Reading Romance: The Impact Facebook Rituals Can Have On A Romantic Relationship

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Abstract
Despite the fact that research has identified intimate relationships as being an important factor in how people look to present themselves on social networking sites, there still remains a lack of research in this domain. By comparing trends inside the rituals of the relationship status, public displays of affection and photographs on Facebook this paper examines how they can impact a relationship in the offline world by discussing the extent to which the design and features of the site can impact the emotional repertoire of its users. Results highlighted that the website has the potential to provide a new focus and channel for a person to depict where their relationship is going, feeling rules can be attached to certain rituals on the website. By focusing on the relationship status option and public displays of affection, it was emphasized that these rituals accentuate themes of possession and territory and can be used to configure a couple's superiority. The discussion on photographs illustrated how the website can bring problems and jealousy to the relationship, particularly when the 'ex-partner' was taken into account.

Keywords
Online-intimacy, feeling rules, Possession, Jealousy, Online Rituals, Facebook

Introduction

Since their introduction on a mass scale in the mid-1990s, electronic media have redefined the way people communicate with each other. Emails, forums and instant messaging have placed a whole new meaning on the term community (Tufecki, 2008). Social networking sites (SNSs) have been around for many years, the arrival of Facebook has taken their use to a completely new level. While Facebook is not particularly unique in comparison to other SNSs, it is its popularity that sets it apart from the others. Since its

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inception in 2004, the growth of Facebook has been nothing short of astounding. It is currently the world's 4th most visited website, the most popular social networking site and has over 500 million users. According to the website's press room, 50% of its users will log on in any given day, with the average user spending 55 minutes each day on the website[2]. With the advent of Facebook usage on mobile phones, its popularity has been developed further. We are now looking at a situation where electronic communication is with us at all times and the boundaries between internet and real life communication are becoming increasingly blurred (Steinfield, 2009). With the average user having 130 friends on the website we are no longer worrying about 'bowling alone', but rather when will we get the chance to do anything alone.

Users have a mixture of what would be termed as weak ties (friends a user has a marginal link to), and close ties (friends with whom they maintain a close relationship) in one place. Developing weak ties is one of the primary sources for people using Facebook (Ellison, 2007; Walther, 2009). Romantic relationships may only represent a small part of a person's Facebook usage it is nevertheless the most public place a couple will represent themselves. Muize (2009) found there was a correlation between the time a user spends on Facebook and relationship jealousy, while Boyd (2008) and Lewis (2009) showed Facebook to be an environment that can impact upon an intimate relationship. Much of the literature, however, has focused on the value of maintaining weak ties and enhancing social capital (Lewis, 2009). This paper will take a different stance and compare how certain rituals on Facebook can impact a person's intimate relationships on the offline environment.

Through eleven semi structured interviews of undergraduate Facebook users this study will look to compare attitudes within the relationship status option, public displays of affection (PDAs) and photographs. The discussion will question whether they have certain emotional attachments to them which can impact upon a relationship in the offline environment.

Theoretical Framework

A social networking site can be seen as an online community where a person is offered the opportunity to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system. Users then become 'friends' with other users with whom they share a connection (boyd, 2002). In addition to allowing others to view their profile, the user is offered the opportunity to explore the list of connections made between those and others within the system (boyd, 2007). Meeting strangers has often been pinpointed as one of the main characteristics of these sites, this is not the primary function of many of them, including Facebook (Lewis, 2009). SNSs are seen as more trustworthy as they are based on people knowing each other (boyd, 2007). 'Participants in social networking sites are usually defined by their real names and often include photographs; their network of connections is displayed as an integral piece of their presentation' (boyd, 2002:72).

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[2] http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

Indeed much of the negativity directed towards these sites has been based around stalkers and sexual predators. This is inclined to take on a rather exaggerative tone (Shariff, 2009); SNSs are a valuable way of maintaining friendships especially amongst the college age group where having friends is an important way of building social capital (Ellison, 2007).

