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Social Media and Relationship Development

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Gretchen Kelmer
August 2013
Advisor: Howard J. Markman
Abstract

The present study examined the use of social media to represent romantic relationships among a diverse, national sample (N=831) of Facebook users aged 20-37. Taken together, results from this study indicate that relationship representation via Facebook is associated with various aspects of commitment, including couple identity, prioritization of one’s relationship, and commitment to the future, and was also associated with stability of the relationship over time. Social media relationship representation was also found to be associated with lower levels of sexual infidelity, alternative partner monitoring, and partner’s jealousy, as well as higher levels of perceived social pressure from friends and family for one’s relationship to continue. No gender differences in relationship representation via social media were found among individuals who were currently in relationships, but single men were found to be more likely than single women to display their single status via Facebook. Among single individuals, displaying one’s single status via Facebook was associated with sexual activity with a higher number of sexual partners. These results are consistent with hypotheses based on commitment theory, self-presentation theory, and economic signal theory. Results are discussed in light of commitment theory, and the fact that many social scientists have perceived a recent societal trend toward ambiguity in relationship development processes among emerging adults. The findings lend support to the notion that social media provides individuals and society with the opportunity to adopt clear,
public emblems of commitment, thought by many social scientists to be on the decline. The importance of the volitional nature of social media relationship representation is considered, as are the clinical, methodological, and societal implications of the present results. Limitations of this study and the challenges and possibilities of social media in the field of relationship research are discussed, and recommendations are made for future research.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Specific Aims

An overarching goal of the present study was to examine the use of social media to present information about romantic relationships or lack thereof and determine what, if anything, Facebook profiles reveal about their creators’ romantic relationships, particularly in regard to commitment. Incorporating theoretical perspectives as well as previous research where it exists, commitment processes are examined through the lens of social media self-presentation and the ways in which social networks provide modern emblems of commitment in romantic relationships are discussed. Findings from this study provide clues regarding the social meaning of these emblems and help us consider the possibility that social media functions are actively shaping relationship development processes on a societal level. This study also provides information and understanding that can guide future relationship research using the potentially valuable research tool of social media. The specific aims of the present study were as follows:

1. To examine the association between individuals’ relationship representation on Facebook profiles and various aspects of commitment: a) couple identity and prioritization of the relationship, b) commitment to the future, perceived likelihood of breakup, perceived likelihood of eventual marriage, and actual relationship stability over time, c) alternative partner monitoring, sexual infidelity, and jealousy, and d) social pressure to maintain the relationship.
2. To test theory-based hypotheses regarding gender differences in commitment processes through the lens of social media relationship representation.

3. To explore the social meaning of Facebook relationship status by determining whether for individuals who are single (not currently in a relationship), presenting oneself as “single” on one’s Facebook profile (as opposed to not posting any relationship status or posting an inaccurate relationship status) is associated with particular attitudes or behaviors including dating activity, sexual activity, active partner seeking behavior, and desire to be in a relationship.

Background

The importance of social media and its relevance to relationship research.

Facebook, the world’s largest social media outlet, with over 901 million active users, is currently the second most visited website in the world, just behind Google (Alexa Internet, Inc., 2012). During March 2012, 398 million people reported that they had been active with Facebook on at least 6 of the past 7 days (Facebook, 2012), and it has been shown that the average Facebook user spends 55 minutes per day on the website (Facebook, Inc., 2010). Facebook is certainly not just an American phenomenon; 80% of Facebook users are outside the United States and Canada and Facebook is now available in over 70 translations, with additional languages constantly in development (Facebook, Inc., 2012). Given these statistics, it seems important to consider the growing cultural significance of social media and its relevance to researchers in the field of relationships.

Social media deserves the attention of relationship researchers for two reasons: First, from both a theoretical and methodological standpoint, social media provides a
potentially useful window through which to observe relationship development processes. Magnuson & Dundes (2008) point out that the prominent sociologist Erving Goffman (1959; 1979) advocated for the study of microcosmic social “portraits,” or “displays of the self that are devised for consumption by others (p. 240)” that “express a condensed view of a usually hidden social life (p. 239).” Goffman’s recommendation came decades before the first Facebook profile was created, but it easy to imagine the late sociologist’s enthusiasm for what seems to be an ideal “social portrait.” Second, as evidenced by the statistics above, social media is an active, powerful social and cultural force that has the potential to influence relationship development processes. Our understanding of romantic relationship formation, development, and functioning will benefit from a better understanding of social media’s role in these processes.

The role and influence of social media in today’s romantic relationships has attracted the attention of the popular media in recent years. Mainstream media outlets including TIME (Suddath, 2009), ABC News (Zaki, 2008), Glamour (Najafi, 2009), The Telegraph (Stevens, 2007), New York Daily News (Black, 2009) and The Wall Street Journal (Bernstein, 2009) as well as numerous new media outlets have commented, criticized, analyzed, celebrated, issued warnings and made assertions on the topic. Taken together, the most common message from the popular media seems to be that social media is changing the dating game and relationships as we know them.

Despite the apparent public interest in Facebook’s role in romantic relationships there is a relative lack of empirical research on the topic. Research on Facebook in general has burgeoned in recent years, focusing on characteristics of Facebook users, motivational factors driving Facebook use, self-presentation issues, interpersonal
functions of Facebook, and issues of privacy and disclosure (for reviews of the Facebook literature, see Wilson, Gosling, and Graham, 2012 and Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012). With the exception of a growing body of research on Facebook stalking, partner monitoring, and relational intrusion (e.g., Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011), surprisingly few researchers have looked at Facebook in regard to romantic relationships. Many of the studies that do exist have been limited to small and/or undergraduate samples (Papp & Cayemberg, 2012; Dong et al., 2008; Muise et al., 2009) or samples comprised of the researcher’s own personal social network (i.e., the researchers’ own Facebook “friends”; Young, Dutta & Dommety, 2009; Magnuson & Dundes, 2008). The present study aims to address this perceived lack in research and begin to build an empirically-based understanding of the intersection of romantic relationships and social media using a large, diverse, national sample of young adults and robust measurement of key constructs.

**Facebook functions: Relationship status and primary photo.**

Facebook offers users a multitude of functions, applications, and potential uses, a comprehensive description of which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worthwhile to briefly review two of the Facebook functions most relevant to the representation of romantic relationships and the present study. The social meaning of these two functions and their significance to relationship development processes will be discussed in greater detail in a later section, but the following descriptions will provide a basic understanding for readers less familiar with Facebook.
First and foremost, Facebook provides the opportunity for users to designate their current relationship status, which is posted on the user’s profile and thus visible to those with access to that profile. Users must choose from a limited pull-down menu of options to define their relationship status. On Facebook, at the time of data collection, seven choices were offered: “Single,” “In a Relationship,” “Engaged,” “Married,” “In an Open Relationship,” “Widowed,” and “It’s complicated.” More recently, “Separated,” “Divorced,” “In a Civil Union, and “In a Domestic Partnership” statuses have been added to the pull-down menu. For couples in which both members are Facebook users, Facebook also provides the ability for the partners to “link” profiles, thereby announcing to other users not only individuals’ relationship statuses, but also information about to whom the individuals are partnered (e.g., “In a Relationship with John Smith,” with the partner’s name as an active hyperlink to his or her Facebook profile). The Facebook relationship status item was originally a required field, but as Facebook evolved and become more sophisticated and customizable, it became possible for a user to opt out of posting a relationship status altogether, thus removing the relationship status module from his or her profile.

The second function of Facebook that seems particularly relevant to relationship representation is the ability to post and view photographs. Facebook allows users to post photographs to their own profiles and the profiles of others and create photo albums accessible to other users. Facebook also allows users to “tag” themselves and other users in posted photographs, thus creating a link between oneself or the other user and the photograph. The posting and “tagging” of photographs provide another means of representing romantic relationships through Facebook. For example, a user may choose
to post a photograph of him or herself with his or her partner, date, or romantic interest. On Facebook, users must choose one photo to serve as a “primary photo” that appears prominently at the top of their profile and also appears next to all comments, messages, chats, and other postings throughout the site. If one were to browse through a random handful of Facebook user profiles, one would observe that it is not uncommon for users to designate a picture of themselves with a romantic partner as their primary photo. In this study, along with Facebook relationship status, the primary Facebook photo will be used to measure the degree to which individuals represent their relationships via social media and explore the implications for commitment dynamics in romantic relationships.

Overview of Introduction

In this introduction, I will address each of the study’s three aims, presenting theoretical rationale and specific hypotheses for each. The majority of my attention will be devoted to the study’s primary aim, which was to explore the association between various aspects of commitment and the representation of relationships on Facebook. In my consideration of the primary aim, I draw upon several theoretical perspectives, incorporating models from the fields of Psychology, Sociology, and Economics. Specifically, the theoretical rationale includes elements of Commitment Theory (Stanley & Markman, 1992), Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959), Signal Theory (Spence, 1974), as well as emerging thought on the role of ambiguity vs. clarity in relationship development. Because relationship development and social media is an emerging and understudied field, I also look to the popular media as a bellwether for relevant emerging issues on this topic.
The introduction is organized as follows: After a brief explanation of key terms, I will begin by introducing the construct of couple identity and relating it to the widely reported (though untested) scholarly observation that the process of relationship development is becoming increasingly ambiguous in modern society. I will then consider the possible role of social media functions as emblems of commitment that might serve to reduce ambiguity. Next, I will describe Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory of self-presentation and the development of individual identity and suggest a parallel with Facebook relationship representation and the development of couple identity. I will then consider Facebook relationship representation in light of Spence’s (1972) economic Signal Theory before moving into my discussion of specific hypotheses relating to the primary aim (exploring the relationship between various aspects of commitment and the representation of relationships on Facebook). These hypotheses are framed by several components of commitment identified by Stanley & Markman’s (1992) commitment theory and other commitment-related constructs.

I will then separately address the secondary aims of the present study, presenting the rationale and specific hypotheses for each, as well as findings from previous research, where it exists. In addressing Aim 2, which will explore possible gender differences in social media relationship representation, I will present previous research regarding gendered self-presentation online, as well as Stanley’s (2002) observations of men and commitment processes in support of my hypotheses regarding gender by relationship stage interactions in relationship representation. In addressing Aim 3, I will present previous research on the use of social media in support of my hypotheses regarding
representation of singlehood online and the sexual and dating behavior of individuals not currently in a relationship.

**Definition of Key Terms**

*Social media* refers to the numerous online and/or mobile outlets designed to provide means of interacting with other individuals and sharing information. Examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Pinterest. The present study focuses only on Facebook, because it is by far the largest social media outlet in terms of active users (Alexa Internet, 2012). The term *social media* is closely related to the term *social networking*, though the former is favored in this paper as it is more broadly inclusive and reflects the diversity of online and/or mobile social outlets currently available.

The term *social media relationship representation*, which will be used throughout this paper, sometimes in its shortened form, *relationship representation*, refers to the presentation of information about one’s own romantic relationship to others via social media. Although there are countless ways that an individual might engage in some form of relationship representation via social media, the present study will look exclusively at two forms: Facebook relationship status and primary Facebook photo. Thus, in this paper, *relationship representation* refers directly to the act of posting an accurate (a term defined below) Facebook relationship status and/or displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner.

There is a potentially confusing distinction between the term “relationship status” used generically and *Facebook relationship status*. The latter refers to what is currently posted on one’s Facebook profile in the relationship status module, regardless of one’s
actual romantic circumstances. Similarly, there is an important distinction to be made between stating that someone is in a relationship (no quotation marks, not capitalized), as opposed to stating that someone is “In a Relationship” on Facebook (quotation marks, capitalized). The latter refers to a specific relationship status option being posted on one’s Facebook profile, whereas the former simply refers to whether or not an individual is currently in a relationship. I have made every effort to make these distinctions clear in the text.

Whether or not an individual displays an accurate Facebook relationship status is one of the primary independent variables of this study. An accurate Facebook relationship status is defined as a relationship status that is both displayed (as opposed to no status being displayed) and designates a type of relationship that matches the type of relationship indicated by the participant on his/her survey in the ongoing longitudinal study used here. For example, an accurate Facebook relationship status for those who indicate that they are currently in dating relationships would be “In a Relationship,” for those currently engaged it would be “Engaged,” and for those currently married it would be “Married.” Examples of individuals who do not have an accurate Facebook relationship status would include a married individual who displays a Facebook relationship status of “Engaged,” “In a Relationship,” or “Single,” or an individual in a dating relationship who leaves his/her Facebook relationship status blank.

**Aim 1: Commitment and Relationship Representation**

**Couple identity & ambiguity in relationship development.**

A classic principle of commitment theory is that one of the most important hallmarks of commitment is the development of a sense of couple identity (Levinger,
Levinger describes that “…as interpersonal involvement deepens, one’s partner’s satisfactions and dissatisfactions become more and more identified with one’s own (1979, p.179). Couple identity refers to an individual’s sense of “we-ness” (as opposed to individual “me-ness”) in regard to his or her relationship, and has been shown to be positively associated with relationship quality (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Couple identity is not only a felt internal experience, but also manifests in the form external expressions and representations of commitment.

In recent years, psychologists and sociologists have observed a trend toward ambiguity in romantic relationship development, noting the decline of social scripts for courtship, clearly defined sequential stages of relationship progression, and objective emblems of couple identity. Although there are not published data to empirically demonstrate this trend toward ambiguity on a societal level, there are a number of scholars who have made this observation and believe it to be an important and consequential change in relationship development (Stanley, 2002; Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009; Stanley, 2002; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Dafoe Whitehead, 2002; Casper & Bianchi, 2001; Manning & Smock, 2005; Furman & Hand, 2006). Gone are the days of “getting pinned” and “going steady” note Stanley, Rhoades & Fincham (2011), who also present the decline in the practice of engagement and the increase in pre- and non-marital cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) as evidence of the growing trend toward ambiguity in emerging adults’ romantic relationships.

Stanley, Rhoades, and Whitton (2010) theoretically link ambiguity in relationship development to a number of relationship risks. Without clearly defined stages of
relationship progression, notes Stanley, the waters of commitment are muddied, making it difficult for two partners to arrive at a clear and mutual understanding regarding the future of the relationship or develop a sense of couple identity or “we-ness” as described above. Furthermore, Stanley argues that the clear, traditional courtship steps of yesterday served to provide scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1962) for the development of commitment and fidelity in preparation for marriage. Today’s emerging adults, who do not have the benefit of such scaffolding, may be at higher risk for negative relationship outcomes because it may be harder for two people to define clearly the nature of their relationship and its future.

It has been theorized that the rise in ambiguity in emerging adults’ romantic relationships is, in fact, motivated. Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham (2011) present a hypothesized explanation for this motivation that is largely based on attachment theory. They posit that some people may believe that ambiguity in a relationship will protect them from emotional pain if and when a relationship ends. In other words, ambiguity may be preferred to clarity when clarity brings up feelings of attachment insecurity and real risk for a relationship ending. They suggest that anxiously attached individuals may greatly desire an increase in commitment but fear pushing a partner away while avoidant individuals may prefer ambiguity because it allows one to take part in a relationship without having to commit any more than necessary. Furthermore, in a relationship where the two partners’ commitment levels are asymmetrical, Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham (2011) suggest that the more committed partner may opt to maintain ambiguity so as not to “rock the boat,” and the less committed partner may opt to maintain ambiguity so as
not to find him or herself facing a forced choice between stepping up commitment or ending the relationship.

In 2002, Stanley expressed concern over his observation that traditional emblems of commitment did not appear to have been replaced by anything. While Stanley and other social scientists believe ambiguity is generally on the rise, the past decade has seen an important socio-technological development that may represent a departure from the trend toward ambiguity in relationship development and provide a new set of courtship emblems: the representation of relationships via social media outlets such as Facebook. I will now consider the two functions of Facebook described above (relationship status and primary photograph) as potential emblems of couple identity and commitment.

**Relationship representation on Facebook as an emblem of commitment.**

Of the many Facebook functions that could be used to represent one’s relationship, the relationship status function seems to have the greatest potential as a means of clarification and ambiguity reduction. It is important to note that Facebook users are not given the freedom to define and title their own relationships, but rather, must choose from the small handful of pre-determined titles listed previously. With the exception of “It’s Complicated,” the available options leave little room for ambiguity.

