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The Connection between Online Social Networking and Relationship Conflict

Sonja Hebert, Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Elizabeth Yost Hammer, Psychology and Center for the Advancement of Teaching

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the connection between online social networking usage and relationship conflict in the relationships of college students. The participants in this study were 18 college students, mostly African American females. The study is centered on a non-experimental design that used surveys to collect data and measure each of these variables. Several t-tests were conducted to analyze the data and only one finding was significant. This significant finding suggests that frequent online social networking is negatively related to relationship conflict. Unexpectedly, the finding was the opposite of the hypothesis, which expected that frequent online social networking usage would be positively related to frequent relationship conflict. Limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Key Terms:
- Jealousy
- Online Social Networking
- Relationship Conflict
- Relationship Threat
- Relationship Maintenance

Sonja Hebert is a Psychology major with a minor in English from Harvey, LA. Upon graduating in May, she plans on enrolling in graduate school to study Rehabilitation Counseling. Although this is her first project, Herbert plans to conduct more research in the near future. Her research interests include technology and its impact on personality and relationships, as well as how it has changed social interactions, for better or worse. She presented this project at Xavier’s Festival of Scholars. Herbert’s initial involvement with this project began in her Advanced Research class taught by Dr. Elizabeth Yost Hammer.
Keeping in touch has never been easier. As long as you have access to an Internet connection and some type of smart device (laptop, PDA, etc), you can have access to communication such as email, chat rooms, and online social networking websites such as Facebook. In the past it was necessary to put forth some effort to make telephone calls or to actually meet with people in person to maintain a close relationship. In the coming years it will be interesting to see what types of effects this shift in communication will have on both the generation born into the technology age as well as those older individuals who have transitioned into the technology age. Progressive technology is changing the way we communicate and is making our lives more accessible to people whom we would call “strangers” in addition to people with whom we already have a preexisting personal relationship. This is especially the case for young, technology-savvy individuals, such as college students.

According to Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010), 87% of college students use online social networking (OSN) websites on a regular basis. Research by Goodings, Locke, and Brown (1998) describes OSN websites as “virtual communities” that have extended and, in some cases, even replaced traditional face-to-face interactions. This relatively new form of communication provides a different platform for individuals to display themselves, their interests and opinions. OSN also allows users to display other aspects of their personal lives to friends, family, and even to complete strangers (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). Thus, individuals use OSN to maintain established relationships and to form new ones. Using this platform of convenient communication with an unlimited number of peers could potentially affect individuals who are in a monogamous relationship.

The fact that OSN displays information that would otherwise be unavailable to an individual’s partner makes OSN a potential source of information for jealous partners in a romantic relationship (Muise et al., 2009). When both members of a monogamous relationship use OSN and are able to view each other’s profile, there is a possibility that one or both partners will be tempted to use OSN to monitor their partner’s social interactions. According to Wise, Alhabash, and Park (2010), OSN websites are used more for an active form of social searching than for browsing, direct communication, or impression management. This means that people use OSN websites, such as Facebook, in order to gain some type of information, whether it is information about a social event, contact information of a classmate, or information about who a romantic partner is interacting with in his or her spare time (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke 2010). Components of OSN websites such as: profile information, picture comments, “newsfeeds”, event pages, chat, and inbox messages facilitate each of these examples of information seeking (Muise et al., 2009).

For the purpose of this study, relationship maintenance includes the actions taken to preserve a harmonious, romantic relationship. When using OSN for relationship maintenance, it is important to consider the concept of jealousy. For the purpose of this study, jealousy is defined per White (1981) as “a complex of thoughts, feelings and actions which follow threats to self-esteem and/or threats to the existence or quality of [a] relationship” (p. 24). Research suggests that monitoring a romantic partner’s behavior is a response to jealousy that is motivated by relationship maintenance (Guerreo & Affifi, 1998). Due to the information stated above about OSN, it is my belief that OSN facilitates this response of jealous partners and may even be one of the causes of jealous partners in romantic relationships. In contrast to the other responses to jealousy that are outlined by Guerro and Affifi, such as cordial conversation with one’s partner to express jealous feelings and being more
affectionate than usual towards one’s partner, monitoring the social interactions of one’s partner may be beneficial to the jealous partner because his or her partner does not necessarily have to know about it. This is especially true when the monitoring is done via the convenience of OSN websites.