Facebook was created by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg in 2004. Originally it was intended to cater for a niche community of Harvard graduates. By September 2006 as demand grew it was opened up to other colleges and then schools (Martinez, 2009). A year later it was opened up to the general public, where it has grown and is continuing to grow amongst the older population. Facebook offers many of the same elements which are offered by other social networking sites such as blogs, photo sharing, game applications, online forums and groups. Students tend to use their real names and engage in high levels of disclosure on the website (Tufekci, 2008)1. Photographs play an important role for any Facebook user with over 300 million images being updated daily and that can be swapped between users. Much of the research conducted on Facebook and SNSs in general has focused on impression management, friendship performance, networking, online/offline communication and privacy issues (Boyd, 2007). The importance of Facebook in maintaining weak ties has continually been emphasized (Ellison, 2007; Walther 2008, et al). While keeping in touch with people is an important aspect of the website, Walther (2008) also identified a surveillance function attached to people's use of the website. People use the site to investigate the activities of friends and see it as an important self-preservation tool. Walther sees Facebook as reflecting the desire for perpetual contact and questions the social implications of this: 'An increased awareness of others actions has potentially important implications for how we relate to others and how we understand ourselves' (2008:1034).

Erving Goffman's (1957) seminal work 'The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life is of much relevance to SNS theory; his belief that individuals always try to convey their best self in any given situation, and that a person will adapt themselves in order to maintain a stable self-image for their audience is of relevance due to the degree of control one has over their webpage (Ellison, 2006). However, this was questioned by Walther and Parks (2007) who found that postings made about pictures and comments on the owner's profile page by others were perceived to be more truthful to observers than what the owner was saying about him. Pro social statements by peers are important to self-presentation. This is where the notion of 'friending' comes in. Friending is where a user is asks to be added as a contact on another's profile page, accepting the offer gives the person access to their page, it can be seen as a form of minor intimacy that signals trust (Grimmelman, 2009). While in some ways SNSs offer a person more control over their performance, the ease at which people become Friends means that the performance is taking place in front of a large number and variety of people. McCarthy (2002) found that individuals had an average mean of six cluster types: family, place of work, neighbours, people from one's current work colleagues, school friends and networks via another person. On sites like Facebook they are a single category of friends (Boyd, 2006). Having to perform to such a cluster of friends simultaneously can lead to

problems that can distort performance. Goffman feels that time and space is necessary for performance, and that incompatible parts of different lives should be kept separate from each other (Ritzer, 2009). Sites like Facebook remove the privacy barriers that people have between different aspects of their lives (Boyd 2002). Taking this further, this study will explore how a performer incorporates a romantic relationship through certain ritual on Facebook, and if this correlates with how a couple sees their relationship in the offline environment.

Relationships and Facebook, what we know and how we can learn more

Boyd (2008) and Paskoe (2008) conducted research on how teenagers deal with relationships on SNSs. Paskoe's chapter on intimacy offered some interesting insights into how relationships begin and end via 'mediated publics'; however it seemed to be as much about the trials and tribulations of being a teenager as it was about being in a relationship. Boyd - in mentioning friendships - talked of deleting a previous partner as something which is intentionally designed to hurt the other person. Sveningson Elms (2007) study of Swedish students on SNS 'Lunarstorm' showed that unlike normative displays of heterosexual masculinity men were more likely to emphasize their romantic relationships and feelings more proportionately than they would outside the website. She theorized that men wanted to display aspects of hegemonic masculinity, the question of whether this is the same for Facebook and whether there are rituals which allow this to happen has thus far not been answered.

Overall, qualitative work on the college age group relationship and Facebook has been largely ignored in the literature. The college relationship differs from the adolescent relationship in terms of stability and independence. Bogle's (2008) showed the college relationship to be more unpredictable and variable, yet one is still more likely to follow the adult rules of romance. For a student being in a relationship is no longer a first time experience in the way it is for adolescents (Raz, 2007). What they experience is a different form of intimacy than the adolescent experience described by Paskoe. For this reason a detailed research on the experiences of relationships through SNSs for this demographic, would be of value.

Both Rodriques (2009) and Lewis (2009) focused on what Facebook and 'friending' brings to student life, and mentioned the importance of intimate relationships as being part of their Facebook use, but this was not the primary focus of these studies. For example, Rodrigues felt that 'stalking was a common feature in particular of ex boyfriends' but we are not informed of the emotions this generates in people and what a person does to deal with or alleviate such emotions. As previously mentioned Muize's (2009) quantitative study 'Does Facebook bring out the green-eyed monster of jealousy' came to the conclusion that time spent on Facebook increases Facebook-related jealousy. This research finished with the statement 'Facebook provides a superb forum for the study of relational jealousy and our study only serves as a starting point' (2009: 1035). Lewis draws similar conclusions and feels that future research should investigate

intimate relationships as opposed to close friendships and weak ties, which is what much of the literature on the website has focused upon so far.