It appears that Facebook relationship status may be the new wearing of a partner’s class ring or letterman’s jacket, getting pinned, or “going steady.” This tool within social media provides a way to produce a public symbol of commitment between two partners. In several instances, Facebook relationship status has been directly compared to a wedding or engagement ring by the popular press (Krafsky & Krafsky, 2010; Suddath, 2009; Zaki, 2009).
The adoption of the adjective “Facebook official” into popular parlance provides further evidence of the cultural significance of social networking relationship representation. UrbanDictionary.com, a popular website featuring user-generated and edited definitions of popular culture phrases and slang words, defines the phrase “Facebook official” as follows: “The ultimate definition of a … relationship; when on one’s Facebook profile it says ‘In A Relationship’ and your significant other’s name, as in ‘Are Adam and Courtney dating?’ “I don’t know, they’re not Facebook official yet.” An internet search for this phrase revealed that it is widely in use in popular women’s magazines, college newspapers, online advice columns and numerous blogs and message boards. In the Harvard University student newspaper, a young social commentator asserts that “Although usually uttered in jest, the statement ‘it’s not real until it’s on Facebook’ increasingly offers an accurate description of reality (Fiske, 2009).” In the only existing study looking at relationship correlates of Facebook relationship status, it was found that displaying a partnered Facebook relationship status was associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Papp & Cayemberg, 2012). Although there is relatively little empirical research on the topic, it appears from the popular media that the emblem of Facebook relationship status may be gaining an increasingly widely agreed-upon social meaning.

An interesting twist on the relationship status function as it relates to ambiguity and clarification is the available choice to opt out of posting a relationship status altogether, thus removing the relationship status module from one’s profile. A review of recent articles and blogs on the topic (and readers’ responses to these articles and blogs) revealed what appears to be a resistance to or backlash against the increased public
sharing of relationship information through social media (e.g., Downey, 2011; Suddath, 2009; Zaki, 2008; Bernstein, 2009; Stevens, 2007; Najafi, 2009; James, 2009; Gartner, 2007; Misick, 2010; Darcie, 2008; Dunnell, 2009; Strul, 2009; Axon, 2010). This backlash goes above and beyond the ongoing discourse regarding general internet safety and privacy (for discussions of privacy on Facebook, see Stutzman & Thompson, 2011, Houghton & Joinson, 2010, and Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008) and specifically targets relationship representation. Many articles (and readers’ responses) advocate not representing one’s romantic relationship online in any way, citing the possible professional and social ramifications of doing so and presenting personal anecdotes from those who have endured pain or embarrassment due to a breakup made public by Facebook, been pressured by a partner to change their relationship status before they were ready, or made one little click that caused havoc and misunderstanding. The popular press’ suggested solution to these potential problems, in many cases, is to reject the option to represent one’s relationship online altogether. In practical terms, this means opting to list no relationship status on one’s profile, not posting pictures of or with one’s partner, and limiting public communication with him or her. It is, of course, difficult to determine the degree to which such decisions could be motivated purely for privacy concerns that have real life implications, versus being manifestations, in part, of the Zeitgeist to keep unmarried romantic relationships ambiguous.

Because there are not published data indicating the percentage of Facebook users who opt out of the relationship status module, descriptive statistics from the present study provide valuable data regarding this phenomenon. By examining how often the decision to keep one’s relationship status private is made, the present study also attempts to shed
light on the issue of ambiguity in relationship development on a broad societal level. It is possible that the apparent backlash against relationship representation via social media might be partially explained by the general trend toward ambiguity in relationship development discussed in the previous section. If couples today are accustomed to not having to navigate or abide by public courtship rituals, and social media presents them with the opportunity and, in some cases, the obligation to do so, it may be quite uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Facebook relationship status can be thought of as a relationship tool with the potential to increase clarity. Findings regarding the degree to which society embraces and utilizes or rejects this tool provide important empirical information about general trends in relationship development.

In addition to the option of not posting a relationship status, the present study also takes into account the possibility that an individual’s Facebook relationship status may not accurately reflect his or her real-world relationship status. This discrepancy could occur for any number of reasons. It is not difficult to imagine a person displaying “Single” on Facebook in order to keep his or her options open while seriously dating someone, displaying “In a Relationship” in order to deter unwanted online advances, waiting to display “In a Relationship” until a romantic partner to changes his or her status first, or simply forgetting to make the formal switch after a real-world relationship transition. The present study provides information regarding how often individuals list a relationship status that is incongruent with their current circumstances and also attempts to determine the general level of congruence between partners’ relationship statuses. These issues have important methodological implications, shedding light on whether Facebook relationship status can serve as a reasonable proxy for real-world relationship
status in future research, and whether Facebook relationship status should be treated as a couple variable or an individual variable.

**Public displays of affection: Commitment and Goffman’s self-presentation theory.**

The power of many emblems of commitment, from posting “In a Relationship” on Facebook to getting married, is often related to the public nature of their enactment and the information they convey to friends, family, potential partners, and society at large (Kiesler, 1971; Rubin, 1973; cited in Rosenblatt, 1977). It has been suggested that public (as opposed to private) expressions of commitment may be especially effective in reducing ambiguity, leaving less room for misunderstanding between partners (Stanley et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2011).

The importance of public behavior is a key aspect of Goffman’s (1959) classic model of self-presentation and self development. Goffman uses a dramaturgical framework, meaning that he conceptualizes the process of social interaction as a theatrical play, and the individual as an actor on stage before an audience. With the goal of presenting a desired image to the audience, the individual engages in impression management by choosing the “costume,” “props,” and a manner of acting that highlight the desired aspects of the self in a given situation. An actor decides which aspects of his or her self are presented on stage and which aspects are to be kept backstage. Goffman contends that this process of presenting oneself to the audience is central to one’s development of a sense of self. That is, our performances shape who we are and who we believe ourselves to be.
I will now suggest that it is a logical extension of Goffman’s theory to apply his self-presentational model of individual identity development to the process of couple identity development and relationship representation via social media. Drawing on Goffman’s framework, Manago, Graham, Greenfield & Salimkhan (2008) commented on the self-presentational nature of communication via social media and suggested that social media is “transforming the human activity of constructing personal, social, and gender identities (p. 447),” pointing out that interactions via social media “are not just conversations between two people; they are conversations before an audience (p. 452).” Similarly, posting one’s relationship status or photos with one’s partner on Facebook are not just relationship decisions made between two people; they are relationship decisions made before an audience.

If we use Goffman’s (1959) framework and consider Facebook to be a stage, the creation and upkeep of one’s Facebook profile to be a performance, and one’s network of Facebook friends to be the audience, it seems likely that one’s representations of his or her relationships will not only reflect but also influence commitment processes in relationship development. The specific details of this fundamental hypothesis will be laid out at the end of this section, but a discussion of directionality in light of Goffman’s model is warranted.

It is important to note that the hypothesized association between social media courtship emblems and commitment is not believed to be unidirectional. That is, I posit that the degree to which an individual represents his or her relationship on Facebook is not simply a mirror on his or her current level of commitment. Rather, in accordance with Goffman’s model, I expect that an individual’s Facebook “performance” or self-
presentation is likely to have an active influence on his or her identity, decisions, and behavior. Through qualitative research with MySpace users, Manago et al (2008) concluded that “profiles can represent the authentic self, selected aspects of the multifaceted self, the idealized self, or experiments with possible selves (p. 451)” and can create “feedback mechanisms,” by which “the MySpace user can reify a desired self-image through an online performance to an audience. This performance may incarnate an idea of who one wants to be.” Thus, the act of performance itself, as well as the audience’s feedback serves to strengthen the presented aspects of the self.

Applied to relationship development, it is not difficult to imagine how these self-presentational feedback loops might serve to strengthen commitment. For example, a growing sense of affection and commitment might influence a newly paired couple to change their relationship status on Facebook from “Single” to “In a Relationship with [partner’s name]” and post a few photos of themselves having a fun night out on the town together. As they log in each day, each views his or her own revised “performance” and this new view of “self” as boy/girlfriend (i.e., couple identity) is reinforced. This view is further reinforced by feedback from the audience, the couple’s social network. In other words, it seems likely that commitment would lead to online representation, which would likely lead to more commitment. Based upon Goffman’s model, I predicted that clear, public emblems of commitment would result in stronger feedback loops, while such feedback loops may be weaker or nonexistent for those in less publicized, more ambiguous relationships.

If it is the case that public demonstrations of commitment are particularly effective in reducing ambiguity, it seems likely that the “stage” of Facebook may provide
a powerful means of clarification. Given the rapid growth in size and influence of social media, the availability of this particular set of emblems has the potential to be quite consequential on a societal level in terms of relationship development patterns and scripts.

**Signal value.**

The potential importance of public expressions of commitment is underscored not only by Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, but also the economic theory of signaling. In the field of economics, market signals are “activities or attributes of individuals in a market which, by design or accident, alter the belief of, or convey information to other individuals in the market (Spence, 1974, p. 1, cited in Rowthorn, 2002, p. 135).” Rowthorn (2002), who applied this economic theory to marriage, points out that because one’s intentions can not be directly observed by others, a person who is committed to another person must somehow manage to signal this commitment in a credible manner. Furthermore, a couple may wish to signal mutual commitment to the outside world. Marriage is one such signal that is available to some, though not all couples\(^1\), and it could be argued that posting one’s relationship status on Facebook is another.

The relative strength and credibility of a signal, sometimes referred to as its “signal value,” is largely determined by whether or not there are sizeable costs involved (Rowthorn, 2002). In the case of marriage, the potential legal, financial, and social costs are quite substantial. In the case of Facebook relationship status, the risks are probably

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\(^1\) In his chapter “Marriage as a Signal,” Rowthorn (2002) notes that “same-sex couples wishing to signal and reinforce their commitment would clearly benefit from an established institution that gave their relationship public recognition and legal backing (p. 149),” as would potential receivers of such a “signal” who are otherwise unable to gain information about the commitment level of a same-sex couple based on marital status.
less serious, but presenting one’s relationship online is not without potential costs. The possibility of facing an embarrassing breakup or public rejection, deterring alternate partners, and/or increasing the involvement of family and friends are risks taken by those who make the decision to represent their relationships online. These potential costs increase the signal value of becoming “Facebook official” and will be further discussed below in the context of a related construct, constraint commitment. The results of the present study are considered in terms of this theoretical framework, and possible indicators of the “signal value” of Facebook relationship representation are discussed.

**Commitment theory: Constraint and dedication.**

Stanley & Markman’s (1992) theory of commitment, which has roots in Levinger’s (1965) interdependence model of commitment, Johnson’s (1973) tripartite model of personal, moral, and structural commitment, and Rusbult’s (1980) investment model of commitment, holds that commitment is comprised of two related constructs: personal dedication and constraint commitment.

Personal dedication refers to the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the participants. It is evidenced by a desire (and associated behaviors) not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner’s welfare, not simply one’s own (p. 595).

Constraint commitment, on the other hand,

refers to forces that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to them. Constraints may arise from either external or internal pressures, and they favor relationship stability by making termination of a relationship more economically, socially, personally, or psychologically costly (p. 595-596).

Stanley & Markman (1992) have identified a number of subtypes of both constraint commitment and personal dedication. The present study explores the potential
association between Facebook relationship representation and various elements of commitment, using Stanley & Markman’s model as a guiding framework. The findings inform our consideration of social media relationship representation as an important and meaningful emblem of commitment and provide information about the social meaning of social media relationship representation.

**Social media relationship representation and commitment.**

I will now present and discuss specific hypotheses and theoretical rationale in four major areas of commitment:

1. **Couple Identity & Prioritization of the Relationship,**
2. **Commitment to the Future & Stability,**
3. **Alternative Partner Monitoring & Infidelity,** and
4. **The Audience: Social Pressure to Maintain the Relationship.**

**Couple identity & prioritization of the relationship.**

The level of priority that an individual assigns to his or her relationship relative to other activities or interests is an important component of commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992). From a self-presentational perspective, it seems that the degree to which an individual decides to represent his or her relationship on his or her Facebook profile likely provides some information regarding this dimension of personal dedication. Similarly, an individual’s sense of couple identity, or the degree to which an individual sees him or herself in terms of “we” or “us” as opposed to “me” or “I” is likely reflected in his or her online self-presentation or lack thereof. In particular, the decision to designate a picture with one’s partner as one’s primary photo seems to be a rather direct expression of couple identity.
It was hypothesized that emblems of relationship prioritization and couple identity displayed in a person’s Facebook profile would both reveal and reinforce the relationship prioritization and couple identity in the person’s life. That is, I predicted that for dating, engaged, and married individuals, displays of relationship representation (a primary photo with one’s partner and/or a visible and accurate relationship status) would be associated with greater sense of couple identity (Hypothesis 1a) and a higher level of relationship prioritization (Hypothesis 1b), controlling for relationship length.

**Commitment to the future & stability.**

A stated or implied future for the relationship could be considered a defining aspect of commitment. The degree to which an individual wants his or her relationship to continue in the future may be reflected and reinforced by individuals’ Facebook profiles. Although on a strictly technological level, relationship status can change with just a few clicks of a mouse, I hypothesized that the decision to publicly represent a relationship online may indicate some desire for the relationship to continue for at least a period of time, if not indefinitely. I also hypothesized that relationship representation would be associated not only with the desire for a future, but with the perception that the relationship will in fact continue and progress in commitment. Furthermore, by observing individuals at multiple time points, the degree to which these emblems accurately predict future stability was determined.

Thus, predictions were as follows: for dating, engaged, and married individuals, displays of relationship representation (primary photo with one’s partner and/or visible and accurate relationship status) would be negatively associated with perceived likelihood of breakup in the near future, positively associated with both commitment to
the future and perceived likelihood of marrying one’s partner, and would also predict actual relationship stability over time, controlling for relationship length (Hypotheses 2a-2d). In testing these hypotheses, important information was gathered regarding the social meaning of these online emblems in regard to commitment, providing insight regarding whether these social signals in fact convey meaningful and reliable information about the future of a relationship.

*Alternative partner monitoring, infidelity, and jealousy.*

Commitment to one’s partner involves giving up potential alternatives. The degree to which an individual in a relationship attends to other possible relationship partners is referred to by Stanley & Markman (1992) as alternative partner monitoring, and those who report being more dedicated in their relationships also report less monitoring of attractive, alternative partners (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). It was posited that alternative partner monitoring may be quite relevant to the representation of relationships via social media in that representing one’s relationship online may deter other potential partners in one’s social network. It seems likely that those who are engaged in high levels of alternative partner monitoring may tend to downplay or even hide any existing relationships. Individuals who engage in less alternative partner monitoring may have fewer concerns about making their relationship status known and potentially taking themselves “off the market.” Thus, it was hypothesized that there would be a negative association between alternative partner monitoring and relationship representation (*Hypothesis 3a*).

Two topics closely related to alternative partner monitoring, jealousy and infidelity, were also explored. In one of the only existing empirical studies of social
media and romantic relationships, Muise, Christofides & Desmarais (2009) found that, controlling for a variety of personality and relationship factors, increased Facebook use significantly predicted Facebook-related jealousy among undergraduates. In interpreting these findings, the authors suggested that Facebook provides users with information that they might not otherwise receive which can incite jealousy and lead to further Facebook checking, thus creating a vicious cycle of jealousy and Facebook use.

Jealousy and infidelity are common themes in the popular media’s coverage of social media and relationships. In December of 2009, widely publicized results from a large online divorce law firm’s internal research claimed that one in five divorce petitions processed by the firm cited Facebook, usually in regard to a spouse’s discovery of adulterous sexual or flirtatious messages or posts. In 2010, the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers reported to the Associated Press that 81% of its members have observed an increase in legal evidence from social networking sites (Italie, 2010). In the same year, a self-help book called Facebook and Your Marriage was published, offering readers tips for avoiding social media pitfalls: don’t “friend” exes, mention your partner from time to time on the site, list yourself as “married,” don’t put down your spouse or bring up relationship problems on Facebook, and keep conversations with the opposite sex on public walls (Krafsky & Krafsky, 2010).

The present study addresses this potentially important topic that appears to have captured popular interest and works toward an empirically-based understanding of how jealousy and infidelity relate to social media relationship representation. The possible association between jealousy and social media behavior is explored by looking at whether one’s partner’s relationship representation or lack thereof is associated with one’s own
level of jealousy. It was hypothesized that individuals whose partners display representations of the relationship on their profiles would experience less jealousy (Hypothesis 3c). It was further hypothesized that higher levels of jealousy may be warranted among those whose partners decide not to represent their relationships online. That is, it was predicted that representation of one’s relationship on one’s Facebook profile would be associated with lower rates of sexual infidelity among dating, engaged, and married individuals (Hypothesis 3b).

**The audience: social pressure.**

Social pressure from family and friends to continue an existing relationship is a key dimension of constraint commitment identified by Stanley & Markman (1992). By providing their social network with information about a relationship via Facebook, a couple may increase the involvement and investment of friends and family in the relationship, which may lead to increased pressure to maintain the relationship. In turn, highly involved and invested families and friends may encourage increased levels of relationship information through social media. It was hypothesized that for dating, engaged, and married individuals, both forms of relationship representation measured (having a primary photo w/ partner and posting a relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) would be positively associated with social pressure from family and friends to continue the relationship, controlling for relationship length (Hypothesis 4).
Aim 2: Gender Differences in Commitment Processes and Relationship Representation

A qualitative study of self-presentation and gender on MySpace found that gender norms tend to be intensified in users’ profiles (Manago et al., 2008). This study found that men tend to portray themselves as possessing power and strength and women tend to portray themselves as attractive and affiliative on social networking sites. This type of gendered self-presentation is certainly not unique to social media, but the authors indicated that these portrayals appear to be exaggerated beyond real-world self-presentation of gender norms. Women have also been shown to express more affection on Facebook than men (Mansson & Myers, 2011). These findings raise the question of whether men and women might use social media to represent their relationships differently. This question was considered in terms of commitment theory and previous hypotheses about men and other relationship emblems.

