Remaining Facebook versus Face-to-Face Friends after a Romantic Breakup:
Factors that Distinguish Those Who Do from Those Who Do Not

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ABSTRACT

The study queried whether the relational characteristics that influence individuals to remain face-to-face friends with former romantic partners following a break up also impact the decisions to remain Facebook "friends" with former romantic partners. The sample included over 300 young adults who met two criteria: They maintained an active Facebook account and reported a pre-marital, romantic break-up. The results revealed that the variables that impact post-dissolution friendship decisions of former romantic partners in the face-to-face context (quantity of relational investments, relational satisfaction, and relational disengagement strategies) do not impact former romantic partners' decisions to maintain or dissolve Facebook friendships. These results provide evidence that romantic partners may experience different relational motivations and dynamics in online versus off-line venues.

KEYWORDS

REMAINING FACEBOOK VERSUS FACE-TO-FACE FRIENDS AFTER A ROMANTIC BREAKUP

Researchers continue to examine factors associated with former romantic partners remaining face-to-face friends following their breakup (e.g., Griffith, Gillath, Zhao, & Martinez, 2017; Hadden, Harvey, Settensten, & Agrew, 2018; Mogilski & Welling, 2017); however, very few studies have examined friendships between former romantic partners on social media venues such as Facebook. We could locate no previous study that examined whether the same factors (that distinguish former romantic partners who elect to remain face-to-face friends from those who do not elect to remain friends) were equally effective in distinguishing those who remain Facebook friends versus those who do not.

Given the prevalence of social media in contemporary life, our study endeavored to discover the extent to which the research findings concerning face-to-face friendship between former romantic partners apply to social media friendships. To that end, we examined factors that might distinguish college students' who remain Facebook friends with former romantic partners versus those who elect to "unfriend" former partners. The term "unfriend" comes from Facebook's friend-managing features that allow a user to "delete" a fellow user from his/her list of Facebook friends and thus prevent the former friend from directly viewing the user's profile and status updates.

Existing literature examining face-to-face relationships suggests that the quantity of relational investments (Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006), disengagement behaviors used in the breakup process (Banks, Altendorf, Greene, & Cody, 1987), and relational quality prior to the breakup (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011) influence the decision to (or not to) remain face-to-face friends with former romantic relationship partners. We directly examined whether these three factors differ significantly across two groups: former romantic partners who elect to remain Facebook friends versus those who do not.

Originally intended to connect college students at one U. S. university, Facebook now serves 1.47 billion daily active users worldwide (Facebook, 2018) and is widely considered the most used social media outlet on the planet. Research on Facebook primarily focuses on two topics: privacy/self-disclosure (e.g., Bazarova, 2012; Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012) and, more relevant to the current study, social networking (e.g., Craig & Wright, 2012; Crosier, Webster, & Dillon, 2012). For a detailed review of this literature, see Caers et al. (2013).

SOCIAL NETWORKING ON FACEBOOK

Crosier et al. (2012) argues that humans have a genetic predisposition to desire connection and that online social networks provide venues for satisfying that desire. Facebook creates an environment where sharing and connecting with others is easier in many ways than traditional forms of face-to-face interaction. Indeed, Facebook "friendships" involve extremely low commitment. Users can elect to (a) post (or not to post) updates on their thoughts and activities for friends to read as well as (b) read (or not read) friends' posts. Activity leads to a sense of "keeping up with" people but Facebook allows users' to maintain "friend" status whether or not they actively engage on the website. Similarly, friendship status does not change if users spend a few minutes a day on the website or a few hours per day. Such a disassociation between investment and relationship status stands in sharp contrast to face-to-face relationships that seem to fade away if friends do not stay in regular contact as well as regularly share information and/or experiences together.

Researchers argue that, in addition to creating connections, Facebook also plays a vital role in the maintenance of personal relationships (Craig & Wright, 2012; Ledbetter & Mazer, 2014) and the enactment of relational closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Perceptions of similarity and attraction may be heightened in text-based online interactions due to lack of nonverbal feedback, thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to more sharing (Walther, 2011). Furthermore, the prevalence of social media can intensify the quantity of information being shared, resulting in greater access to personal information--meaning the sheer number of Facebook users creates an environment in which users share massive amounts of information. Additionally, some aspects of the quality of shared information can facilitate network growth and perceived closeness. One such piece of information is "relationship status." Here the user indicates whether he/she is in a romantic relationship, and, if so, names that partner. Every member of both relational partners' networks receives a notice when a relationship status is announced or altered. Thus, social networking has evolved from making connections based on "likes" and "comments" to an on-going part of romantic relationships where partners declare they are "in a relationship with" each other, integrate their social networks, and connect with each other (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014). Indeed, romantic partners may "struggle to maintain privacy and independence" on Facebook (Fox et al., 2014, p. 527).

FACEBOOK ROMANCE

In 2010 alone, 43,869,800 people changed their Facebook relationship status from "In a Relationship" to "Single" (Wasserman, 2010). In one interview study, many college students characterized Facebook as "a threat to their romantic relationships" (Gershon, 2011) for multiple reasons including inducing feelings of anxiety and jealousy. Indeed, Facebook permits users to stay in touch with former romantic

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