The internet has long being identified as a place where gossip is becoming more difficult to control, the salient features of SNSs means that it is becoming more difficult to escape incidents which may tarnish a person's reputation (Solove, 2007). The use of real names in friend lists, Facebook gifts, blogging, poking, uploading photographs, the inducement to increase social currency[3] are all applications and activities on Facebook which encourage intimate gossip related activities that can impact upon the relationship. The comments of Dr Brenda Wiederhold editor of Cyberpsycholgy and Behaviour add further reason to be enthused about the importance of this research.

> The research on university age individuals is an excellent starting point to begin asking how this new forum might be implicating the dynamics of adult relationships and other social processes'[4]

Method and Data

This is a qualitative study consisting of 11 semi structured interviews (7 women and 4 men) with college students in the 3rd and 4th year of their undergraduate degrees. Participants ageing from 21 to 24 were acquired through snowball sampling and the interviews lasted from one and a half to two hours. Participants ageing from 21 to 24 were acquired through snowball sampling and the interviews lasted from one and a half to two hours. The respondents were all heterosexuals, from Dublin and attended one of the three main colleges in the city, Trinity College, Dublin Institute of Technology and University College Dublin. All were white Caucasians. Certain prerequisites were asked of the interviewees beforehand, that they were regular users of Facebook; they had been a member for over a year and a half and used this for up to one hour per day. It was asked that they were currently in or had been in a romantic relationship in the time they had been in college. The definition of a romantic relationship was to be left up to the discretion of the interviewee; naturally this led to quite a broad analysis with some of the relationships described only lasting two months while others lasted up to three and a half years. According to Furman (2006), a broad definition of a romantic relationship means that difficulties arise in determining the generality of the findings. However, this was deemed to be the best option as Furman continued to state that the norms regarding what a romantic relationship is supposed to be keep changing which can make studying them difficult, romance amongst this age group in particular is becoming more broad and more ambiguous (Bogle, 2008). Allowing the individuals to decide was felt to be the best way of covering this age group.

The interviews began with the users discussing their general reasons for using Facebook, how long they have been using it, their likes and their dislikes, who they

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[3] The Stanford Facebook class currently has an exercise to see which person can accumulate the most Facebook friends (Grimmelman, 2009)

[4] http://www.scienceblog.com/cms/does-Facebook-usage-contribute-jealousy-relationships-23794.html

converse with on the website. The questioning then focused on their romantic relationships, how they met in the offline environment and how this was incorporated into how their presentation on Facebook. The rituals of the relationship status and public displays of affection were themes that began to emerge from early interviews. Since jealousy had been identified as an issue previously the questioning included certain probing questions which asked the interviewees to focus if they ever had been and to recall incidents which brought feelings of resentment or spite to the relationship. The study does have certain limitations particularly when examining the differences between the descriptions offered by the interviewees and their actual online behaviour. The subjects did permit a viewing of their Facebook profile during the interviews and their profile pages concurred with the descriptions offered during the interviews. While this was helpful for verification purposes, time constraints meant that following the interviewees Facebook actions over a period of time was impossible. This may have led to more fruitful interviews and findings especially with regard to the myriad of ways a relationship can be incorporated into Facebook. Instead operating through grounded theory and an insider perspective the findings looked to focus on specific topics and to increase future interest in this area.