In a paper entitled “What is it with Men and Commitment, Anyway?” Stanley (2002) attempts to reconcile two seemingly contradictory findings about men and marriage: On one hand, men seem to resist marital commitment. On the other hand, compared to women, men are more likely to report that they value marriage and believe that it is important (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). Furthermore, once married, men are as committed to their marriages as women (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Stanley theorizes that this may be because “men see the line between marriage and not marriage more starkly than women” and perceive that taking on the role of husband carries increased responsibilities and often requires substantial changes in behavior.
It may be the case that men are also more resistant to lesser emblems of commitment, including representation of relationships via social media, for a similar reason. Men often “resist crossing the line until they can no longer afford not to cross it (Stanley, under review p. 3; also see Stanley 2002).” For example, men are more likely than women to say that they moved in with their partner because their partner was going to break off the relationship if they had not done so (Rhoades, 2007). Stanley is referring to “crossing the line” of marriage, but this may be equally applicable to other “lines” in relationship development, including the decision to represent their relationships via social media.

Based on this theoretical perspective of commitment processes in men, as well as several empirical findings on gender differences in social media behavior, several hypotheses were posited regarding differences in relationship representation as a function of gender, relationship stage, and an interaction effect between gender and relationship stage. Men’s tendency to resist commitment early in relationships (Stanley, under review) and women’s tendency to emphasize affiliation (Manago et. al, 2008), particularly romantic affiliation (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008) in their social networking profiles led to a prediction that single men (i.e., those who are not currently in a romantic relationship) would be more likely to display a “single” relationship status than single women (Hypothesis 5a).

Several hypotheses regarding gender differences in Facebook relationship representation among individuals who are in relationships (dating, engaged, or married) were put forth. Based on the rationale regarding gendered commitment processes and online self-presentation presented above, a main effect of gender was predicted, such that
that women in all types of relationships (dating, engaged, and married) would be more likely to display their relationship status and present a primary photo including their partner, compared to their male counterparts (Hypothesis 5b). Supporting this notion were findings from a study involving a content analysis of undergraduates’ MySpace profiles, which found that female emerging adults were more likely to mention their significant other in the narrative text portions of their profiles than were male emerging adults (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008). A main effect of relationship type was also predicted, such that engaged and married individuals would be more likely to display their relationship status and present a primary photo including their partner than unmarried, non-engaged individuals in dating relationships (Hypothesis 5c).

However, more importantly, a gender by relationship type interaction was predicted, such that the gender differences predicted above would only exist among unmarried, non-engaged individuals in dating relationships. That is, it was anticipated that among those who are engaged or married, the gender differences would disappear (Hypothesis 5d). Such findings would make sense in the context of Stanley’s “crossing the line” theory described above. Among men who have taken the leap of engagement or marriage, I expected to see increased willingness and desire to present oneself as a member of a couple, compared to men who have not made an emblematic commitment to marriage.

**Aim 3: Social Media and the Single Girl (And Boy)**

Until now, our discussion has been primarily focused on social media and the representation of existing romantic relationships. I will now turn my attention toward the third aim of the study, examining the role of social media in earlier stages of relationship
formation, including dating and partner seeking, and considering the role of social media in the romantic and sexual activities of individuals who are single (not currently in a relationship).

Research indicates that social media is not typically used for meeting new people or reaching out to strangers. Rather, studies show that users of social networking sites primarily use these sites to connect with people with whom a prior, offline relationship exists (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Therefore, it is important to make a clear distinction between social media sites and online dating sites such as match.com and eHarmony.com, which are typically used to meet potential partners who would otherwise be strangers.

However, although Facebook is less commonly used to meet potential partners, it may play an important role in early stages of relationship formation, dating, and partner selection. Dong, Urista & Gundrum (2008) hypothesized that “romantic communication is a key reason young people use MySpace (p. 577)” and found that individuals who perceive themselves to be physically attractive were particularly likely to use MySpace for romantic communication. Lampe et. al (2006) found that college students report that they frequently check out the Facebook profile of a person that they met socially. It seems likely that Facebook profiles are used both as a source of information about potential partners and as a means of projecting information about oneself to potential partners. In a small pilot study, Young, Dutta & Dommety (2009) asked a group of undergraduates to rank the steps they would take if they wished to elicit romantic contact
on Facebook and found that “listing relationship status as single” had the highest ranking of the choices provided to participants.

In the present study, several attitudinal and behavioral factors were examined in an attempt to shed light on the social meaning of declaring oneself to be single via social media. It was hypothesized that for single individuals (i.e., those who are not currently in a relationship), displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Single” would be associated with higher levels of desire to be in a relationship and more active partner-seeking activities (*Hypothesis 6a*). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that individuals who are not currently in a relationship who present themselves as “Single” to their social network via Facebook relationship status would report higher numbers of people with whom one has gone on a date since one’s last relationship ended, higher numbers of sexual partners since one’s last relationship ended, and more sexual activity since one’s last relationship ended, compared to singles who do not list any relationship status or who display a false relationship status (*Hypothesis 6b*).

**Specific Hypotheses**

In order to gain a better understanding of the role, meaning, and function of social media relationship representation, the present study tested the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1.* For individuals in dating, engaged, and married relationships, both of the forms of relationship representation measured (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were predicted to be positively associated with a stronger sense of couple identity (*Hypothesis 1a*) and a higher level of prioritization of the relationship controlling for relationship length (*Hypothesis 1b*).
Hypothesis 2. For individuals in dating, engaged, and married relationships, both of the forms of relationship representation measured (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were predicted to be positively associated with commitment to the future (Hypothesis 2a), negatively associated with perceived likelihood of breakup in the coming year (Hypothesis 2b), positively associated with perceived likelihood of marriage to one’s current partner (Hypothesis 2c), and positively associated actual relationship stability over time (Hypothesis 2d), controlling for relationship length.

Hypothesis 3. For individuals in dating, engaged, and married relationships, both of the forms of relationship representation measured (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were predicted to be associated with lower levels of alternative partner monitoring (Hypothesis 3a), as well as lower levels of sexual infidelity (Hypothesis 3b), controlling for relationship length. One’s partner’s display of an accurate Facebook relationship status (i.e., one’s partner in a dating relationship lists “in a relationship,” one’s fiancé lists “engaged,” or one’s spouse lists “married” on his or her profile) was predicted to be negatively associated with jealousy (Hypothesis 3c).

Hypothesis 4. For individuals in dating, engaged, and married relationships, both of the forms of relationship representation measured (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing “single” or not displaying a relationship status) were predicted to be associated with
social pressure from family and friends to continue the relationship, controlling for relationship length.

*Hypothesis 5.* Differences in social media relationship representation as a function of gender and actual relationship type were predicted, as well as gender by actual relationship type interactions. It was predicted that:

a. Single men would be more likely to display a “Single” Facebook relationship status than single women.

b. There would be a main effect of gender in predicting social media relationship representation, such that women in all types of relationships (dating, engaged, and married) would be more likely to display an accurate relationship status (as opposed to not displaying a relationship status or listing oneself as “single”) and present a primary photo including their partner, compared to their male counterparts.

c. There would be a main effect of actual relationship type in predicting social media relationship representation, such that engaged and married individuals would be more likely to display an accurate relationship status (as opposed to not displaying a Facebook relationship status or listing oneself as “single” on Facebook) and present a primary photo including their partner, compared to their unmarried, unengaged counterparts.

d. There would be a gender by actual relationship type interaction, such that among individuals who are engaged or married, gender differences in both forms of relationship representation (displaying an accurate Facebook relationship status and presenting a primary photo that includes one’s partner)
would not exist. Men who have made the commitment of engagement or marriage would be more likely to present an accurate Facebook relationship status and more likely to present a primary photo including their partner, compared to men who have not made those commitments. Therefore, among individuals who are engaged or married, men and women would be equally likely to present their relationship status and equally likely to present a primary photo including their partner.

_Hypothesis 6._ For single people (i.e., those who are not currently in a relationship), displaying “single” (as opposed to hiding one’s relationship status or posting another relationship status) was predicted to be associated with higher levels of active partner seeking behavior and a greater desire to be in a relationship (6a), as well as higher numbers of people with whom one has gone on a date since one’s last relationship ended, higher numbers of sexual partners and “hook up” partners since one’s last relationship ended, and more sexual encounters since one’s last relationship ended (6b), controlling for the amount of time since one’s last relationship ended.
Chapter Two: Method

Participants

The present study utilized a sample of participants from a larger longitudinal study on relationship development. To qualify for the larger study, participants were required to meet the following criteria at the time of recruitment and the initial time point of data collection:

1. age 18-35,
2. unmarried, and
3. involved in a romantic relationship of at least two months with a member of the opposite sex.

Because data for the current study was collected at the 7th data collection time point (3 years after the first time point), many participants in the current study did not still meet these criteria (for example, since a participant completed the first time point, he or she may have broken up with their original partner, gotten married, or aged past 35).

Although the larger study included the partners of some participants in order to obtain couple data, only primary participants were included in the present study. Only those participants who reported having an account on Facebook were included in the present analyses.

Of the 1045 primary participants (excluding partners) who completed the survey at the 7th data collection time point, 80% reported that they have an account on Facebook,
resulting in an sample of 831 Facebook users for the present study. The sample included in the present study was comprised of 264 men (32%) and 567 women (68%). The sample was approximately 77% White, 14% Black or African-American, 3% Asian, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and <1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Approximately 4% report more than one race and 1% do not report a race. In terms of ethnicity, the sample is approximately 8% Hispanic or Latino and 92% not Hispanic or Latino. The mean age was 27.4 (SD = 4.6). The mean education and annual income levels were 15 years and approximately $18,000, respectively, with 35% of the sample reporting that they were currently enrolled as a full- or part-time student. 24% of the participants were married, 13% were engaged, 38% were in an unmarried (dating) relationship, and 25% were not currently in a relationship (single).

Using the G*Power 3.0 program (Faul, Lang & Buchner, 2007), a power analysis was conducted to evaluate the projected sample size and the number of participants of the comparison groups of interest for the proposed analyses. Using a conservative approach, the two comparison groups with the smallest projected sizes were examined. With even the smallest groups, it was determined that it would be possible to detect a medium effect size (using Cohen’s $d$; Cohen, 1992).

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited via nationwide targeted-listed telephone sampling conducted by a call center. The call center screened for eligibility using the age and relationship criteria described above. Individuals who met the criteria, agreed to participate, and provided a complete mailing address (N=2213) were mailed forms within two weeks of their phone screening. Of those who were mailed forms, 1447 returned
them (response rate=65.4%). 153 of the individuals who returned forms did not meet the age or relationship status criteria and were excluded from the study, leaving a sample of 1294 at the initial data collection time point. Participants were paid $40 for completion of the forms at each time point, including Time 7, which was utilized for the present study.

**Measures**

**Actual, privately reported relationship status.**

Because it was expected that an individual’s current, actual, privately reported “real-world” relationship status would sometimes differ from his or her Facebook relationship status, and that many individuals would opt out of displaying any Facebook relationship status, actual relationship status and Facebook relationship statuses were assessed separately. To assess actual (privately reported) relationship status, participants were asked answer the following question with a yes or no: “Are you in a relationship now?” Participants who answered yes to indicate that they are currently in a relationship were directed to a follow-up question: “As of today, what is the status of your relationship?” The response choices to this follow-up question were: “Dating (living together or not),” “Engaged,” and “Married.” Participants were then asked to indicate how many months they had been in their current relationship. Because data was collected at multiple time points and participants were asked about break-ups at each time point, it was possible to track the stability of relationships (staying together vs. breaking up) over time.

**Facebook relationship status and profile picture.**

After reporting whether or not they have a profile on Facebook, participants who do have a profile were presented with the following question: “What is the ‘relationship
status’ currently listed on your Facebook profile?” Participants were required to choose from the following options: “Blank (my relationship status is not visible on my profile),” “Single,” “In a relationship,” “In a relationship with [my partner],” “Engaged,” “Engaged to [my partner],” “Married,” “Married to [my partner],” “It’s complicated,” “It’s complicated with [my partner],” “In an open relationship,” and “In an open relationship with [my partner].” In anticipation of the possibility that Facebook’s relationship status function options might change after the distribution of the surveys, the option of “Other:___________” was included on the survey. More recently, “Separated,” “Divorced,” “In a Civil Union, and “In a Domestic Partnership” statuses have been added to the pull-down menu of relationship status options for Facebook users, though at the time of data collection, the options on Facebook were limited to the former twelve options only. For the analyses, groupings based on Facebook relationship status were collapsed across individuals with and without the “with [my partner]” component following their relationship status. For example, those whose Facebook relationship status is “in a relationship” were grouped with those whose status is “in a relationship with [my partner].” Facebook users were then asked to choose from the following options to describe their current Facebook profile picture: “A picture of just you,” “A picture of you and your current partner,” “A picture of you and someone other than your current partner (e.g., friend(s), family, ex-partner, child),” or “Other:____________.” For the analyses, groupings based on primary Facebook photo were dichotomized, with one group composed of those who displayed a primary Facebook photo with their partners, and one group composed of those who did not (collapsed across other options).
As discussed in the introduction, an accurate Facebook relationship status is defined as a relationship status that is both displayed (as opposed to no status being displayed) and designates a type of relationship that matches the type of relationship indicated by the participant on his/her survey. That is, an accurate Facebook relationship status is operationally defined in this research as when the privately self-reported actual relationship status is consistent with the displayed Facebook relationship status. For example, for those who indicate that they are currently in dating relationships, the Facebook status would need to be reported as “In a Relationship” to be accurate. For those currently engaged, it would be “Engaged,” and for those currently married it would be “Married.”. Examples of individuals who do not have an accurate Facebook relationship status would include a married individual who displays a Facebook relationship status of “Engaged,” “In a Relationship,” or “Single,” or an individual in a dating relationship who leaves his/her Facebook relationship status blank.

All individuals who reported that they are currently in a relationship (regardless of their Facebook relationship status) were asked whether or not their partner has a Facebook profile, and if so, what relationship status (if any) is currently listed on their partner’s Facebook profile.

**Dedication.**

Four components of dedication (couple identity, prioritization of relationship, commitment to the future, and alternative partner monitoring) were measured using a revised version of the Dedication Scale from Stanley & Markman’s (1992) Commitment Inventory. Couple identity was measured with two items (sample item: “I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’ than ‘me’ and ‘him/her.’”)
Prioritization of relationship was measured with three items (sample item: “My career (or job, studies, homemaking, childrearing, etc.) is more important to me than my relationship with my partner [reverse].”) Commitment to the future was measured with three items (sample item: “I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now [reverse].”) Alternative partner monitoring was measured with two items (sample item: “I think a lot about what it would be like to be married to (or dating) someone other than my partner.”) Response choices were on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

In the validation study of the original measure, each of these subscales from which these items were drawn demonstrated good internal consistency, and the Commitment Inventory as a whole was shown to be valid (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Although a recent psychometric analysis of a revised Commitment Inventory (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2010) found that a single dedication subscale fit well with data collected from an unmarried sample, the current study sought to look more specifically at these four components of dedication and test specific hypotheses for each. In the present sample, adequate reliability was demonstrated for each of these individual Commitment Inventory dedication subscales (couple identity $\alpha = .69$; prioritization of relationship $\alpha = .77$; commitment to the future $\alpha = .90$; alternative partner monitoring $\alpha = .70$).

**Social pressure.**

One component of constraint commitment, social pressure, was measured using the Constraint Scale from a revised version of Stanley & Markman’s (1992) Commitment Inventory. Social pressure was measured with four items (sample item: “My family really
wants this relationship to work.”) The validation study of the original measure found the subscale from which these items were drawn to be internally consistent (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Owen et al. (2010) found that this subscale from a revised version of the Commitment Inventory fit data from a sample of unmarried men and women well. In the present sample, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$.

**Perceived likelihood of breakup.**

Individuals’ perceptions about the likelihood of breaking up in the near future were measured with a single item: “How likely is it that you and your partner will break up within the next year?” Answer choices were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Very Unlikely” to “Very Likely.”

**Perceived likelihood of marriage.**

Individuals’ perceptions about the likelihood of marrying their current partner were measured with a single item: “How likely is it that you and your partner will get married?” Answer choices were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Very Unlikely” to “Very Likely.”

**Sexual infidelity.**

Sexual Infidelity was measured with a single, yes-or-no item: “Have you had sexual relations with someone other than your partner since you began seriously dating?”

