly than men that FBO indicates exclusivity and seriousness. Women were also more likely than men to believe that FBO status yielded attention from their social network both online and offline. Participants also identified that there were both interpersonal and social reasons for wanting to go FBO, although men and women did not differ in their reasoning.

The finding that men and women differ in their perceptions of what it means to be "Facebook official" implies the potential for conflict in heterosexual relationships. In a study on relationship terminology,<sup>29</sup> researchers found that participants used different terms to classify the same described relationship; one partner might label a relationship as "romantic" whereas another might describe it as "casual." They concluded that these labels indicate that individuals may see the relationship as being at different stages of commitment or development. In this study, however, we found that even if partners are using the same label, it can have different meanings. Men were less likely than women to believe that FBO implied exclusivity in the relationship and more likely to believe that a person might still be seeking other partners outside of the posted relationship. Thus, this may yield strife in heterosexual relationships as one person in the dyad perceives the relationship to be exclusive although the other does not. Previous research found that disagreements about posting the FBO status are linked to relationship dissatisfaction.<sup>12,14</sup> This study identified one possible explanation: placing a label on the relationship that means different things to each partner may cause turmoil. When partners agree to post this status on Facebook, women may take this as a sign of commitment and exclusivity that men do not intend to convey to their partner. Further, men may incorporate this strategy to secure the fidelity of one woman while continuing to pursue other relationships simultaneously because they do not view FBO as seriously as their partner does. This discrepancy in the *actual* status of relationship partners—instead of what Facebook says—may cause distress and even dissolution.

In this study, emerging adults acknowledged that a technological affordance—a process of button clicking on a Web site—is an interpersonally significant experience that affects how they interpret the intensity and level of commitment of their romantic relationships. Further, the choice to escalate the relationship and go FBO is not merely a decision between the couple like "going steady" used to be. Rather, clicking the button to achieve this status between the couple also simultaneously serves as a broadcast from the couple to their respective networks. Thus, by design, taking a step up the relationship ladder in modern emerging adult relationships is as much a social experience as an interpersonal one. Due to the public nature of the announcement and the potential for feedback, it is possible that social networks have more influence than ever before on the intra- and interpersonal decision making that takes place during romantic escalation. Future research should explore how these interpersonal and social motives for going FBO predict relationship outcomes or if partners' differing motives lead to dissatisfaction or distress in the relationship.

This study was designed to ascertain the beliefs of emerging adults about the role of Facebook in romantic escalation given that this is the period in which romantic relationships are salient and individuals typically learn about relationships with a number of partners.<sup>4</sup> Given the growth of Facebook use across adults of all ages, these perceptions should be tested among other age groups. Future studies should also explore these processes among gay and lesbian populations given they were underrepresented in this study. Also, given over 80 percent of Facebook users are outside of the United States and Canada,<sup>1</sup> research in international domains is imperative.

In sum, this study revealed that, in the age of social media, communication technologies are not merely devices that facilitate our interactions. Rather, they are tools that are establishing, shaping, and even defining our relationships.

#### Author Disclosure Statement

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