A general description of participants Facebook use

The general attitudes and beliefs on why the respondents used Facebook bore similar results to previous research on the university age group. Each of the participants labelled Facebook as being an important part of their daily lives and an essential part of their college experience. Their main reasons for using Facebook were to keep in contact with people; especially those not living in close proximity, to keep up to date with what was going on around them and for sharing interests and information. The amount of friends' people had on the website ranged from 150 to 632, those who had the higher amount of friends were more enthusiastic both about Facebook in general and how their relationship was viewed on it. The presentation of the romantic relationship was not considered to be an important aspect of their Facebook use; Laura's boyfriend was not even a member of the website. However most did state they viewed their partners Facebook page every time they logged on and had an interest in their activities on the website. Despite not being important it did play a role in the overall make up of the time they spent on the website, it was also identified that many of them knew their partners Facebook passwords. Kiera was the only one who availed of the opportunity to use this when she hacked into her boyfriends account to alter his relationship status after he had jokingly changed it to 'In an open relationship with Kiera'.'Stalking'[5] was identified as an important aspect of Facebook use, this was something which was generally only done with Facebook friends that they were closest to in the offline world. This was similar to other findings (Lewis 2009, Walther 2008 et al). The ex-boyfriend was also identified as

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[5] Stalking: Looking at somebody's profile without leaving a comment is a common feature of Facebook, The most common passive activity and has been referred to by Walthers as a form of surveillance.

someone being stalked, particularly for those who would no longer have reason to contact their previous partner. None of the participants identified this as being a problem to their overall relationship and felt that it was nice to see that they were doing fine, especially if they had not seen or contacted them in a long time. Kiera and Laura stressed that this had no impact on their current relationship. Passive activities such as stalking had little impact on their offline relationships, this may contribute to occasional conversations with their partners about 'what so and so was doing' or if an event was coming up. Active activities such as contacting the ex-boyfriend or putting up photographs had more of an effect in bringing stress or eliciting emotions to a Facebook users intimate relationship. This can be demonstrated by focusing on the rituals which coerce active actions amongst users such as the relationship status.

The relationship status: How it impacts ones feelings in the offline world.

The changing of the relationship status has the ability to alter certain dynamics of the offline relationship. This resides in the fact that this ritual allows the couple to make the relationship 'official' in an instantaneous collective manner. The process of bringing over 150 friends together in one place in the offline environment to announce the emergence of a relationship is something that is unlikely to happen. It was something that each person had discussed with their respective partner outside of Facebook before a decision was made. Despite being offered a variety of choices, this paper argues that the ritual of changing ones relationship status option acts as what Hoschild (1984) would term as a feeling rule reminder. Feeling rules are social norms that tell us what to feel, when to feel, where to feel, how long to feel, and how strong our emotions can be.

For the interviewees who decided to change their status to 'in a relationship with' this public declaration to their friends was to be seen as the relationships natural progression, a step forward. It was also seen as a mechanism to stop people from flirting with their partner; phrases like 'to show people she is taken' and 'to scare other guys off,' suggest an element of possession or ownership attributed to the changing of the status. The following description by Michelle attributes feelings of happiness to this ritual as a result of the certainty and assurance it brought to her relationship.

> This was a big step in our relationship, I remember thinking oh if he doesn't mind his friends seeing it, then it must be okay... when I first met him he would have been a bit of a player... It was a little extra fix and a safety net. I was very happy with it' (Michelle)

Interestingly, the factors that brought elation in Michelle caused feelings of apprehension in Elaine who only changed her status so as to not 'rock the boat' in her relationship. What she perceived her boyfriend as wanting to show to other people made her feel uncomfortable.

> I wasn't that keen on showing it off to other people. I just don't understand the reasoning for it, he just wanted me to think he was the most important, it was kind

of like to show I do have a boyfriend, he means a lot to me so don't come in on my territory. It's like wearing a wedding ring (Elaine).

Comparing it to a weddings and engagements is befitting, making a public declaration to friends, family and acquaintances is something which previously would not have been done until ones engagement to be married. The status option can add new depths to the relationship, something which the person may not feel comfortable with. As relationships amongst the university age group become more transient offline rituals which may exude feelings of possession, exclusivity and responsibility are also decreasing. Bogle exhibited that sex has become rather frivolous amongst this age group and respondents admitted they had engaged in sexual relations before they changed their status or were sure of the 'security' of their relationship. If it can be seen to add an extra layer of security it also poses the question of whether the status option accelerates relationships emotionally. Focusing on the opinions, attitudes and ideals of the minority who decided not to change their status when in a relationship exemplifies this further.