**Jealousy.**

Five items from the Cognitive Jealousy subscale of the well-validated Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) were used to measure jealousy. The Cognitive Jealousy subscale assesses the frequency of threat appraisal and suspicious thoughts. Sample items include “I suspect that my partner may be attracted to
someone else,” and “I think that my partner is secretly developing an intimate relationship with someone else.” Response choices were on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “always.” In the sample utilized, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$.

**Sexual and dating behavior and attitudes of singles.**

Participants who were not currently in a relationship were asked to report the date on which their last relationship ended in order to control for the length of this time interval in the analyses. Singles were also asked to provide numbers describing how many people they have gone on a date with, “hooked up” with, and had sex with since their last relationship ended, as well as how many times they have had sex since their last relationship ended. Original items used to assess active partner seeking included: “I am doing all I can think of to find a new partner,” “I am actively looking to get into a new relationship,” and “I am regularly going to events or activities to be around potential partners” ($\alpha = .70$). Original items used to assess desire for a relationship included: “I am enjoying not being in a serious relationship (reverse coded),” “I feel lonely,” “I have other things that I want to focus on right now that are more important than being in a relationship (reverse coded),” and “I really don’t like being single” ($\alpha = .68$). Response choices were on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”
Chapter Three: Results

Preliminary Analyses

At the time of data collection, 80% of all participants indicated that they had a Facebook profile. 87% of singles (N=243), 76% of individuals in dating relationships (N=417), 78% of engaged individuals (N=140), and 81% of married individuals (N=243) reported having a Facebook profile.

When Facebook users and non-users were compared on several key demographic variables, results indicated that they did not differ in terms of their annual income, level of financial stress/hardship, or maternal education level ($p$s>.05), though participants who did not have a Facebook profile were, on average, older than those who did, $t(1041)=5.13, p<.001, M_s=29.22$ and 27.38 years old, respectively. 87% of college students reported having a Facebook profile, compared to 76% of non-students, which was a difference that reached significance, $\chi^2(1, 1028)=16.51, p<.001$. A significantly higher number of women reported having a Facebook profile, compared to men (83% vs. 74%, respectively; $\chi^2(1, 1043)= 10.16, p=.001$). Among the four largest racial groups represented in the sample, 81% of White participants, 77% of Asian participants, 75% of Black or African-American participants, and 86.5% of participants reporting more than one race reported having a profile on Facebook. Facebook membership did not vary as a function of ethnicity ($p >.05$), with 73 % of Hispanic or Latino participants reporting that
they had a Facebook profile, compared to 80% of non-Hispanic or Latino participants reporting that they did not.

75% of Facebook users who were currently in relationships indicated that their partner was also a Facebook user. Among Facebook users partnered with other Facebook users, an 86% concordance rate was reported. That is, 86% of participants’ Facebook-using partners display the same relationship status as the participant.

Table 1 reports the count and percentages of Facebook relationship status by individuals in dating, engaged, and married relationships. In general, there was an unexpectedly high degree of uniformity among engaged and married individuals in terms of Facebook relationship status display, with 95% of married individuals displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Married,” and 81% of engaged individuals displaying “Engaged” or “Married.” In other words, among engaged and married individuals, there was very low rate of opting to leave one’s Facebook profile blank and a high level of congruence between actual relationship status as stated on the surveys and Facebook relationship status. Therefore, it was determined that all analyses examining differences as a function of congruence between Facebook relationship status display and actual relationship status as stated privately on the surveys would be conducted only among those individuals in dating relationships, who displayed considerable heterogeneity in terms of Facebook relationship status. We were, however, able to look at the associations between social media relationship representation and the relationship variables of interest among engaged and married individuals via analysis of individuals’ reports of whether their partner is included in their primary Facebook photo.
Table 1

*Facebook Relationship Status Count and Percentages by Relationship Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single (% of singles)</th>
<th>Dating (% of daters)</th>
<th>Engaged (% of engaged)</th>
<th>Married (% of married)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blank (None Displayed)</td>
<td>65 (31.0%)</td>
<td>67 (21.3%)</td>
<td>5 (4.6%)</td>
<td>6 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Single”</td>
<td>130 (61.9%)</td>
<td>33 (10.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In a Relationship”</td>
<td>10 (4.5%)</td>
<td>197 (62.5%)</td>
<td>15 (13.8%)</td>
<td>2 (1.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Engaged”</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>84 (77.1%)</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Married”</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
<td>2 (0.6%)</td>
<td>4 (3.7%)</td>
<td>187 (95.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s Complicated”</td>
<td>3 (1.4%)</td>
<td>10 (3.2%)</td>
<td>1 (0.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In an Open Relationship”</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (0.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Don’t Know/Joke</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
<td>4 (1.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 29.7% of individuals in relationships (N=617) reported that their primary Facebook photo displayed at the time of data collection was a photo that included their partner. This included 18.2% of individuals in dating relationships, 39.6% of engaged individuals, and 43.8% of married individuals (See Table 2).

Table 2

*Primary Facebook Photo Count and Percentages by Relationship Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dating (% of daters)</th>
<th>Engaged (% of engaged)</th>
<th>Married (% of married)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photo with partner</td>
<td>56 (18.2%)</td>
<td>42 (39.6%)</td>
<td>85 (48.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo not with partner</td>
<td>251 (81.8%)</td>
<td>64 (60.4%)</td>
<td>109 (51.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first four hypotheses outlined in the Specific Hypotheses section were tested to examine the association between social media relationship representation and couple identity and prioritization of relationship (Hypothesis 1); commitment to the future, perceived likelihood of breakup and eventual marriage, and actual stability over time (Hypothesis 2); alternative partner monitoring, infidelity, and jealousy (Hypothesis 3); and social pressure (Hypothesis 4). The results of the analyses examining continuous
relationship variables are summarized below in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6. The presentation of results for Hypotheses 1-4 is followed by the presentation of results examining possible gender differences (Hypothesis 5) in social media relationship representation as well as the representation of singlehood via social media (Hypothesis 6).

Table 3

*Continuous Relationship Variables Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes by Facebook Relationship Status for Individuals in Dating Relationships*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(A) Blank/none M(SD)</th>
<th>(B) “In a rel.” M(SD)</th>
<th>(C) “Single” M (SD)</th>
<th>A vs. B Blank vs. in a rel.</th>
<th>B vs. C In a rel. vs. single</th>
<th>A vs. C blank vs. single</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants’ Facebook Relationship Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Identity</td>
<td>4.71(1.32)</td>
<td>5.70(1.28)</td>
<td>4.53(1.52)</td>
<td>-0.76***</td>
<td>0.84***</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritization</td>
<td>4.14(1.22)</td>
<td>5.08(1.21)</td>
<td>3.47(1.46)</td>
<td>-0.77***</td>
<td>1.21***</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to Future</td>
<td>4.77(1.39)</td>
<td>5.77(1.26)</td>
<td>4.68(1.25)</td>
<td>-0.75***</td>
<td>0.87***</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Breakup (perceived)</td>
<td>2.52(.927)</td>
<td>1.75(.95)</td>
<td>2.76(.97)</td>
<td>0.82***</td>
<td>-1.05***</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Marriage (perceived)</td>
<td>3.19(1.08)</td>
<td>3.82(1.11)</td>
<td>3.03(.73)</td>
<td>-0.58***</td>
<td>0.86***</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Monitoring</td>
<td>4.58(1.73)</td>
<td>5.30(1.56)</td>
<td>4.21(1.79)</td>
<td>-0.44**</td>
<td>0.65***</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Pressure</td>
<td>3.81(.76)</td>
<td>4.28(.90)</td>
<td>3.64(.81)</td>
<td>-0.57***</td>
<td>0.75***</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants’ Partners’ Facebook Relationship Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>2.44 (1.23)</td>
<td>1.76 (1.14)</td>
<td>2.68 (1.70)</td>
<td>0.57***</td>
<td>-0.65***</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes. Effect sizes are Cohen’s $d$ values. ANCOVAs, controlling for relationship length, were used to test for significant differences between groups and are reported in the Effect Sizes column.***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.***
Table 4
Main and Interaction Effects for Primary Facebook Photo and Relationship Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FB photo main effect</th>
<th>Relationship type main effect</th>
<th>FB photo X relationship type interaction effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Identity</td>
<td>14.15</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>15.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritization</td>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>37.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to Future</td>
<td>23.90</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>35.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Breakup</td>
<td>22.42</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>32.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Marriage</td>
<td>20.54</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>73.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Monitoring</td>
<td>26.70</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>10.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Pressure</td>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Table 5
Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect sizes by Inclusion or Exclusion of Partner in Primary Facebook Photo for Continuous Relationship Variables with Significant Relationship Type by Photo Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dating with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Not with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Engaged with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Not with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Married with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Not with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couple Identity</td>
<td>6.01 (1.09)</td>
<td>5.17 (1.45)</td>
<td>0.66***</td>
<td>6.39 (0.85)</td>
<td>6.19 (1.08)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>6.40 (0.84)</td>
<td>6.07 (1.16)</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritization</td>
<td>5.47 (1.02)</td>
<td>4.50 (1.37)</td>
<td>0.81***</td>
<td>6.10 (0.77)</td>
<td>5.63 (1.11)</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>6.21 (0.74)</td>
<td>5.97 (1.10)</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to Future</td>
<td>6.23 (0.91)</td>
<td>5.22 (1.41)</td>
<td>0.87***</td>
<td>6.80 (0.39)</td>
<td>6.57 (0.79)</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>6.79 (0.48)</td>
<td>6.46 (1.00)</td>
<td>0.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Breakup</td>
<td>1.47 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.20 (1.08)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.07 (0.26)</td>
<td>1.22 (0.55)</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>1.06 (0.24)</td>
<td>1.30 (0.771)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(perceived)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Marriage</td>
<td>4.30 (0.83)</td>
<td>3.38 (1.11)</td>
<td>0.95***</td>
<td>4.93 (0.26)</td>
<td>4.73 (0.63)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(perceived)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Effect sizes are Cohen’s $d$ values. ANCOVAs, controlling for relationship length, were used to test for significant differences between groups and are reported in the Effect Sizes column.
***$p < 0.0003$, **$p < 0.003$, *$p < 0.017$
Table 6
Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes by Inclusion or Exclusion of Partner in Primary Facebook Photo for Continuous Relationship Variables that Do not Differ Across Relationship Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>With partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Not with partner M (SD)</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Partner Monitoring</td>
<td>6.14 (1.07)</td>
<td>5.18 (1.66)</td>
<td>0.70***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Pressure</td>
<td>4.71 (0.75)</td>
<td>4.22 (0.90)</td>
<td>0.59***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Effect sizes are Cohen’s $d$ values. ANCOVAs, controlling for relationship length, were used to test for significant differences between groups and are reported in the Effect Sizes column. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$.

Couple Identity and Prioritization of the Relationship (Hypothesis 1)

As predicted by Hypothesis 1a, social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) was found to be significantly associated with a both a stronger sense of couple identity and a higher level of prioritization of the relationship, controlling for relationship length. The specific, in-depth results for the statistical tests of Hypothesis 1a and 1b follow:

Couple identity (Hypothesis 1a).

To test the hypothesis that displaying an accurate Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any Facebook relationship status) would be associated with a greater sense of couple identity, controlling for relationship length, among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level variable designating the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. None/blank) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.
The omnibus test indicated significant differences in couple identity scores as a function of Facebook relationship status, \( F(2, 288) = 20.38, p < .001 \). Planned comparisons with ANCOVAs indicated that, as predicted, controlling for relationship length, individuals in dating relationships who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” reported the highest levels of couple identity (\( M = 5.70, SD = 1.28 \)), significantly higher than those who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “Single” (\( M = 4.53, SD = 1.52 \)), \( F(1, 222) = 18.92, p < .001 \) and also higher than those who elected not to display a Facebook relationship status (\( M = 4.71, SD = 1.32 \)), \( F(1, 258) = 29.28, p < .001 \). The latter two groups (those with Facebook relationship statuses of “Single” and those who elected not to display any Facebook relationship status) had statistically similar levels of couple identity, \( F(1, 95) = .37, p = .54 \). The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or planned comparisons, \( ps > .05 \).

To test Hypothesis 1a’s prediction that displaying a primary Facebook photo with one’s partner would be positively associated with one’s sense of couple identity, controlling for relationship length, among dating, engaged, and married individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo included one’s partner and a 3-level factor for whether the participant is dating, engaged, or married (added to test if the association between photo representation and the dependent variable was moderated by the participant’s relationship type). Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, \( F(1,586) = 14.15, p < .001 \),
and relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), $F(2, 586) = 15.91, p < .001$, as well as an interaction between the two that approached significance, $F(2, 586) = 3.02, p = .05$. The covariate relationship length was not significant ($p < .05$).

Because the interaction term approached significance, post-hoc analyses exploring the relationship between whether or not one’s partner is included in one’s primary Facebook photograph and one’s level of couple identity (controlling for relationship length) were conducted separately for dating, married, and engaged individuals. ANCOVAs conducted using Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017 indicated that, controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo is associated with higher levels of couple identity among dating individuals, $F(2, 299) = 8.59, p < .001$, though it is not associated with couple identity among married individuals, $F(1,184) = 4.26, p = .04$, or engaged individuals, $F(1,101) = .30, p = .59$. The covariate, relationship length, was significantly associated with couple identity among engaged individuals, $p = .003$, but not among dating or married individuals ($ps < .05$).

**Prioritization of relationship (Hypothesis 1b).**

To test Hypothesis 1b’s prediction that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be positively associated with prioritization of one’s relationship among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level factor designating the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. None/blank). Relationship length was entered as a covariate.
The omnibus test indicated significant differences in relationship prioritization scores as a function of Facebook relationship status, $F(2, 285) = 28.78, p < .001$. Planned comparison ANCOVAs indicated that, controlling for relationship length, individuals in dating relationships who display “In a Relationship” on their Facebook profile reported a higher level of prioritization of their relationships than individuals in dating relationships who elected not to display any Facebook relationship status $F(1, 255) = 29.10, p < .001$, and also higher than individuals in dating relationships who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single,” $F(1, 219) = 39.11, p < .001$. Furthermore, those who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single” reported significantly lower levels of relationship prioritization than those who elected not to display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1, 95) = 4.13, p = .045$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or planned comparisons, $ps > .05$.

Hypothesis 1b also predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo with one’s partner would be associated with prioritization of one’s relationship (controlling for relationship length). To test this hypothesis among dating, engaged, and married individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo includes one’s partner and a 3-level variable designating whether the participant is in a dating relationship, engaged, or married (added to test if the association between photo representation and the dependent variable was moderated by whether the participant is dating, engaged, or married) as factors. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, $F(1, 582) = 26.27, p < .001$,.
and relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), $F(2, 582) = 37.97, p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between the two, $F(2, 582) = 4.38, p = .013$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant, $p > .05$.

Because the interaction term was significant, post-hoc analyses exploring the relationship between whether or not one’s partner is included in one’s primary Facebook photograph and one’s level of prioritization of relationship (controlling for relationship length) were conducted separately for dating, married, and engaged individuals. ANCOVAs conducted using Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .017 indicated that, controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo was associated with higher levels of prioritization of relationship among individuals in dating relationships, $F(1, 296) = 25.01, p < .001$, though not among engaged individuals, $F(1, 102) = 4.98, p = .028$, or married individuals, $F(1, 182) = 3.05, p=.08$. The covariate, relationship length, was significant among individuals in dating relationships, $F(1, 296) = 4.47, p = .035$, though not among engaged or married individuals ($ps> .05$).

Commitment to the Future, Plans for the Future, and Actual Stability (Hypothesis 2)

As predicted, both forms of social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting a an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were found to be significantly associated with a greater commitment to the future, a lesser perceived likelihood of breakup in the coming year, a greater perceived likelihood of eventual marriage to one’s partner, as well as a greater likelihood of actual relationship stability.
over time, controlling for relationship length. The specific, in-depth results for the statistical tests of Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d follow:

**Commitment to the future (Hypothesis 2a).**

Hypothesis 2a’s prediction that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be associated with greater commitment to the future, controlling for relationship length was tested among individuals in dating relationships using ANCOVA, with a 3-level variable designating the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. “None”) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant differences in commitment to the future as a function of Facebook relationship status, $F(2, 287) = 20.26, p < .001$. Planned Comparison ANCOVAs indicated that, controlling for relationship length, individuals in dating relationships who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” reported higher levels of commitment to the future compared to both those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1, 257) = 29.43, p < .001$ and those who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “Single,” $F(1, 222) = 18.19, p < .001$. There were no significant differences in commitment to the future between those who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “Single” and those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1, 94) = .09, p = .760$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or planned comparisons, $ps > .05$.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner would be associated with commitment to the future, controlling for
relationship length. To test this hypothesis among dating, engaged, and married individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo includes one’s partner and a 3-level variable designating whether the participant is in a dating relationship, engaged, or married as factors. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, $F(1, 584) = 23.90, p < .001$, and relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), $F(2, 584) = 35.31, p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between the two, $F(2, 584) = 5.85, p = .003$. The covariate relationship length was not significant, $p > .05$.