An issue with actively monitoring a romantic partner’s social interactions via OSN websites is that the profile owner may not be fully responsible for all of the information on his or her profile (Walther, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Tong, 2008). A portion of the OSN profile information available to the public is authored by the profile owner (e.g. an “about me” section) and another portion of information is authored by contacts or “friends” of the profile owner (e.g. profile or “wall” comments and picture comments) (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). The latter serves as a prompt for the profile owner to communicate with the contact who authored the comment. The content of this communication can be taken out of context by other contacts of the profile owner, including the profile owner’s romantic partner. If this happens, and the information is not preferable to the profile owner’s romantic partner, it is likely that jealousy can follow, which can ultimately lead to relationship conflict in the form of confrontation. A second issue with monitoring a romantic partner’s social interactions via OSN websites is that the actual relationship between one’s romantic partner and a third party can actually be meaningless to the profile owner, even though it appears to be of substance to the profile owner’s romantic partner (Tong et al., 2008).

Jealousy and the actions it may encourage, such as OSN monitoring, are examples of relationship threat. For the purpose of this study, relationship threat is defined as the action or condition that leads individuals in a monogamous relationship to feel uneasy about the status of said relationship. Relationship threats, in this case OSN monitoring, can cause someone to have a false sense of security because it seems like he or she has all the answers. In some cases, this may be true, but if in reality things are not as they seem on these OSN sites, then unnecessary relationship conflict can be a result of confrontation about these assumptions. For the purpose of this study, relationship conflict is defined as the on-going, unfavorable change in accustomed, romantic relationship behavior (specific to a particular romantic relationship) due to argument or disagreement caused by a relationship threat. If left unresolved, relationship conflict, can lead ultimately to the termination of a romantic relationship.

Expanding upon current research, this study makes a specific connection between OSN usage and relationship conflict. Previous research indicates a connection between OSN usage and jealousy. However, jealousy is an example of a relationship threat which, according to this study’s definition, can lead to the more inclusive category of relationship conflict. Since college students are frequent users of OSN websites, such as Facebook, I am interested in exploring how their romantic relationships are affected, if at all, by the use of OSN. I hypothesize that frequent use of online social networking is positively related to the occurrence of relationship conflict in the relationships of college students.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 33 participants was obtained through Xavier University of Louisiana’s Psychology Department subject pool. However, only 18 of the surveys were acceptable for analysis because there was a participant constraint that required the participant to be in a current romantic relationship for at least three months in order to participate in the study. Participants were predominately African American, female, college students.
Materials

To measure online social networking use, an original ten-question survey was used. Only two out of ten questions were used in analysis. The first question was, “How often do you access online social networking websites?” The options for this question were: “Never,” “More than Once a Day,” “Daily,” “Weekly,” and “Monthly.” The second question was, “How much time do you spend using online social networking websites in one sitting?” The options for this question were: “Half an Hour,” “1-2 Hours,” “2-4 Hours,” and “5+ Hours”. Higher numbers indicated more online social networking usage.

To measure relationship conflict, questions were selected from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). The original scale has 38 items, 19 items referring to participant-initiated conflict and the same 19 items referring to participants’ report of partner-initiated conflict. Only items “a” through “l” were used; the other questions were omitted for ethical reasons. For example one of the omitted questions asked about assaulting someone with a firearm. If a participant reported that they did do this, then the researcher would be required to report it to legal authorities, and the survey would no longer be anonymous. A sample question from the questions actually used in the survey was, “How many times have you done or said something to spite your partner?” Items are scored on a scale of 0 to 6. Higher numbers indicated higher conflict.

Procedure

This was a non-experimental study. Participants came to designated classrooms to participate in the study. Upon arrival, participants signed and returned informed consent forms. Then, participants independently completed the surveys. This took about 20-30 minutes each session, and there were three sessions total. All submitted questionnaires were anonymous. Participants received written debriefing forms after turning in their surveys.

Results

Because of the structure of the surveys used in this study, a series of t-tests were conducted in order to analyze the data. In general, t-tests are used to look for differences between two means. Before explaining each of these t-tests further, it is important to mention that the survey that measured relationship conflict divides relationship conflict into two categories: participant-initiated conflict and partner-initiated conflict. Each of the following t-tests compared means for each category of relationship conflict, for a total of four t-tests. The first set of t-tests compared the conflict means of two groups that represented how often online social networking is used by the participant. These two groups were “rarely” and “frequently.” These groups were derived from question two on the original survey that measured online social networking usage. These first two t-tests were insignificant. For the first t-test, which compared participant-initiated conflict means of the two groups “rarely” and “frequently,” \( t = .18, df = 6.8, p = .86 \), two-tailed. The means were 24.00 for “rarely” and 22.86 for “frequently.” For the second t-test, which compared partner-initiated conflict means of the two groups “rarely” and “frequently,” \( t = .38, df = 5.6, p = .71 \), two-tailed. The means were 20.25 for “rarely” and 18.50 for “frequently.” This means there was no significant difference between the means for each group. Thus, neither the participants nor their partners were more likely to encounter relationship conflict based on how often each uses OSN.