The decision not to change their relationship status and to leave it as blank is something discussed offline between the partners, and the main reason for not changing it was due to reasons of privacy. The fact that people learn about the relationships of their friends through the newsfeed, was cited by all interviewees and this group felt it unnecessary to make such a public declaration to their friends. One of the main characteristics of this group was that they were more defensive about their decision, and used more negative language in their descriptions of those who did decide to change their status referring to them as 'childish, attention seekers and ignorant'. The defensive tone adopted by this group is not only directed at those who change their status but more so at the site in general for adding to this pressure. This was enough for Stephen to make a public proclamation about this:

> "Under your photo it asks for a phrase where it says you can write something about yourself and mine was 'as if I'm going to put up my relationship status like an ad. In terms of myself I'm with the system it but I want to limit that to my own terms so I'm not going to say I'm in a relationship or that I'm single. It's not peoples business" (Stephen on why he doesn't change his status).

Despite the rather strong connotations that changing one's status indicates, this group felt that they were going 'against the system' and had to put on an ironic tone to defend themselves. By ignoring the conventional route that a relationship should take they are aligning themselves as being against the rules of Facebook on this issue. In this way a couple who have agreed and discussed why they are not going to change their status, are using the feeling rule to show an element of defiance. Christina's reasoning for not changing her status depicts this type of emotional exchange:

> Ah we just kind of saw no need for it, everyone thinks Facebook's so big or whatever it's ah... We think it's a little childish in a way, like we're fine with the nothing.

Suzanne who had been dating her boyfriend for six months referred to her friend joking with her over the fact that she had not made her relationship 'official' yet. Taking Hoschild's (1984) belief that humour is often used as a mechanism which lightly corrects feelings and adjusts them to convention, Suzanne believed her friend to be subtly trying to alter her emotions to fit in with the 'official' rules of a relationship on Facebook. The pressure to change her status came from her Facebook friends rather than within the relationship itself.

In comparing the two groups those that do decide to change their relationship status attach more meaning to their Facebook use. Sharing information, what their friends noticed thought and discussed about their profile page was important to them. Changing their status can be seen as an announcement that their relationship is now at a new level, largely because they attach such an importance to what their peers think of their profile page. This next level does have certain themes of possession and territory attached to it, and was not always to be seen as something positive for the relationship. On the other hand those who do not decide to change their status cite privacy as being imperative to their reasons, fear of making such a public commitment and the pressures they face from sources outside of the relationship mean they see this action as one of defiance and excuses have to be made.

Public Displays of Affection

If in some ways the changing of the relationship status symbolizes a possession and territory role being brought to the relationship, the enactment of this role can be seen through what the interviewees referred to as public displays of affection as will be discussed next. Putting up photographs, saying 'I love you' and 'I miss you' to their partner as well as making in-jokes that no one else would get were the clearest examples. PDAs have their offline equivalent, holding hands, kissing in public, engaging in activities such as kissing, cuddling in public can see as acceptable forms of couple behaviour in western societies (Bogle, 2008). PDAs were seen as a cause of irritation; the feeling that people should 'get a room' was voiced, and overall there was a consensus that some people become too personal on their pages. Unlike offline PDAs, these were not seen as natural, there was a feeling that it 'falsifies the relationship'; it was also questioned as to why people did not just phone or text their partner instead of writing something in public. Despite the fact that it annoyed people, making PDAs was something that the interviewees admitted to doing. Michelle said that her brother was disgusted at some of the comments she was making to her boyfriend, but continued to do it anyway because 'everybody does it'. However if it is something that people know others do not like them doing, and that they do not like to see themselves, what explanations is there for making such PDAs?

To understand this more clearly it is most helpful to view PDAs as couples creating a script, where they take on the role of a couple who are in love. Using love as a narrative has been described elsewhere (Giddens, 1992). What is interesting here is seeing PDAs as being part of a narrative that is no longer intimate; by posting PDAs the public is being

asked to be a witness to their love affair. Three respondents reported making PDAs because their partner had done it first, and they did not want to ignore them; a reciprocal rule here is part of the condition for making PDAs. This is logical as ignoring the gesture would be seen by all of their Facebook friends, something which the ideal partner would not do. Since people foster more of an impression from the comments made on a person's profile (Walther, 2008), a valuable asset to one's presentation, is to create a script where there is a degree of certainty that positive things will be said.