Because the interaction term was significant, post-hoc analyses exploring the relationship between whether or not one’s partner is included in one’s primary Facebook photograph and one’s level of commitment to the future (controlling for relationship length) were conducted separately for dating, married, and engaged individuals. ANCOVAs conducted using Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .017 indicated that, controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo was associated with higher levels of commitment to the future among dating, $F(1, 298) = 25.52, p < .001$ and married individuals, $F(1, 183) = 7.34, p = .01$, though among engaged individuals, this difference did not reach significance, $F(1, 101) = 1.73, p = .19$.

**Perceived likelihood of breakup (Hypothesis 2b).**

To test Hypothesis 2b’s prediction that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be associated with higher levels of perceived likelihood that one’s
relationship will break up (dissolve) within the next year, controlling for relationship length, among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level variable designating the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. “None”) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant differences in perceived likelihood of breakup within the next year as a function of Facebook relationship status, $F(2, 290) = 26.78, p < .001$. Planned comparisons with ANCOVAs indicated that individuals in dating relationships who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” on their profiles perceived a lower likelihood of their breakup within the next year, compared to both those who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “Single,” $F(1, 224) = 28.05, p < .001$, and also perceived a lower likelihood of dissolution than those who elected to not display a Facebook relationship status, $F(1, 258) = 34.18, p < .001$. No significant difference was found between those who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “Single” and those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1, 97) = 1.59, p = .21$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or any of the planned comparisons, $ps > .05$.

Hypothesis 2b also predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo with one’s partner would be associated with perceived likelihood of breakup within the next year, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among dating, engaged, and married individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo includes one’s partner and a 3-level
variable designating whether the participant is in a dating relationship, engaged, or married as factors. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, $F(1, 589) = 22.42, p < .001$, and relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), $F(2, 589) = 32.42, p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between the two, $F(2, 589) = 5.50, p = .004$. The covariate relationship length was not significant in the omnibus test or the planned comparisons, $ps > .05$.

Because the interaction term was significant, post-hoc analyses exploring the relationship between whether or not one’s partner is included in one’s primary Facebook photograph and one’s perceived likelihood of breakup within the next year (controlling for relationship length), analyses were conducted separately for dating, married, and engaged individuals. ANCOVAs conducted using Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .017 indicated that, controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo was associated with significantly lower levels of perceived likelihood that one’s relationship will break up within the next year among dating, $F(1, 301) = 23.30, p < .001$, and married, $F(1, 184) = 7.62, p = .01$, individuals. No significant differences in perceived likelihood of breakup within the next year as a function of Facebook photograph existed among engaged individuals, $F(1, 102) = 1.95, p = .17$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or any of the post-hoc tests, $ps > .05$. 
Perceived likelihood of marriage (Hypothesis 2c).

Hypothesis 2c also predicted that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be associated with a higher level of perceived likelihood of eventually marrying one’s current partner, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level variable designating the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. “None”) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant differences in perceived likelihood of eventually marrying one’s partner as a function of Facebook relationship status $F(2,288) = 13.99, p < .001$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant, $p > .05$. Planned comparison ANCOVAs indicated that individuals in dating relationships who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” reported significantly higher perceived likelihood of eventually marrying their current partners than both those who displayed “Single,” $F(1,222) = 16.85, p < .001$ and those elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,256) = 15.88, p < .001$. No significant differences in perceived likelihood of eventual marriage to current partner were found between those who displayed “Single” and those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,97) = .78, p = .38$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or planned comparisons, $ps > .05$.

Hypothesis 2c predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo with one’s partner would be associated with level of perceived likelihood of eventually marrying
one’s partner, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among dating and engaged individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017 was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo includes one’s partner and a 2-level variable designating whether the participant is in a dating relationship or engaged as factors. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, $F(1,401) = 20.54, p < .001$, and relationship type (dating vs. engaged), $F(1,401) = 73.30, p < .001$, as well as a significant interaction between the two, $F(1,401) = 9.93, p = .002$. The covariate relationship length was also significant, $F(1,401) = 4.21, p = .04$

Because the interaction term was significant, analyses exploring the relationship between whether or not one’s partner is included in one’s primary Facebook photograph and one’s level of perceived likelihood of eventually marrying one’s partner (controlling for relationship length) were conducted separately for dating and engaged individuals. ANCOVAs indicated that, controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo was associated with higher levels of perceived likelihood of eventually marrying one’s partner among dating, $F(1,299) = 32.92, p < .001$ individuals, but not among engaged individuals, $F(1,101) = 1.78, p = .19$. The covariate, relationship length was significant among engaged individuals, $F(1,101)=30.52, p <.001$, but not among individuals in dating relationships, $p>.05$. 

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Stability of relationship over time (Hypothesis 2d).

Hypothesis 2d predicted that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be positively associated with actual relationship stability (staying together as opposed to breaking up) over time, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among individuals in dating relationships, three logistic regressions were conducted, with a binary dependent variable designating whether or not an individual remained with his or her current T7 partner at the follow-up time point (T8). Relationship length (as a covariate) and one of three dummy-coded predictor variables designating Facebook relationship status were entered simultaneously in each. Of the 315 Facebook users in dating relationships at Time 7, 289 returned the survey at Time 8, resulting in a 8.3% attrition rate between Time 7 and Time 8 for this subsample. Facebook users in dating relationships at Time 7 who returned the Time 8 survey did not differ significantly from their counterparts who failed to return the T8 survey in terms of whether or not their partners were included in their primary Facebook photo, $\chi^2(1, 307)=.71, p=.40$, Facebook relationship status, $\chi^2(6, 315)=2.72, p=.84$, gender, $\chi^2(1, 315)=.01, p=.91$, dedication, $t(311)=-.21, p=.84$, or relationship length, $t(310)=-.81, p=.42$.

Descriptively, 10.7% of the individuals who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” at T7 had broken up by T8 (20 of 143), compared to 23.3% of those who displayed no Facebook relationship status (10 of 43), and 50% of those who displayed “Single” (6 of 12). The following three logistic regressions tested the statistical significance of these differences (see Table 7 for a summary of results).
Table 7
*Stability Between Time 7 and Time 8 by Facebook Relationship Status Among Individuals in Dating Relationships*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook relationship status comparison</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>% increased likelihood of staying together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blank/None (0) vs. Single (1)</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank (0) vs. “In a Relationship” (1)</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>64%¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (0) vs. “In a Relationship” (1)</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>363%²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes.* Comparisons were made using logistic regression, with a binary dependent variable for stability (broke up vs. still together). Relationship length at Time 7 (as a covariate) and dummy-coded predictor variables designating Facebook relationship status were entered simultaneously.

1 Percent increase in likelihood of staying together between Time 7 and Time 8 associated with having a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship,” compared to a blank Facebook relationship status.

2 Percent increase in likelihood of staying together between Time 7 and Time 8 associated with having a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship,” compared to “Single.”

* p < .05.

The first logistic regression compared the likelihood of having remained with one’s Time 7 partner at T8 between individuals who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single” (dummy code = 1) with those who elect to not display a Facebook relationship status (dummy code = 0). The dummy-coded variable designating whether one’s Facebook relationship status was “Single” (1) or left blank (0) was not significantly associated with stability over time, B=-.27, Wald=.25, p = .77, Odds Ratio=.76. The covariate, relationship length, was significantly associated with stability, B=.03, Wald=5.75, p = .02, odds ratio=1.03.

The second logistic regression compared the likelihood of having remained with one’s Time 7 partner at T8 between individuals who display a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” (dummy code = 1) with those who elect to not display a Facebook relationship status (dummy code = 0). Both the dummy-coded variable designating whether one’s Facebook status was “In a Relationship” (1) or left blank (0),
B=.492, Wald=5.69, \( p = .02 \), odds ratio = 1.64, and the covariate, relationship length, (B=.03, Wald=10.14, \( p = .001 \), odds ratio = 1.03 were significantly associated with stability. That is, controlling for relationship length, displaying a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” as opposed to not posting a relationship status was associated with a 64% increase in the likelihood of staying together with one’s partner between T7 and T8.

The third logistic regression compared the likelihood of having remained with one’s Time 7 partner at T8 between individuals who display a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” (dummy code = 1) with those who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single (dummy code = 0).” Both the dummy-coded variable designating whether one’s Facebook status was “In a Relationship” (1) or “Single” (0) and the covariate, relationship length, were significantly associated with stability (B=1.29, Wald=6.51, \( p = .01 \), odds ratio=3.63, and B=.02, Wald=5.97, \( p = .02 \), odds ratio=1.02, respectively). That is, controlling for relationship length, displaying a relationship status of “In a Relationship” as opposed to displaying “Single” was associated with a 363% increase in the likelihood of staying together with one’s partner between T7 and T8.

Hypothesis 2d also predicted that displaying one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo would be positively associated with relationship stability between T7 and T8 (staying together as opposed to breaking up), controlling for relationship length at T7. To test this hypothesis a logistic regression was conducted with a binary dependent variable designating whether or not an individual’s relationship stayed intact between the two time points. A binary independent variable indicating whether or not one’s partner is
included in one’s primary Facebook photo, two dummy-coded variables representing relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), two dummy-coded relationship type by Facebook photo interaction terms, and relationship length (as a covariate) were entered simultaneously (see Table 8 for a summary of results).

Table 8

*Stability Between Time 7 and Time 8 by Primary Facebook Photo Among Individuals in Dating, Engaged, and Married Relationships*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>photo with partner vs. photo without partner</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>% increased likelihood of staying together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>161%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

The interaction terms were not found to be significant (*ps*>.05), indicating that the association between including one’s partner in one’s Facebook photo and stability does not vary by relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married). Due to the non-significance of the interaction terms, results of a more parsimonious Logistic Regression examining the relationship between Facebook photo and stability (controlling for relationship length at T7) across individuals of all relationship types are presented.

Results indicated that displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner is associated with a significantly greater likelihood of stability over time, B=.961, Wald=5.73, *p*=.017, Odds Ratio=2.61. That is, individuals who included their partner in their Facebook photo were 161% more likely to have stayed together with their partner between T7 and T8. 12.2% (45 of 323) of individuals who did not have a primary Facebook photo with their partner at T7 had broken up by T8, compared to only 4.7% of individuals who did have a primary Facebook photo with their partner (8 of 170). The
covariate, relationship length, was also significant, $B=.03$, Wald=18.35, $p<.001$, Odds Ratio=1.03. That is, a one-month increase in relationship length was associated with a .03% increase in likelihood of staying together between T7 and T8.

**Alternative Partner Monitoring, Infidelity, and Jealousy (Hypothesis 3)**

As predicted by Hypothesis 3, both forms of social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were found to be significantly associated with lower levels of alternative partner monitoring and a lower likelihood of having actually engaged in sexual infidelity over the course of one’s current relationship, controlling for relationship length. Furthermore, individuals whose partners displayed an accurate Facebook relationship status reported lower levels of jealousy, compared to those whose partners did not. The specific, in-depth results for the statistical tests of Hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c follow:

**Alternative Partner monitoring (Hypothesis 3a).**

Hypothesis 3a predicted that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be associated with a higher level of alternative partner monitoring, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level variable designating the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. “None”) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant differences in level of alternative partner monitoring as a function of Facebook relationship status, $F(2,286) = 9.38$, $p < .001$. 

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Planned comparison ANCOVAs indicated that individuals in dating relationships who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” reported significantly less alternative partner monitoring than both those who displayed “Single,” $F(1,220) = 12.72$, $p < .001$, and those elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,256) = 15.88$, $p < .001$. No significant differences in alternative partner monitoring were found between those who displayed “Single” and those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,256) = 9.99$, $p = .002$. The covariate, relationship length, was not significant in the omnibus test or planned comparisons, $ps > .05$.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo with one’s partner would be associated with a greater level of alternative partner monitoring, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among dating, engaged, and married individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo includes one’s partner and a 3-level variable designating whether the participant is in a dating relationship, engaged, or married as factors. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, $F(1,584) = 26.70$, $p < .001$, and relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), $F(2,584) = 10.10$, $p < .001$. Controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo was associated with lower levels of alternative partner monitoring among dating, married, and engaged individuals. The interaction term was not significant, $F(2,584) = 2.06$, $p = .13$, indicating that the relationship between alternative partner monitoring and including one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo does is statistically similar across
relationship types (dating, engaged, and married). The covariate relationship length was not significant, $p > .05$.

**Sexual infidelity (Hypothesis 3b).**

Hypothesis 3b predicted that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be negatively associated with infidelity behavior, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among individuals in dating relationships, three logistic regressions were conducted, with a binary dependent variable designating whether or not an individual has had sexual relations with someone other than their partner during their current relationship. Relationship length (as a covariate) and one of three dummy-coded independent variables designating Facebook relationship status were entered simultaneously in each (see Table 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook relationship status comparison</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>% increased likelihood of infidelity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blank/None (0) vs. Single (1)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank (0) vs. “In a Relationship” (1)</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>53%(^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (0) vs. “In a Relationship” (1)</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>179%(^2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** Comparisons were made using logistic regression, with a binary dependent variable for infidelity. Relationship length (as a covariate) and dummy-coded predictor variables designating Facebook relationship status were entered simultaneously. In all three analyses, the covariate relationship length was a significant predictor.

\(^1\)Percent increase in likelihood of infidelity associated with a blank Facebook relationship status, compared to “In a Relationship.”  
\(^2\)Percent increase in likelihood of infidelity associated with a Facebook relationship status of “Single,” compared to “In a Relationship.”

*\(p < .05\).*

The first logistic regression compared the likelihood of having engaged in infidelity between those individuals who display a Facebook relationship status of
“Single” (dummy code = 1) and those who elect to not display a Facebook relationship status (dummy code = 0). The dummy-coded variable designating whether one’s Facebook relationship status was “Single” (1) or left blank (0) was not significantly associated with infidelity, \( B = .14, \text{ Wald} = .09, \ p = .77, \) Odds Ratio=1.15. The covariate, relationship length, was significant, \( B = .01, \text{ Wald} = 4.43, \ p = .04, \) odds ratio=1.01.

The second logistic regression compared the likelihood of having engaged in infidelity while in relationship with one’s current partner between individuals who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” (dummy code = 1) with those who elected to not display a Facebook relationship status (dummy code = 0). Both the covariate, relationship length, and the dummy-coded variable designating whether one’s Facebook status was “In a Relationship” (1) or left blank (0) were significantly associated with infidelity (\( B = .01, \text{ Wald} = 7.56, \ p = .006, \) odds ratio = 1.01 and \( B = -.43, \text{ Wald} = 6.39, \ p = .01, \) odds ratio = 0.65 respectively). That is, controlling for relationship length, leaving one’s Facebook relationship status blank rather than Displaying “In a Relationship” was associated with a 53% increase in the likelihood of having had sexual relations with someone other than one’s partner over the course of one’s relationship.

The third logistic regression compared the likelihood of having engaged in infidelity with one’s current partner between individuals who display a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” (dummy code = 1) with those who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single (dummy code = 0).” Both the dummy-coded variable designating whether one’s Facebook status was “In a Relationship” (1) or “Single” (0) and the covariate, relationship length, were significantly associated with infidelity (\( B = -1.03, \text{ Wald} = 5.26, \ p = .02, \) odds ratio=.36, respectively, and \( B = .01, \text{ Wald} = 6.39, \ p = .01, \) odds ratio = 0.65 respectively).
Wald=5.99, \( p = .01 \), odds ratio=1.01, respectively). That is, controlling for relationship length, displaying a relationship status of “Single” as opposed to displaying “In a Relationship” was associated with a 179% increase in the likelihood of having had sexual relations with someone other than one’s partner over the course of one’s relationship.

Hypothesis 3b predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner would be negatively associated with infidelity behavior, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis a logistic regression was conducted, with a binary dependent variable designating whether or not an individual has had sexual relations with someone other than their partner during their current relationship. A binary independent variable indicating whether or not one’s partner is included in one’s primary Facebook photo, two dummy-coded variables representing relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), two dummy-coded relationship type by Facebook photo interaction terms, and relationship length (as a covariate) were entered simultaneously. See Table 10 for a summary of results.

**Table 10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Infidelity with current partner by Primary Facebook Photo Among Individuals in Dating, Engaged, and Married Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>photo with partner vs. photo without partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Percent decrease in likelihood of having engaged in infidelity associated with having a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner as opposed to having a photo that does not.

* \( p < .05. \)

The interaction terms were not found to be significant (\( ps > .05 \)), indicating that the association between including one’s partner in one’s Facebook photo and sexual infidelity does not vary by relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married).
Furthermore, it should be noted that reported acts of infidelity may have occurred at any point in the history of one’s relationship with one’s current partner, or, as the item reads, “since you began seriously dating.” That is, a married individual who reports sexual infidelity may have committed that infidelity long before marriage. Due to the absence of data on when infidelity occurred, as well as the non-significance of the interaction terms, results of a more parsimonious Logistic Regression examining the relationship between Facebook photo and sexual infidelity (controlling for relationship length) across individuals of all relationship types are presented.