The second set of t-tests compared the conflict means of the two groups that represented time spent using online social networking in one sitting. The two groups were “less time” and “more time.” These groups were derived from question three on the original survey that measured online social networking usage. This second set of t-tests yielded one insignificant finding and one significant finding. The t-test of
“time spent” using online social networking and partner-initiated conflict was significant ($t = 2.20$, $df = 13.00$, $p = .043$, two-tailed). The partner-initiated conflict mean for the group that spent “less time” using online social networking is 21.50. The partner-initiated conflict mean for the group that spent “more time” using online social networking is 13.666. This means that the group that spent less time using OSN had more partner-initiated conflict than those who spent more time using OSN. For the fourth t-test that produced an insignificant result and compared participant-initiated conflict means of the two groups “less time” and “more time”, $t =1.52$, $df = 7.8$, $p = .148$. The means were 25.8333 for the “less time” group and 17.67 for the “more time” group. Therefore, there were no significant differences between these groups. Thus, neither the participants nor their partners were more likely to experience relationship conflict based on the amount of time each spends using OSN.

**Discussion**

In my hypothesis, I expected that frequent online social networking usage would be related to a higher occurrence of relationship conflict. Three out of four t-tests revealed no significant results. While the fourth t-test yielded a significant result, this finding provided evidence against my hypothesis. In fact, this finding suggests that more time spent using online social networking is negatively related to the occurrence of relationship conflict, which is the exact opposite of my hypothesis. Partner-initiated relationship conflict is the category of conflict that had a significant result within the t-test. The reason for this may be that the participants were biased and may have been more inclined to reveal conflict initiated by their partner rather than the self-initiated conflict. Because this finding is not consistent with past research, more research needs to occur. More data needs to be collected and analyzed in order to understand the reasons that frequent online social networking usage is not related to frequent relationship conflict.

Based on previous research, OSN is popular among college students. This study reinforces that idea because only two out of eighteen participants reported that they did not use OSN. This information also supports the idea that OSN extends social interactions beyond face-to-face encounters for college students (Goodings, Locke, & Brown, 1998). However, the fact that the only significant finding does not support my hypothesis suggests that some past research included in this study is not relevant to this particular study. For example, Wise, Alhabash, and Park (2010) stated that social searching was more prevalent than social browsing for OSN users. It may be true that social searching is more common than social browsing, however, this social searching is probably not done in the context of relationship maintenance. Instead, more social searching may be done when looking for friends, both new and old.

The fact that the only significant finding of this study is that OSN usage is negatively related to relationship conflict may be good news for those in relationships. Perhaps OSN is one less thing couples need to worry about negatively impacting their relationships. If the same finding is expressed in future large-scale studies, then it will help relationship counselors to focus on other sources for conflict rather than wasting time discussing trends in OSN usage when dealing with couples who are experiencing relationship conflict.

There are several limitations in this study. The first limitation is that the surveys that measured each variable were flawed. When developing my hypothesis, I expected to use a correlations test to test the relationship between the two variables. But because of the structure of the surveys, it was not possible to do a correlations test, which may have provided more meaningful...
data. Secondly, participation in this study was low; I was expecting at least 40 participants, but ended up with only 18. Another limitation with this study is that data was only collected from one partner in the romantic relationship. In order to be both fair and accurate, data collection from both partners may be necessary.

Suggestions for future research include adding a third variable of jealousy. Measuring jealousy or jealousy tendencies in a romantic relationship may help in making a different connection between relationship conflict and online social networking usage. Researchers may also want to explore how this topic is related to Internet addiction, since the concept of monitoring partner behavior via online social networking was mentioned in past research. Also, it seems reasonable to consider how online social networking relates to both same-sexed and opposite-sexed platonic friendships.

Overall, this topic will continue to be important in our ever-evolving technological society and should be explored in as much detail to show what the effect of this technology is on social interactions. Although this particular study did not yield significant results in support of my hypothesis, it is my belief that this research is still important to the field of psychology. Reasons that support this belief include the possibility for improvement in the study. If this same study was conducted again with necessary changes and improvements, then there is a possibility that there will be different findings that might actually support the original hypothesis. In contrast if the same findings were discovered through the execution of an improved study, then it would be important to note that online social networking has a positive relationship with successful romantic relationships. Either way, this research will serve as a fundamental basis for the continued study of this topic.

References


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