In Edward's case he didn't want to send PDAs to his girlfriend but she asked him outside of Facebook to post affectionate comments to her '*because she liked getting nice messages from me on her wall*'. PDAs can be seen as a rational, performative act where the feelings displayed are for the public domain, rather than for the couple themselves. Comments of 'I love you' and 'I miss you' are examples of surface acting on the forum. While this act could be seen as using the relationship for the purpose of self-promotion, this ignores the collectivism involved in making something like this happen. Not only are they doing something that people don't like, that they themselves may not necessarily like, it has become part of the relationship. In *The Managed Heart* Hoschild describes how people commercialize human feeling in order to sell a product. Here we could ask if people are acting out certain feelings on this public forum in order to sell the product of a loving authentic relationship.

Once again the idea of territory and possession was part of the meaning people gave for making such public displays of affection; they wanted to ensure that a 'presence' was there. Couples felt it was important to show others that they were in a loving relationship so they 'wouldn't get any ideas'. This can be shown most clearly in Elaine's case after she had left a comment on her ex-boyfriend's page. The next time Elaine logged on his new girlfriend had made loving comments, and had tagged him using romantic photographs of them, which Elaine felt were directly aimed at her. Elaine felt this was his girlfriend's way of telling her to 'stay away' and an attempt to make her jealous. Stephen also admitted to making displays of affection after a stranger had commented on his then girlfriend's profile, to 'show' people he was her boyfriend. If in some ways the changing of the relationship status symbolizes a possessive role being brought to the relationship, here we see the enactment of this role.

The other reason for PDAs is not aimed at any particular person as in the above example, but more so at the general audience. '*Romantic love is often shown as something that is authentic; it represents a sort of refuge in the chilly environment of our affluent, impersonal, uncertain society.*' (Boden, 2003; 88) In the same way that people seek to present the best of themselves on their page, they will also seek to present their relationship in its most idealized form as a means of affirming superiority. Goffman's belief that '*performers have a tendency to offer an impression that is idealized in several different ways*' *(1957:38)* can be echoed in this action. Again, there is more certainty involved in the portrayal of the self through a relationship, because it can be verified from another source - through PDAs with a partner. Portraying the ideal relationship to friends can be seen as an effort to demonstrate the love they have found, something that others should aspire to. In describing how they disliked PDAs the phrase 'get a

room' was mentioned. The comments about PDAs are more eccentric, 'tasteless' and 'overly personal' because the couple *wants* to be noticed. Making comments similar to others left on Facebook would not convey the feelings of romance that the couple is looking to convey to the public.

The ritual of PDAs not only represents possession, but they also act as a feature which aligns the couple's superiority. This can cause feelings of resentment amongst observers, as discussed, but it can have the opposite effect too, where a sense of envy is created. Four of the respondents admitted that when they were single they had looked at other couples and wished they were in a relationship. This was something which caused doubt in Nicola when she was single, which shows the possible effect PDAs can have on people.

> You feel the 'I wish I had what she was having' sort of thing;, sometimes when you are looking at your friends online in relationships, you kind of sort of give yourself a review and go wow 'should I be in a relationship or should I take my stand because I think I haven't found the right guy. You constantly find yourself, comparing yourself to other people. This never happened to the point where I'd change myself.

It should also be noted that the interviewees who admitted to engaging in PDAs most often were those who saw the positives in changing their relationship status to 'in a relationship with', the more overt ones Facebook personality is the more likely they are to engage with and be affected by these rituals. While this analysis did not seek a gender comparison in its objectives, it is interesting to note that the male interviewees were far more indignant in their belief that they would not have made PDAs without pressure from their partners; for female respondents there was much more of an emphasis on what their friends perceived their relationship to be like. For the minority which did not make PDAs, once again privacy and the 'refusal to participate in the Facebook game' were cited as a reason for this. While Gosling (2008) has been keen to emphasise that Facebook personalities are very similar to their real life characters, these people emphasised that their profile page bore no similarities to their actual personalities.

What was not shown from the interviews was whether PDAs made in a previous relationship could affect those in a new relationship. Laura was the only one who made mention of this when she said she deleted comments from 8 months previously, as she was worried that her boyfriend might take a look at them if he joined Facebook. The notion of the 'archived romance' questioned by Boyd (2008) did cause problems for couples in terms of photographs, and this will be discussed in the next section.