Results indicated that displaying a Facebook photo that includes one’s partner is associated with a lower likelihood of having engaged in sexual infidelity during one’s relationship with one’s current partner, $B=-.95$, Wald=10.64, $p=.001$, odds ratio=.39. That is, controlling for relationship length, electing to display a Facebook photo that includes one’s partner is associated with a 156% lower likelihood of having engaged in sexual infidelity while in a relationship with that partner, compared to those who do not display a Facebook photo that include one’s partner. The covariate, relationship length, was also significant, $B=.01$, Wald=5.41, $p=.02$, odds ratio=1.01. That is, a one-month increase in relationship length was associated with a .01% increase in the likelihood of having engaged in sexual infidelity.

**Jealousy and partner’s Facebook relationship status (Hypothesis 3c).**

Hypothesis 3c predicted that one’s partner listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be positively associated with jealousy regarding one’s partner, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level variable designating
the participant’s partner’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. “None”) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate. See the lower section of Table 3 for a summary of the following result.

The omnibus test indicated significant differences in jealousy as a function of one’s partner’s Facebook relationship status, \( F(2,224) = 10.92, p<.001 \), controlling for length. Planned comparison ANCOVAs indicated that individuals in dating relationships whose partners display a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” report significantly lower levels of jealousy than those whose partners display no Facebook relationship status, \( F(1,206) = 15.31, p < .001 \), and also lower levels of jealousy than those whose partners display “Single” on Facebook, \( F(1,174) = 12.02, p = .001 \). Length was neither significant in the omnibus test nor the planned comparisons, \( ps > .05 \).

**Social Pressure to Maintain Relationship (Hypothesis 4)**

As predicted by Hypothesis 4, both forms of social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were found to be significantly associated with higher ratings of social pressure from friends and family to maintain one’s current relationship. The specific, in-depth results for the statistical tests of Hypotheses 4 follow:

Hypothesis 4 predicted that displaying a representative Facebook relationship status (as opposed to listing “Single” or not displaying any relationship status) would be associated with higher levels of perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among individuals in dating relationships, a one-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a 3-level variable designating
the participant’s Facebook relationship status (“In a Relationship” vs. “Single” vs. “None”) as the independent variable. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.

The omnibus test indicated significant differences in perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship as a function of Facebook relationship status $F(2,290) = 15.06, p < .001$. Planned comparison ANCOVAs indicated that individuals in dating relationships who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” reported significantly greater perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship than both those who displayed “Single,” $F(1,224) = 10.58, p < .001$, and those elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,258) = 16.67, p < .001$. No significant differences in perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship were found between those who displayed “Single” and those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,97) = 2.89, p = .09$. The covariate, relationship length, was significant only in the planned comparison between those who displayed “Single” and those who elected to not display any Facebook relationship status, $F(1,97) = 4.14, p = .05$.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner would be associated with greater perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship, controlling for relationship length. To test this hypothesis among dating, engaged, and married individuals, a 2-way ANCOVA was conducted, with a dichotomous variable indicating whether one’s primary Facebook photo includes one’s partner and a 3-level variable designating whether the participant is in a dating relationship, engaged, or married as factors. Relationship length was entered as a covariate.
The omnibus test indicated significant main effects for both whether or not one’s partner was included in one’s primary Facebook photograph, $F(1,588) = 18.17, p < .001$, and relationship type (dating vs. engaged vs. married), $F(2,588) = 30.90, p < .001$. Controlling for relationship length, having one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo was associated with higher levels of perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship among dating, married, and engaged individuals. The interaction term was not significant, $F(2,588) = 1.81, p = .165$, indicating that the relationship between perceived social pressure to maintain one’s relationship and including one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo does is statistically similar across relationship types (dating, engaged, and married). The covariate relationship length was not significant, $p > .05$.

**Differences by Gender and Relationship Type (Hypothesis 5)**

As predicted by Hypothesis 5a and 5c, single men were found to be more likely than single women to display a Facebook relationship status of “Single.” Further, engaged or married individuals were more likely than individuals in dating relationships to display an accurate Facebook relationship status and were also more likely to display a primary Facebook photo that includes their partner. However, contrary to the predictions of Hypothesis 5b and 5d, no gender differences were found in either form of relationship representation, nor were there any significant gender-by-relationship-type interactions. The specific, in-depth results for the statistical tests of Hypotheses 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d follow:
Gender effects among singles (Hypotheses 5a).

Hypothesis 5a specified that single men would be more likely than single women to display a Facebook relationship status of “Single.” The Facebook relationship status counts and percentages for single men and women (those who are not currently in a relationship) are displayed in Table 11.

Table 11
Facebook Relationship Status Counts and Percentages by Gender and Relationship Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Dating</th>
<th>Engaged</th>
<th>Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank (None)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(23.4%)</td>
<td>(35.3%)</td>
<td>(22.3%)</td>
<td>(20.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Single”</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(71.4%)</td>
<td>(56.4%)</td>
<td>(6.4%)</td>
<td>(12.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In a Relationship”</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.2%)</td>
<td>(4.5%)</td>
<td>(64.9%)</td>
<td>(61.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Engaged”</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Married”</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.5%)</td>
<td>(1.1%)</td>
<td>(0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s Complicated”</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(3.2%)</td>
<td>(3.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In an Open Rel.”</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(1.1%)</td>
<td>(0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Don’t Know/Joke</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.5%)</td>
<td>(1.1%)</td>
<td>(1.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As reported in Table 11, approximately 5% of both men and women who report that they are not currently in a relationship displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship.” It should be noted that 5 of these 10 individuals reported a recent breakup at the time of data collection. These ten participants, as well as the two single participants whose Facebook relationship statuses were “Married” and “Other,” respectively, were not included in the following analysis, which will focus on the
decision between displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Single” and displaying no Facebook relationship status.

To test hypotheses regarding gender differences in the public representation of one’s singlehood, we conducted a 2x2 chi-square test comparing single men and women in terms of the relative frequency of their decision to display “Single” as opposed to opting out of displaying any Facebook relationship status. Results indicated significant gender effects; single men are more likely than single women to display a Facebook relationship status of “Single,” $\chi^2(1, N=195) = 3.95, p = .047$.

**Gender differences among individuals in relationships (Hypothesis 5b).**

Hypothesis 5b predicted a gender difference in social media relationship representation, such that women in all types of relationships (dating, engaged, and married) would be more likely to display an accurate Facebook relationship status and display a primary Facebook photo including their partner, compared to their male counterparts. Chi-square tests were conducted to test these hypotheses. For the purpose of the following analyses, an “accurate” Facebook relationship status was defined as a relationship status that is both displayed (as opposed to no status being displayed) and designates a type of relationship that matches the type of relationship indicated by the participant on his/her survey (i.e., an accurate Facebook relationship status for those currently in dating relationships would be “In a Relationship,” for those currently engaged it would be “Engaged,” and for those currently married it would be “Married.”). The 4 engaged individuals and 2 individuals in dating relationships who reported that they displayed the more committed Facebook relationship status of “Married” were coded as an “accurate.” The 11 individuals who displayed a Facebook relationship status
of “It’s complicated” and the 2 individuals who displayed “In an Open Relationship” were not coded as “accurate,” given the conceptualization of social media relationship representation as a marker of commitment and monogamy.

Chi-square analyses testing for differences in the likelihood of displaying an accurate Facebook relationship status and displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner as a function of gender indicated no significant differences between men and women. Across combined relationship types (dating, engaged, and married), men and women did not differ in terms of likelihood of displaying an accurate Facebook relationship status, $\chi^2 (1, 617)=.03, p = .85$. 76.3% of men and 77.0% of women display an accurate Facebook relationship status. Similarly, across combined relationship types (dating, engaged, and married), no gender differences were found in terms of likelihood of displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner, $\chi^2 (1, 607)=.08, p = .78$. 30.9% of men and 29.8% of women displayed a primary Facebook photo that included their partner.

**Differences between dating vs. engaged/married relationships**

(Hypothesis 5c).

Table 11 displays the Facebook relationship status counts and percentages for individuals in dating relationships, engaged individuals, and married individuals by gender. The degree of homogeneity in Facebook relationship status among engaged and married individuals was greater than expected.

Chi-square analyses tested for differences in the likelihood of displaying an accurate Facebook relationship status and displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner as a function of relationship type (dating vs. married/engaged)
revealed significant group differences for both dependent variables. Compared to individuals in dating relationships, individuals who were engaged or married were significantly more likely to display an accurate Facebook relationship status, $\chi^2(1, 617)=60.29, p < .001$, and also more likely to display a primary Facebook photo that includes their partner, $\chi^2(1, 607)=41.82, p < .001$. 90.2% of engaged or married individuals (compared to 63.8% of individuals in dating relationships) displayed an accurate relationship status, and 42.3% of engaged or married individuals (compared to 18.2% of individuals in dating relationships) displayed a primary Facebook photograph that includes their partner.

**Gender by relationship type interaction (Hypothesis 5d).**

Hypothesis 2d predicted a gender-by-relationship-type interaction, such that among individuals who are engaged or married, gender differences in Facebook relationship representation would exist only among individuals in dating relationships, and not among engaged or married individuals. To further test how gender and relationship type are associated with the display of an accurate Facebook relationship status, and to explore the possibility of a gender-by-relationship-type interaction effect, a Logistic regression was conducted, with gender (male=0, female=1), a dichotomous variable indicating whether an individual is engaged/married (1) vs. in a dating relationship (0), and a gender-by-relationship-type interaction term entered as independent variables, predicting a dichotomous outcome variable indicating whether or not one displays an accurate Facebook relationship status.

The logistic regression indicated that the dichotomous relationship type variable (dating vs. engaged/married) was significant, $B=1.12$, Wald=9.17, $p = .002$, odds
Being engaged or married to one’s partner (as opposed to being in a dating relationship) is associated with a 223% greater likelihood of displaying an accurate Facebook relationship status. Gender was not significant (B=−.18, Wald=.48, p = .49, odds ratio=.84), nor was the gender-by-relationship-type interaction term significant (B=.80, Wald=2.91, p = .09, odds ratio=2.231).

To test whether gender and relationship type are associated with the display of one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo, and to explore the possibility of a gender-by-relationship-type interaction effect, a Logistic regression was conducted, with gender, a dichotomous variable indicating whether an individual is engaged/married vs. in a dating relationship, and a gender-by-relationship-type interaction term entered as independent variables, predicting a dichotomous outcome variable indicating the presence or absence of one’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo.

The logistic regression indicated that the dichotomous relationship type (dating vs. engaged/married) was significant, B=1.44, Wald=16.74, p < .001, odds ratio=4.24. Being engaged or married to one’s partner (as opposed to being in a dating relationship) is associated with a 423% greater likelihood of displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner. Gender was not significant (B=.17, Wald=.27, p = .61, odds ratio=1.19), nor was the gender-by-relationship-type interaction term significant (B=−.359, Wald=.74, p = .39, odds ratio=.70).

**Representation of Singlehood (Hypothesis 6)**

As predicted, among single people (i.e., those who are not currently in a relationship), displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Single” (as opposed to hiding one’s relationship status or posting another relationship status) was significantly
associated with having a higher number of sexual partners since the end of one’s last relationship. The hypothesis that those who display “Single” would report significantly higher levels of active partner seeking behavior and a greater desire to be in a relationship (Hypothesis 6a) were not supported. Results from statistical tests of Hypothesis 6 are presented in Table 12. Specific and in-depth results from the tests of Hypothesis 6a and 6b follow.

Table 12
Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes for Partner-Seeking, Desire for a Relationship, Sexual Behavior, and Dating Behavior by Facebook Relationship Status for Single Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blank/none M(SD)</th>
<th>“Single” M(SD)</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner-Seeking behavior</td>
<td>3.08 (1.48)</td>
<td>3.14 (1.45)</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for a Relationship</td>
<td>3.57 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.37 (1.41)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people with whom one has gone on a date</td>
<td>1.97 (2.00)</td>
<td>2.88 (4.36)</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people with whom one has “hooked up”</td>
<td>1.20 (1.79)</td>
<td>2.46 (4.52)</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people with whom one has had sex</td>
<td>0.88 (1.06)</td>
<td>1.98 (3.70)</td>
<td>-0.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of times one has had sex</td>
<td>6.09 (10.68)</td>
<td>9.18 (17.64)</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

**Partner-seeking and desire for a relationship (Hypothesis 6a).**

Hypothesis 6a predicted that, for single individuals, displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Single” would be associated with higher levels of active partner-seeking behavior and a greater desire to be in a relationship, compared to those who displayed no Facebook relationship status. To test these hypotheses, two independent-samples t-tests were conducted. No significant differences were found between single individuals who displayed a Facebook status of “Single” and single individuals who did not display any Facebook relationship status in terms of active partner seeking behavior, \( t(189) = -.24, p = .81 \) or desire to be in a relationship, \( t(188) = .90, p = .37 \).
Sexual and dating behavior (Hypothesis 6b).

Hypothesis 6b predicted that, for single individuals, displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Single” would be associated with higher frequency of sexual and/or dating behavior. To test these hypotheses, a series of four, 2-way ANCOVAs were conducted, with a 2-level Facebook relationship status factor (“Single” displayed vs. no relationship status displayed) and the following four dependent variables:

1. the number of different people the individual has gone on a date with since the end of his or her last relationship,
2. the number of different people the individual has “hooked up” with since the end of his or her last relationship,
3. the number of different people the individual has had sex with since the end of his or her last relationship, and
4. the number of times the individual has had sex since the end of his or her last relationship.

In each ANCOVA, the amount of time since the end of the individual’s last relationship was included as a covariate.

Results indicated that singles who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single” reported having sex with a significantly greater number of partners in the time period since their last relationship ended, controlling for the amount of time since the individual’s last relationship ended, compared to singles who did not display any Facebook relationship status, F(1,166)=4.08, p=.045. Although mean differences in the expected direction were observed for the other three dependent variables of interest
(number of people dated, number of people “hooked up” with, and number of times having sex), these differences did not reach significance (see Table X).
Chapter Four: Discussion

Summary of Findings

Results of the present study generally support the primary hypotheses, indicating that relationship representation via social media was associated with commitment, stability, and fidelity. Among individuals in dating relationships, displaying a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship” was associated with higher levels of prioritization of relationship, commitment to the future, perceived likelihood of marrying partner, social pressure to maintain relationship, and stability over time, as well as lower levels of alternative partner monitoring and sexual infidelity, compared to electing to not display any Facebook relationship status or displaying a Facebook relationship status of “Single.” Lower levels of jealousy were reported among individuals whose partners displayed a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship,” compared to both those whose partners elected to not display any Facebook relationship status and those whose partners displayed “Single.”

Among individuals in dating relationships, engaged individuals, and married individuals, displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner was associated with lower levels of alternative partner monitoring and sexual infidelity, higher levels of social pressure to continue the relationship, and higher rates of stability over time. For individuals in dating relationships and married individuals, displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner was associated with greater
commitment to the future and a lower perceived likelihood of breakup in the near future. For individuals in dating relationships, displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner was associated with higher levels of couple identity, prioritization of relationship, and perceived likelihood of marriage to one’s partner.

No gender differences in relationship representation via social media were found, with similar numbers of men and women displaying accurate Facebook relationship statuses and displaying primary Facebook photos that included their partners. Engaged and married individuals were more likely than individuals in dating relationships to display an accurate relationship status and were more likely to display a primary Facebook photo that includes their partner.

Single men were found to be more likely than single women to display a Facebook relationship status of “Single,” as opposed to electing to not display any relationship status. Among single individuals, those who displayed a Facebook relationship status of “Single” reported a higher number of sexual partners since the end of their last relationship, controlling for time since the end of their last relationship.

**Frequency of Facebook Use and Variance in Relationship Representation**

As expected, a majority of participants (80%) from the present study’s representative national sample of adults aged 20-37 reported that they are part of the 845 million individuals worldwide who have a Facebook profile (Facebook Inc., 2011).

In terms of Facebook relationship status, there was little variability in Facebook relationship status among engaged and married Facebook users, compared to those in dating relationships. That is, it was uncommon for those who were engaged or married to opt out of displaying a Facebook relationship status or to display anything other than
“Engaged,” or “Married,” respectively, on their Facebook profiles. Individuals who were in dating relationships, however, were much more varied in their Facebook relationship status choices. While displaying “In a Relationship” was a popular choice among these individuals, there were also large contingents of individuals in dating relationships that displayed “Single” or elected to display no relationship status.

The relatively greater variety of Facebook relationship statuses among individuals in dating relationships compared to those who are engaged or married is consistent with hypotheses and will be discussed below in light of commitment theory. However, the degree of the homogeneity of Facebook relationship status among engaged and married individuals was greater than expected, and the lack of variance posed some problems in terms of testing the proposed hypotheses regarding Facebook relationship representation among engaged and married individuals. As noted above, it was determined that the analyses examining possible relationship differences as a function of Facebook relationship status would be fruitful only among individuals in dating relationships, due to low base rates of engaged and married individuals who did not display “Engaged” or “Married,” respectively.