Photographs

For those in a relationship, photographs are likely to cause the most problems and evoke feelings of jealousy above anything else on Facebook. This was most noticeable in arguments between couples surrounding photographs taken from previous relationships they had been in. While photographs, love letters and gifts from an ex-partner in the offline world can be excluded from a new relationship quite easily, on social networking

sites this is not necessarily the case. Deleting messages or untagging oneself from a photograph is more likely to be perceived as a public statement. When her new boyfriend asked her to take down pictures of her ex-boyfriend Suzanne refused saying that the only way someone would see them was if they were 'stalking her profile and digging real deep'. James on the other hand was successful in getting his girlfriend to take down pictures of his ex after they had made him feel angry and jealous. In the previous parts of this analysis we discussed how one's Facebook page acted as a collective representation for the couple. Here we see conflict arising over who is in control of the page and further enactment of the possessive role that Facebook brings to the relationship. Edwards's account of the problems on his ex-girlfriends page very clearly illustrates the new paradigm that Facebook has brought to the relationship.

> My girlfriend uploaded some nice pictures of me and her after a party and then immediately her ex-boyfriend really nastily put up pictures of him and her while they were going out, as if he owned her, I made her defriend him but then she refriended him a bit after. It was always a big strain having him around. (Edward)

The ex-boyfriend that Edward was referring to live in the United States and could not have impacted on their relationship in the offline world at this time. The strain he was exerting on their relationship could only have come from communicated media. This is a more extreme example, as the Facebook actions which caused problems to the relationship came from a source that they had no control over. Edward's version of the story is valuable to this research as in the space of two sentences he outlines the confusion that being in a relationship has brought to the possessive nature of the page. First of all he was angry because his girlfriend's ex-boyfriend was doing something which he perceived as symbolizing ownership. By asking her to delete the ex-boyfriend Edward was using his position to exercise control over her page. By refriending the ex-boyfriend, his girlfriend was demonstrating that she was the owner of the page. Not only is this an example of feeling rules, but the uncertainty over how to govern these rules and entitlements led brought problems to the relationship.

Photographs were also problematic for both Laura and Michael, who became jealous as a result of pictures taken of their partners on a night out, which were put up on their 'friends' page. Michael said he felt jealous but did not bring it up with his partner as it would have sounded 'ridiculous'. Suppressing feelings in this instance is another example of emotion management. For Laura the ambiguous pictures caused feelings that made her question her boyfriend's fidelity.

> I saw him in pictures with another girl on a night out, just in each picture being with that girl and in each picture hugging and cuddling…I thought maybe there's something more to it and you just don't know how to interpret these things…especially in the beginning where from previous experience you're unsure.

Laura mentioned that her present boyfriend was not even on Facebook, yet the website still had the ability to bring problems to her relationship. This and the other

examples reflect the ease at which difficulties can be brought to one's relational performance, especially if they are coming from external forces. While certain emotions and feelings were intensified by using Facebook, in none of these cases was an attempt made to dilute the feelings or resolve the situation through the website. Again this is an example of emotions being managed to ensure that nothing takes place within a public setting. Laura explained *'I never told her fuck off leave my boyfriend alone. It's not something I'd do…Nobody does that'.* Offline their feelings may have changed but the online persona remains the same in situations like this. Facebook may have the ability to bring problems to a relationship although it is not seen as an alternative way of managing these problems. Once again the rational manner in which the student presents themselves means that impulsive behaviour, like an attack on those that they perceive as being a threat to the relationship through the site, is unlikely to happen. This would also be a characteristic of this age group in the offline world, repeated studies have alluded to university students seeking to have as many friends and acquaintances as possible during this period of their lives.

SNS in their general make up actively encourage users to download and share photographs; it was identified as being an important part of how people experience Facebook. The problems they bring to a relationship have no offline equivalent and are something which couples would not have had to contend with before their insurgence. Not everybody interviewed had portrayed a previous relationship on Facebook; therefore some of the problems discussed by others would not have had an impact on them. Those such as Laura who saw themselves as being private in their relationships presentation could still be impacted by the myriad of photos that are passed between networks within this age group. Unlike the other rituals outside sources can have just as large an impact on the romantic relationship on Facebook.

Written comments by ex-partners were also cited as factors which cause jealousy by Stephan and Michelle although both agreed that they would never bring this up with their partners as they might be just talking about sport or what they are currently up to. To comment on this would be 'ridiculous' and 'unnecessary', this analysis would argue that the cliché 'a picture speaks a thousand words' appears to hold true in factors that can inhibit a relationship on Facebook or can engender certain feelings to the relationship.

Conclusion and Discussion

In outlining relational attitudes to the relationship status, public displays of affection and photographs this study focused on a minute aspect of peoples Facebook use, the results revealed a new dimension for decision making, public presentation and arguments which can impact a relationship in the offline world. Most importantly the design and features of Facebook can have an emotional impact on its users and the format of online presentation can intensify feelings of possession and jealousy in an intimate relationship. A public display of unity is of immense importance to how a person depicts the seriousness of their relationship.

By comparing attitudes within rituals this research also denoted themes of possession and ownership in people's descriptions of what went on in their online representation. The ex-partner is a factor for those that have one on the website, the fairly tenuous links of friendship ensure that even when respondents identified their previous relationship to have ended acrimoniously it is likely that they will be friends on the website in the long run. This has the potential to disrupt the relationships idyllic presentation and lead to friction over who exactly is in control. Everybody interviewed has been influenced by these rituals, sometimes in very different ways. It should be acknowledged that how people present their relationships on Facebook bore similarities on how they reflected on their relationship in the offline world. One interviewee felt that that the Facebook arguments she described were similar to the arguments she would have with her boyfriend in the offline world and that it was part of how they functioned as a couple.

Outside of the specific themes discussed, attitudes towards Facebook use in general bore similar results to those described in other studies, they were positive towards the website, amassed a wide variety of friends, used it for information about parties, study groups, and gossip from individuals that they were friends with. It was only when the comparison turned towards specifics within the rituals that deviations were to be seen; not only in how they viewed the website but also in how they approached various aspects of their romantic relationships. General attitudes towards Facebook did not label romantic relationships as an important aspect of the website, however by comparing attitudes within the specific rituals this research would argue that the relationship played a major role in analysing how they use Facebook and in turn the website could be used as a mechanism for monitoring how a relationship develops.

Looking at each ritual helped highlight the concept of feeling rules, the person begins to see themselves as being part of a collective as a result of their relationship; with this comes the question over who is in control of the profile page and the content on it. This could be seen within the rituals; the relationship status option has the ability to influence the direction of a relationship which was emphasized in the positive and negative feelings identified in discussions about the changing of the relationship status. Those who refrained from changing their status were aware of the connotations within this symbol, thus opted for a more defiant stance in their reasoning for not doing so. Themes of possession were also evident in those who decided to make PDAs; here people looked to create a script in order to add leverage to their relationship, this example of the collective is also capable of bringing about jealousy in people observing this form of behaviour. The most negative aspect of this collective representation can be seen through photographs, where partners were asked to delete couple photographs from a previous relationship. The widespread use of photographs amongst this age group also means that the relationship can be affected by outside influences, the ex-boyfriend refusing to take down pictures or flirtatious pictures from nights out can highlight cracks in one's relationship presentation.

With research of this type every question answered leads to several new sub questions. A gender comparison of how people approach these rituals is something that

could yield some interesting results in exploring the feeling rules evident within a modern relationship. Shao (2008) suggests that university aged homosexuals are less forthcoming in presenting their relationship on SNS, researching whether conservative features of the relationship status and PDAs imply a sovereign heterosexual space could yield some interesting results. Hoschild (2003) observed that middle class people engage more in emotion management than working classes, who instead focus on behaviour. This study focused on middle class students, would a study on working class people of this age group yield different results, such as approaching those who are trying to impact upon the relationship in the offline world? Finally, it would be of interest to study if similar feeling rules are attached to older couples who may have a lengthier past on the forum but also have a more professional appearance with regard to their page (Dimarco, 2008).

Focusing on the end of relationship and how people change their appearance from being in a relationship to being single again is something that would be a worthwhile area of study especially amongst this age group where this is something that is still likely to happen. This research has emphasized the extent to which ones offline relationship and feelings can be intensified by their presentation in the online environment. Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of how the rules and rituals of social networking sites can impact human emotions and experience especially with regard to our most intimate relationships.

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