The present study revealed that posting a primary Facebook photograph that includes one’s partner is fairly common, with about one-third of Facebook users across relationship types (dating, engaged, and married) utilizing this means of relationship representation. Data regarding the inclusion or exclusion of an individual’s partner in one’s primary Facebook photo demonstrated enough variance within dating, engaged, and married relationships to allow an examination of relationship variables as a function of this form of relationship representation in all three of these relationship types.
Specific Aspects of Commitment

A specific discussion of each of the four areas of commitment studied [1) Relationship prioritization and Couple Identity; 2) Stability, Perceived Stability, and Commitment to the Future; 3) Alternative Partner Monitoring, Infidelity, & Jealousy; and 4) Social Pressure] will now be presented, followed by a general discussion of the overall pattern of results regarding commitment.

Relationship prioritization and couple identity.

It was hypothesized that social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) would be associated with a both a stronger sense of couple identity and a higher level of prioritization of the relationship, controlling for relationship length. These hypotheses were supported. Among individuals in dating relationships, a sense of “we-ness” is linked to both forms of Facebook relationship representation studied. Similarly, the data suggest that observing an individual’s utilization of Facebook’s relationship representation tools (or lack thereof) may reflect the individual’s prioritization of his/her relationship compared to other aspects of his/her life.

The display of a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s partner or an accurate Facebook relationship status might be conceptualized as a direct representation of couple identity. The primary Facebook photo is not only viewed by one’s partner and one’s social community as discussed above, but is also viewed repeatedly by the individual who posted it. As noted in the introduction, the importance of public behavior in the development of self is central to Goffman’s (1959) classic dramaturgical model.
That is, Goffman contends that one’s performances shape one’s view of one’s own identity. An interpretation of the findings in light of Goffman’s model would suggest that the public nature of relationship representation “performances” on Facebook might not only reflect an individual’s current sense of couple identity and relationship prioritization (or lack thereof), but might also serve to strengthen and reify it, resulting in a feedback loop between one’s Facebook profile and one’s view of one’s self. This is, in fact, exactly what the theory of cognitive dissonance would predict in that there would be internal pressure to have one’s behavior and attitudes remain consonant (for a review, see Brehm, 2007). Furthermore, in accord with the theory of cognitive dissonance, efforts to reduce dissonance will be greatest when one perceives their original decision or choice (in this case, the act of relationship representation via social media) to be fully volitional.

**Stability/perceived stability/commitment to the future.**

It was hypothesized that both forms of social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) would be significantly associated with a greater commitment to the future with one’s partner, a lesser perceived likelihood of breakup in the coming year, a greater perceived likelihood of eventual marriage to one’s partner, as well as a greater likelihood of actual relationship stability over time, controlling for relationship length. Each of these hypotheses was supported by the present findings.

The findings regarding differences in commitment to the future, perceived stability, and actual stability over time as a function of Facebook relationship status and primary Facebook photo indicate that relationship representation via social media may, in
a sense, offer a window into the future of a couple’s relationship. Even though these emblems may be changed almost instantaneously with just a few clicks of a mouse, they may reflect the intent of maintaining a relationship into the future, and are indeed predictive of relationship continuance over time. Furthermore, the data indicate that these emblems may be associated with planning to take on the additional commitment emblem of marriage in the future.

Importantly, as hypothesized, the associations between Facebook relationship representation and commitment to the future, perceived stability, and actual stability over time are not only significant for individuals in dating relationships, but also for engaged and married individuals. Displaying a primary Facebook photo that includes one’s spouse or fiancé was found to be associated with a lower likelihood of divorce (for married participants) or a broken engagement (for engaged participants) between time points. Similar to individuals in dating relationships, married participants whose primary Facebook photos included their partners reported a higher level of commitment to the future and a lower perceived likelihood of divorce in the near future. These findings provide some indication that social media relationship representation is not merely a gimmick or plaything used in the dating game, but rather a powerful emblem to which important social meaning can perhaps be ascribed at any stage of relationships, including marriage.

**Alternative partner monitoring, infidelity, & jealousy.**

Findings regarding the associations between Facebook relationship representation and alternative partner monitoring, infidelity, and jealousy were consistent with hypotheses. As predicted, both forms of social media relationship representation (having
a primary photo with one’s partner and posting a an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) were found to be significantly associated with lower levels of alternative partner monitoring and lower likelihood of infidelity controlling for relationship length. Individuals whose partners display an accurate relationship status were found to report lower levels of jealousy, compared to individuals whose partners do not display an accurate relationship status.

When viewed in light of the present findings regarding alternative monitoring and infidelity, it could be argued that the increased levels of jealousy found among those whose dating partners forgo displaying “In a Relationship” on Facebook in favor of displaying “Single” or opting out of displaying any Facebook relationship status are, in fact, warranted. That is, those whose partners use Facebook but fail to represent their relationships might have good reason to experience higher levels of jealousy; individuals who do not represent their relationships via Facebook report higher levels of alternative partner monitoring and a greater likelihood of having engaged in sexual infidelity with one’s current partner. The data could be interpreted to indicate that those who display an accurate relationship status or include their partner in their primary Facebook photos may be more comfortable with the notion of being “off the market” in the eyes of their Facebook social network (which likely includes potential alternative partners).

An individual’s lack of Facebook relationship representation may be associated with relationship characteristics in which infidelity is more likely to occur (e.g., low commitment), but it is also important to consider the possibility that the lack of representation might be a directly contributing factor to the likelihood of infidelity. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, acts of “possessive ornamentation” such as
asking one’s partner to wear a wedding ring have been identified as a key strategy in human mate guarding (Buss, 1988; Buss, 2002; Buss & Shackelford, 1997). It could be argued that emblems of commitment displayed via social media might be considered be a digital strategy of possessive ornamentation. An absent Facebook relationship status or a Facebook relationship status of “Single” may have a social effect similar to that of a bare left ring finger in that, in both cases, there is an observable absence of that which might be a potential deterrent to interested individuals. With the present data, it is impossible to determine when or why any act of infidelity occurred in the course of the relationship, or whether Facebook behavior had any direct association with the reported acts of sexual infidelity. However, when viewed in light of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers’ (AAML) 2010 report that 81% of its members report that they have observed an increase in legal evidence from social networking sites, with Facebook being identified as the primary source of this type of evidence by 66% of AAML members, it seems reasonable to suggest the possibility that some participants’ decisions regarding Facebook relationship representation might sometimes be rather directly related to their reported infidelity.

Social pressure.

It was hypothesized that both forms of social media relationship representation (having a primary photo with one’s partner and posting an accurate Facebook relationship status as opposed to listing single or not displaying a relationship status) would be significantly associated with higher levels of social pressure from friends and family to maintain one’s current relationship. Data from the present study supported these hypotheses.
Facebook is, after all, a form of social media. The link between one’s Facebook relationship representation and social pressure to maintain one’s relationship is an important finding that fits well with theories of commitment and ambiguity put forth in the introduction and speaks to the importance of the public nature of commitment emblems.

It seems that Facebook relationship representation would be a rather direct means of increasing one’s friends’ and family members’ involvement and interest in one’s relationship and partner. Facebook provides one’s friends and family members the opportunity to build what some might consider a rather intimate familiarity with their loved one’s partner and relationship through observation, even at a geographical or social distance.

In using Goffman’s theoretical framework for the development of self via public performance, we should not only consider the impact of the Facebook “performance” on the “performer” (see discussion of findings regarding couple identity above), but also consider the “audience.” Viewed through Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, it makes sense that one’s “performances” before one’s “audience” would not only shape one’s view of self, but would also impact the “audience” members’ behavior, perceptions, and interest. In turn, it seems that one’s friends’ and family members’ involvement and interest in one’s relationship and partner might likely elicit increased representation of one’s relationship via social media. Recommendations for future research on the social media “audience” will be discussed below.
Overall Pattern of Results Regarding Commitment and Relationship Representation

The findings of positive associations between Facebook relationship representation and nearly every aspect of commitment analyzed (which have just been discussed individually) will now be appraised together and the overall pattern of these results will be discussed in terms of commitment theory and signal theory. Taken together, the present findings support the notion that relationship representation via social media can serve as an important emblem of commitment. Overall, the data suggest that a couple’s Facebook relationship statuses and primary Facebook photos may be informative regarding the couple’s commitment level.

As put forth in the introduction, many social scientists have theorized a societal trend toward ambiguity in relationship development processes, a trend that some suggest may be partially motivated by attachment anxiety (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011). In considering social media relationship representation as a phenomenon that may run counter to this trend, it is important to look both at the impact of a couple’s social media relationship representation on the perceptions and behavior of the social community surrounding the couple, as well as the impact of social media relationship representation on the partners themselves. It has been suggested that public (as opposed to private) expressions of commitment may be especially effective in reducing ambiguity in relationships, leaving less room for misunderstanding between partners (Stanley et al, 2010). The potential reduction in ambiguity afforded by social media relationship representation may be quite consequential in terms of how individuals appraise the commitment level of their partners and respond accordingly. While the present study
does not evaluate Facebook changes over time and cannot speak to causation, the evidence that Facebook representations do reflect dimensions of commitment in romantic relationships means that social media can be, and likely is being, used to clarify mutuality of commitment in romantic relationships. The existence of these tools may make it easier for some couples to “define the relationship,” and they are likely being consciously used by many people for this purpose. A phenomenon that was not measured here that may be important to examine is the possibility that relationships may also dissolve as a result of one partner’s unwillingness to engage in relationship representation via social media. In other words, sometimes something that helps define the nature of a romantic relationship has the potential to define it out of existence.

When viewed through the lens of ambiguity in relationship development, it is rather unsurprising that individuals in dating relationships use a wider variety of designations regarding their Facebook relationship statuses (including opting out of posting one altogether) than do their engaged and married counterparts. It is possible to think of social media relationship representation as a versatile and powerful instrument with which an individual can regulate his or her desired balance of ambiguity and clarity in a relationship. When used to increase clarity, it can help the user signal a desire for monogamy with his/her partner, deter potential competition, and/or commit publicly in front of one’s social circle. As discussed previously, social media relationship representation decisions require rather volitional action to be taken. To the extent a user decides to maintain or increase ambiguity, it may help the user keep an emotionally safe and comfortable distance in the face of attachment anxiety or an avoidant attachment style (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011), maintain his/her availability to alternative
partners, and keep any commitments that are made privately out of the public eye.

Individuals in dating relationships may be more motivated to utilize the various functions of social media as an instrument for regulating ambiguity and clarity, compared to those who are engaged or married, for whom clarity is a rather foregone conclusion. Indeed, while not assessed here, a significant portion of those who were engaged or married at the time of these analyses may have used Facebook representations of their commitment as their relationship was progressing to that higher level of clarity and mutuality about commitment. Longer term follow-up of the current sample would allow a test of this hypothesis.

Results indicate that social media relationship representation has the potential to be particularly informative to a couple’s social community in the absence of other, well-established markers of commitment like engagement or marriage. That is, if an individual outside of a an unmarried, un-engaged couple’s relationship (such as a friend or family member) seeks information about the development of the couple’s relationship, he or she might be able to look to social media relationship representation (or lack thereof) as one source of meaningful information providing clues in answering questions such as “Is it getting serious?,” “Where is their relationship headed?” and “What are his/her intentions?”

Even if a couple does have an established marker of commitment like engagement or marriage in place, results from our analyses demonstrating the link between primary Facebook photos and various aspects of commitment indicated that social media relationship representation may be quite informative to a couple’s social community in terms of the married or engaged couple’s commitment. Despite difficulties with adequate
statistical power to test for differences as a function of engaged and married individuals’ Facebook relationship statuses due to low base rates, the hypotheses regarding Facebook relationship status of engaged and married individuals should be tested in future research.

Closely related to ambiguity vs. clarity is the question regarding the signal value of Facebook relationship representation raised in the introduction. As stated previously, signal value is an economic construct that refers to the strength and credibility of a market signal, defined as an “activity or attribute of individuals in a market which, by design or accident, alter the belief of, or convey information to other individuals in the market (Spence, 1974, p. 1, cited in Rowthorn, 2002, p. 135).” The value of a signal depends largely on whether or not there are significant costs associated with it. Data from the present study lend support to the notion that social media relationship representation does, indeed, have a high signal value. Facebook relationship representation was found to be associated with a number of high-cost constructs implying substantial sacrifice (all of which were discussed above), including prioritization of one’s relationship, which implies the opportunity costs of lower-prioritized pursuits; greater likelihood of marriage, which carries numerous financial and social obligations; lower likelihood of infidelity, which implies a sexual cost; and greater social pressure to maintain the relationship, which is associated with the cost of public scrutiny in the event of dissolution.

Stanley et al. (2010) discuss the importance of personal volition in both reflecting actual commitment levels and in the development of commitments that will be resilient. Stanley asserts that a behavior can only be a signal or emblem of commitment to one’s partner if one has control over that behavior (S. Stanley, personal communication, May 24, 2012). Non-volitional behaviors are not particularly informative in terms of reflecting
commitment. One example of this is cohabitation, which most couples slide into, and which is considered to contain relatively little information about commitment unless accompanied by clear, mutual plans to build a future together (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). It is not possible to slide into changing one’s status on Facebook or uploading and posting a primary photo that includes one’s partner; these are actions that require rather volitional and conscious execution.

The idea of volition may help explain Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman’s (2010) finding (from the same sample used in the present study) that behaviors such as planning vacations, sharing a cell phone plan, or signing a lease together are all more predictive or remaining together than is having a child together. Simple and relatively less important decisions and actions that are clearly volitional (such as certain types of social media relationship representation) may actually be more informative about commitment than relatively more important relationship transitions made less volitionally.

Taken together in light of its potential for ambiguity reduction, its significant associated personal costs, and the volitional actions required in its implementation, there appears to be a strong indication that Facebook relationship representation carries a substantial signal value and that acts of social media relationship representation have great potential to serve as truly informative emblems of commitment.

**Gender Differences**

Contrary to predictions, among individuals in relationships, few gender differences in relationship representation via Facebook were found. However, among single individuals, significant gender differences were found, with single men being more
likely than single women to display a Facebook relationship status of “Single.” These two findings will be discussed separately.

The finding that single men are more likely than single women to display a Facebook relationship status of “Single” (as opposed to opting out of displaying any relationship status) is consistent with the previous research that women tend to emphasize interpersonal affiliation (i.e., relationships with other people, group membership, and belongingness) on social networking sites (Manago et al., 2008). Thus, displaying “Single,” which could perhaps be conceptualized as a direct display of a lack of romantic affiliation, may tend to run counter to females’ presentational goals. It may also be the case that displaying “Single” is perceived as a social message regarding sexual availability that may be more socially accepted among males and aligned with male gender norms (see discussion of findings regarding the positive relationship between displaying “Single” and number of sexual partners below, as well as previous discussion of infidelity). It may also be the case that an individual’s display of “Single” is more likely to attract unwanted attention, harassment, or predation when that individual is a woman which might prompt single women to opt out of displaying any Facebook relationship status (see Finn & Banach, 2000, for a discussion of women’s internet safety issues).

The surprising lack of gender differences found among individuals in relationships in terms of Facebook relationship status or inclusion/exclusion of partner in primary Facebook photo raises a number of interesting questions regarding gender, commitment emblems, and the cultural context of Facebook. The hypothesis that women would be more likely than men to display emblems of commitment via Facebook was
based on the premise that these emblems could be adopted by women with or without their partners, unlike, for example, the emblem of engagement, which requires a mutual adoption and, according to the rigid gender roles surrounding engagement (Schweingruber, Cast, & Anahita, 2008), is to be initiated by a man.

Although it is certainly possible for an individual to change his/her Facebook relationship status or Facebook photo in order to represent his/her relationship without assent from his/her partner from a strictly technological standpoint, there may be an unwritten social code with expectations of mutuality attached to these emblems. If that is indeed the case, then the present finding of no gender differences in relationship representation would be expected, as Facebook emblems of commitment would thus come in the form of male-female pairs among heterosexual couples. The possibility that there may be a social expectation of mutuality when it comes to Facebook relationship representation would also be consistent with our finding that 86% of participants’ whose partners had a Facebook profile reported that their partner displays the same relationship status that they do, as well as Papp & Cayemberg’s finding that partners tend to show similarity in terms of Facebook relationship status and primary photo (2012). Although the present study lacked the data to explore possible gender differences in processes of initiation of Facebook relationship representation, future studies should explore possible gender differences using longitudinal data from both members of couples.

The hypothesized gender differences were also based on Stanley’s (under review) assertion that men tend to “resist crossing the line [of marriage] until they can no longer afford not to cross it” (p.3).” That is, Stanley suggests that men tend to hold back from making the commitment of marriage until the prospect of not committing becomes more
personally costly than the perceived demands of committing. It was predicted that the same might hold for the commitment emblem of Facebook relationship representation, resulting in fewer men than women displaying accurate Facebook relationship statuses and primary Facebook photos that include their partner.

When these results are viewed through the lens of Stanley’s “cross the line” theory, the lack of gender differences in Facebook relationship representation could indicate that Facebook emblems may not perceived by men to be on the far side of “the line.” That is, the adoption of an accurate relationship status and/or a Facebook photo with one’s partner may not tend to provoke anxiety or be associated with any perceived demand for behavior change, substantial costs, or responsibilities for men, who might therefore be willing to enthusiastically adopt it while resisting other emblems of commitment. For example, a man who dreads the social expectations of buying an expensive engagement ring (Schweingruber, Cast, & Anahita, 2008) and the lifelong, legally binding obligations of marriage vows may find comfort in the free and instantaneously retractable means of relationship representation via social media.

It also seems quite possible that relationship representation on Facebook might actually amount to having crossed one large line, clearly and mutually, and that doing so might create the conditions under which ambiguity is reduced and mutuality in commitment is more likely. Ambiguity is believed to thrive on the lower availability of cultural emblems of commitment (Stanley et al., 2010). In discussing engagement prior to cohabitation, Kline et al. (2004) suggest that engagement represents a point of clarification being reached, limiting ambiguity in a manner that increases the odds of symmetrical commitment. It seems that the same could perhaps be said for social media
relationship representation. Hence, the findings could be interpreted to indicate that no gender differences in commitment found in the current study may reflect that the sieve of Facebook designation has performed its function.

It is also important to consider the cultural context in which Facebook originated and grew. It seems possible that the process of adopting social media relationship representation emblems is relatively less gendered than the process for adopting other emblems (such as engagement or the wearing of the letterman’s jacket) because unlike modern American engagement rituals, which were established in their current form just after the Great Depression (Brinig, 1990), social media commitment emblems came into being in early 21st century, a time with relatively more flexibility in gender roles and power for women in their romantic relationships. Importantly, this was the same period of time in which the phrases “define the relationship” or DTR, or “having the talk” all came into wide use. While it may not be something that can be empirically tested, it is certainly plausible that such terminology arose because more rigid cultural forms declined.

**Singles’ Sexual Behavior**

The hypothesis that displaying a Facebook status of “Single” would be associated with higher levels of sexual activity was generally supported. Among individuals who are single (not currently in a romantic relationship), those who display a Facebook relationship status of “Single” rather than opting out of displaying any Facebook relationship status were found to have had sex with a significantly higher number of partners in the time interval between the end of their last relationship and the time of data collection, controlling for the length of that interval. Mean differences in number of
dating partners, “hook up” partners, and times having sex did not reach statistical significance, but all were in the expected direction by substantial margins, which may point to statistical power issues rather than true equivalence.

Like relationship representation via social media, the representation of singlehood via social media requires volitional action, which suggests that it might be informative regarding underlying motivations. But the finding that those who display “Single” have had more sexual partners since their last relationship ended than those who leave it blank may be not only a reflection of the sexual goals and interests associated with displaying “Single.” It is also possible that advertising one’s singlehood to one’s Facebook social network could directly create more opportunities for more sexual partners. This is parallel to the earlier suggestion that the higher rates of infidelity among those who refrain from Facebook relationship representation might reflect a combination of personal or relationship qualities (e.g., low commitment) but also the increased opportunities that representing oneself as single on Facebook may provide.

Taken together with the finding that those who display “Single” are not significantly more interested in finding a relationship than those who display no Facebook relationship status, the present findings may suggest that displaying “Single” on Facebook is a useful symbol for those seeking a variety of casual sexual partners rather than (or perhaps in addition to) monogamous relationships. Because Facebook is generally used for connecting with people that are already known offline, rather than for meeting new people (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007), it may be particularly associated with the formation of “friends with benefits” relationships, in which two individuals with an
existing friendship engage in sex on a repeated, regular basis without the expectation of romantic commitment or sexual exclusivity (for a discussion of “friends with benefits relationships,” see Hughes, Morrison & Asada, 2005). Future research examining the motives and processes underlying how singles represent their singlehood via social media should be conducted to test these theorized interpretations of the present findings.

**Implications of Findings**

**Methodological implications.**

Facebook and other social media outlets hold great potential as a resource for social scientists, providing the opportunity to access a richly intimate sample of naturally occurring behavior from both a literal and figurative distance. That is, a researcher can directly observe an individual’s behavior without being in physical proximity to that individual or intruding on the behavior. Facebook behavior involves structured, discrete acts that are readily measurable and quantifiable. For relationship researchers in particular, Facebook can provide a log of Facebook interactions between two people in real time, as well as a full history with every Facebook interaction dated and recorded.

This study provides some clues and raises some important questions regarding the degree of congruence between what participants report on a private survey and what they portray publicly on Facebook. Inconsistencies were found, with many individuals who privately indicated that they were in a dating relationship failing to indicate such on their Facebook profile. Because a plethora of group differences were found as a function of these Facebook choices, Facebook may be most useful to researchers who are interested in studying public, social behavior rather than those who hope to rely on it as a proxy for internal, private phenomena. Studies like this, which use (albeit self-reported) Facebook
behavior and privately self-reported data can gain a window on the issue of private vs. public discrepancy and/or congruence.

**Clinical implications.**

The present study provides valuable information to clinicians working with couples in this age of ubiquitous technology. In general, it points to the importance of clinicians recognizing social media as a potentially meaningful and impactful aspect of life for some (though not all) clients. The results of the present study might serve to discourage a clinician from quickly dismissing social media behavior as trivial or irrelevant to “real world” behavior. Rather, the present study lends credence to the notion that social media-related behavior may be consequential and important in relationships. Facebook has the potential to play a valuable role in couples treatment and may provide a useful means of assessment as well as a point of intervention.²

Discussion of social media relationship representation may be able to provide therapists with a portal of entry through which an exploration of commitment issues can begin. A discussion of when, how, and why decisions regarding social media relationship representation have been made has the potential to elucidate underlying commitment dynamics in a context that is perhaps less threatening than the context of, say, a discussion of decisions regarding marriage. Discrepancies in adoption of Facebook commitment emblems between partners, as well as discrepancies between private and public statements of commitment may be valuable to highlight. The current findings

² The field of clinical psychology (as well as other healthcare and helping professions) is currently engaged in a lively ethical dialogue regarding the intersection of social media and clinical practice that is outside the scope of the present study. There are serious ethical considerations that must be thoughtfully addressed by any clinician who might choose to directly observe or interact with a client via a social media outlet. The present recommendations refer only to in-session discussions of social media, with information provided by the client themselves.
would indicate that a partner’s motivation to engage in or avoid relationship representation via social media may have important correlates in his or her overall commitment level, sense of couple identity, prioritization of the relationship, and/or vision for the future.

Data from the current study would suggest that social media relationship representation may have a significant effect on a couple’s friends and family. In a clinical setting, social media has the potential to be used as a tool for helping a couple explore and examine how they, as individuals and as a couple, relate to those around them, including friends, family members, colleagues, and members of their community. What messages are they sending the outside world about their relationship? Who are the friends and foes of the relationship? What events or aspects of the relationship are kept private, and which are shared with others? Furthermore, support from a couple’s broader social community has been shown to positively impact couple relationships (Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), and working to strengthen and maintain a support network is a worthy clinical goal that may benefit from the use of social media.

One of the key principles of Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT; Christensen, 1998), an empirically-supported approach to couples treatment, is “unified detachment,” which refers to a couple’s ability to distance themselves and one another from a relationship problem or conflict, and, together, observe the problem or conflict as if they were outsiders. It seems that for some couples, Facebook might provide a means of taking an objective, bird’s eye view of their relationship. Facebook’s “timeline” feature would allow a couple to revisit and appraise the time that have passed since they
both joined Facebook, including any challenges and problematic patterns that may be evident from this objective, external record.

In her 2003 book “Not Just Friends,” Infidelity researcher Shirley Glass discusses the importance of properly placed “walls and windows” in preventing infidelity (see also Glass & Wright, 1997). “Walls” can refer to either the protective boundaries that surround a relationship or the barriers between partners that are created when infidelity occurs. “Windows” can refer to either channels for free-flowing communication between a couple, or places through which the outside world has access to the relationship (which may or may not create a vulnerability or liability). Glass encourages couples to make sure that their “windows and walls” are placed thoughtfully and are built in adherence to the “safety code” to help guard against infidelity. Given the present findings regarding social media relationship representation and infidelity, alternative partner monitoring, and jealousy, it seems that Facebook could provide therapists and couples with a very concrete means of examining and evaluating the state of their “walls and windows” and an opportunity to work on establishing and placing them. Results from the present study would indicate that accurate relationship statuses and primary Facebook photos that picture both members of a couple might serve as effective protective “walls” that could be built via Facebook. Therapists might consider encouraging discussion about both of the forms of relationship representation studied here (Facebook relationship status and primary photo), and may perhaps also find it fruitful to encourage discussion of other relationship-relevant Facebook behavior. For example, the question of whether or not to “friend” an ex-partner provides a valuable decision point for a couple, as do the questions regarding what the couple deems acceptable to post in a public status update. For
example, posting a Facebook update of “Enjoying a nice dinner out with my lovely wife,”
might be quite acceptable to said wife, while “Enjoying a hot date with the sexiest woman
alive. Check please!” may be seen as entirely inappropriate and embarrassing or, on the
other hand, exceedingly flattering and endearing. Similarly, partners may vary greatly in
terms of their perceptions regarding the acceptability of posting “I’m off to couples
therapy with Bob!” or “What is it with women and credit cards? Angie just came home
with a pair of shoes that cost more than my first car!” Navigating these concrete
decisions about “walls and windows” on Facebook may provide scaffolding for
navigating “wall and window” decisions in more complex, nuanced arenas.

The present findings underscore the importance of clinicians familiarizing
themselves with social media in order to understand their clients’ experiences and
interactions via these channels. Technology use, including social media, may be an
important aspect of a client’s sociocultural context, and it is the responsibility of the
clinician to work toward an understanding of said context. A clinician who does not
know the basic definitions of “friending,” “following,” “tweeting,” or “tagging,” let alone
the subtleties of social meaning attached to these actions, will not be equipped to help
clients navigate or process the potentially important interpersonal exchanges that take
place via social media.

**Societal implications.**

It is difficult to predict whether or not social media’s opportunities for public
displays of commitment will, in fact, have an impact on relationship development norms.
On one hand, the present findings provide some support for the notion that the
phenomenon of social media relationship representation may run counter to the apparent
trend toward ambiguity in relationship development, providing emblems that are clear, public, and unambiguous. These emblems have been widely adopted, and this study’s findings indicate that they are meaningful representations of commitment, fidelity, and stability.

On the other hand, it seems likely that the adaptability and responsiveness of social media’s technological interface lends itself to being shaped by prevailing social norms. For example, in 2010 and 2011, respectively, Facebook added “Separated” and “Divorced,” as well as “Civil Union” and “Domestic Partnership” to their list of available relationship statuses, stating that these “have been a highly requested feature from users. We want to provide options for people to genuinely and authentically reflect their relationships on Facebook (Mashable.com, 2011).” With Facebook’s apparent desire to cater to users’ social norms and increase users’ ability to “genuinely and authentically reflect their relationships on Facebook,” it seems likely that Facebook might eventually respond to a rising tide of ambiguity by providing increased flexibility and the option of naming one’s own relationship rather than a forced choice among existing definitions. Such a change would likely reduce the usefulness of Facebook relationship status as a tool for clarity within a relationship and its informativeness to those outside the relationship.

Limitations & Future Research

The present study’s reliance on an individual’s paper-and-pencil self-report of whether or not he or she was in a relationship is an imperfect criterion for determining his or her “true” relationship circumstances. In order to respond to the question, participants were faced with the task of defining what qualifies as a “relationship” for themselves and
participants undoubtedly had varying definitions. The prospect of studying phenomena related to relationship ambiguity in a quantitative manner is intrinsically challenging. Undoubtedly, for some participants, the most authentic answer to the item asking them “Are you in a relationship?” would have been something akin to “I don’t know; things are pretty ambiguous” or “It depends; what counts as a ‘relationship?’” though neither of these options were available.

Although the criterion for determining participants’ “true” relationship status was imperfect, there are data that support the claim that it is a reasonable proxy. For example, there were very few participants who privately reported that they were single but elected to display a Facebook relationship status of “In a Relationship,” while the inverse was quite common. Furthermore, the survey used terminology that matched the available Facebook relationship status options. That is, the survey asked participants “Are you in a relationship?” which corresponds linguistically to the Facebook relationship status option of “In a Relationship.” Regardless of what it means to any one individual to be in a relationship, those who disclose it privately but not publicly are, on average, less committed, less sexually faithful, and less likely to stay together with their current partner. Future research could look more closely at the criteria used by individuals to define that which they call a “relationship,” such as monogamy, a verbalized mutual agreement, length of time together, amount of time spent together, and the association of those criteria with Facebook relationship status. However, such research would also face the same challenge of possible circularity faced by the present study; being “Facebook official” might, in fact, be a crucial criterion for some individuals in determining whether or not he or she is truly in a “relationship.”
The exclusion of individuals in same-sex relationships at the time of recruitment unfortunately prevented the present study from shedding light on important and interesting questions about the association between social media relationship representation and the study’s relationship variables of interest among gay and lesbian couples. Future work should examine the research questions raised by the current study among individuals in same-sex relationships. It would seem reasonable to hypothesize that identical analyses conducted with individuals in same-sex relationships might yield a different set results, as representing one’s same-sex relationship via social media entails being “out” and disclosing that one is in a same-sex relationship, which can expose an individual to discrimination, harassment, and bigotry in a way that disclosing one’s heterosexuality via social media does not. Therefore, the present study’s research questions would need to be approached in a manner that takes into account the complexities of the choice to represent a same-sex relationship online.

Older adults are one of the fastest growing demographics in terms of Facebook use. Results from the Pew Internet and American Life project indicated that between April 2009 and May 2010 social networking use among internet users age 50-65 grew from 22% to 42% (Madden, 2010). Although the present study aimed to examine social media relationship representation among younger adults, future research should examine the correlates of social media relationship representation among this growing segment of social media users and determine whether generational differences exist.

The present study relied on individuals’ self-report of their current Facebook relationship status and primary Facebook photograph, as well as their partner’s current Facebook relationship status. To maximize the potential of Facebook in future
relationship research, direct researcher access to participants’ actual Facebook profiles should be sought. Although this pursuit will undoubtedly raise some important and difficult ethical, legal, and methodological questions for the researchers involved, it is believed that direct observation of Facebook behavior will provide more accurate, rich, and useful data and will allow more complex and sophisticated research questions to build upon the basic, initial findings of early studies such as this.

Another limitation of the present data was the lack of information regarding the timing of acts of Facebook relationship representation. Our cross-sectional snapshot did not allow for an exploration of when Facebook relationship statuses were displayed, the synchronicity or asynchronicity of partners’ acts of relationship representation, or what events may have preceded or followed these displays. Future research examining timing of relationship representation will contribute important information to our understanding social media’s role in relationship development.

The finding that relationship representation is associated with a greater sense of pressure from friends and family for one’s relationship to continue raises a host of interesting questions regarding the effect of social media relationship representation on a couple’s social community. Further research examining more directly how “audience” behavior is impacted by the display of various forms of relationship representation would provide insight into the processes by which social media shapes the social environment in which a relationship exists, which, in turn, has an effect on the “performers.” Furthermore, it would be fascinating to explore individuals’ conceptualizations of their social media “audience” and determine which segments of said audience they
(consciously or unconsciously) direct their performances toward, and how this may influence acts of relationship representation or lack thereof.

Future research should also explore the undoubtedly complex constellations of motivations that underlie individuals’ decisions regarding the representation of relationships (and singlehood) via social media. For example, it might be informative to control for individual differences in preferences regarding privacy vs. publicity and/or overall amount of personal information displayed via social media when determining the association between relationship representation and relevant relationship variables. The possible role of attachment styles in using social media tools in the regulation of ambiguity suggested earlier should also be empirically tested. Individual and group (e.g., cultural and generational) differences undoubtedly exist in terms of frequency and function of social media use, the degree of authenticity of that which is presented via social media (including representations of commitment or lack thereof), and the relative degree of importance of social media in one’s life and in one’s relationship, and the influence of such factors on research questions raised by the present study should be examined in future work. A closer look at gender roles in relationship representation decisions (e.g., initiation of relationship status changes) is also warranted in light of the unexpected lack of gender differences found. It would also be interesting to compare various social media outlets to examine possible differences in relationship representation, both across groups and within individuals.

The present study raises as many questions as it answers, and provides a foundation upon which future work in this emerging area of study can build. Taken together, the findings point toward the relevance of social media relationship
representation in and of itself, as well as social media’s potential as a valuable tool for relationship research.
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