

It's Complicated: How Romantic Partners Use Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Romantic partners face issues of relational development including managing information privacy, tension between individual and relational needs, and accountability to existing friends. Prior work suggests that affordances of social media might highlight and shape these tensions; to explore this, we asked 20 people to reflect daily for two weeks on feelings and decisions around their own and others' Facebook use related to their relationships. Most generally, we find that tensions arise when romantic partners must manage multiple relationships simultaneously because Facebook audiences are so present and so varied. People also engage in subtle negotiation around and appropriation of Facebook's features to accomplish both personal and relational goals. By capturing both why people make these decisions and how Facebook's affordances support them, we expect our findings to generalize to many other social media tools and to inform theorizing about how these tools affect relational development.

Author Keywords

Social media, interpersonal communication, romantic relationships, self-presentation

ACM Classification Keywords

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General Terms

Design, human factors

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are selecting photos to upload to Facebook. Since you don't want to disclose too much information about your personal life, especially to your boss and family members, you choose to exclude some intimate photos with your girlfriend. Then you get an angry message: "Why did you exclude pictures of us? Are you ashamed of me?"

Traditional models of information privacy assume that information has a single owner, the originator. However, as social networking sites afford the exchange of social data such as pictures that contain multiple people, issues of co-ownership and mutual decisions arise. An emerging line of

work in collaborative privacy management looks at how these issues of privacy and boundary regulation evolve beyond individual decisions, emphasizing the importance of socially negotiated boundaries [2,6] where multiple stakeholders need to make mutually agreeable decisions on whether and how to publish the co-owned content online.

These issues of shared ownership and control become even more pronounced in the case of interpersonal relationships, which previous work in interpersonal communication [5,30] suggests may play an important role in decisions about what to share and what to hide. As shown in the opening example, people often find themselves balancing multiple, sometimes contradictory, relational and identity needs—and that this balancing act is made trickier in "masspersonal" social networking platforms like Facebook where some information is notionally private but actually visible to many people. We believe that approaching the issue of boundary negotiation from multiple theoretical perspectives will be useful for both better explaining the phenomena and informing technology designs that promote relationship well-being and social capital development.

In this paper, we present the results from a two-week study in which we examine how romantic partners present themselves and interpret others' behavior on Facebook. Although it has been well-studied as a way to maintain weak ties and friendships [16], and is not the primary means of communication for many romantic partners, Facebook provides a useful real-world context to examine how multiple relational goals (e.g., romantic relationships and friendships) interact with personal needs in a setting where the relationship activity is literally embedded in a larger social network [27].

We asked participants to keep a two-week diary in which they recorded their reasons and feelings when they made decisions about creating (or not creating) content on Facebook, as well as their reactions to other people's use of Facebook that made them think about their own romantic relationship. We found a wide range of uses and meanings attached to Facebook features, and how they contributed to both outwards tensions around publicizing the relationship and inwards tensions related to managing decisions around autonomous versus shared decision-making. These uses and features, these inwards and outwards tensions, and Facebook norms sometimes combined to create complex situations to negotiate. However, people exhibited a number of subtle strategies for managing both the features and the tensions. Below, we start by laying out theories around

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privacy management, identity management, and interpersonal communication that can help us understand how these tensions might arise.

RELATED WORK

Much social media research has discussed privacy and online impression management (e.g., [1,15]), focusing on issues of boundary regulation during self-disclosure, primarily as an individual process [10]. Social networking sites afford the exchange of personal information and provide rich opportunities for people to deliberately create digital traces to construct their identities in the online space [14,19]. However, people also need to draw boundaries between their selves and others to avoid exposing too much personal information in front of a mixed public [3,23].

Following Altman's theory on interpersonal boundary regulation [3], we see an emerging line of research on collaborative privacy (e.g. [6,21]) that explores online boundary regulation over co-owned content on social networking sites. The issue of limited control over online content has been highlighted as one important challenge in recent empirical studies around, e.g., controlling identity data revealed through online searches [11,26]. A recent study by Lampinen et al. emphasized the co-ownership issue over content on Facebook and highlights the role of collaborative privacy management [21]. Their work considers disclosure as an interdependent process where people choose what to disclose for each other and develop strategies or rules to manage different expectations.

Other work focuses on the collaborative process of identity management. Similar to how people intentionally manage their ideal self-presentations online [14,19], people also try to present the best of their relationships in public [18]. Bowe's recent study [7] explored relationship rituals on Facebook, such as posting relationship statuses and the public display of affection, and explored why people accept or reject these rituals from a sociological perspective. This study shed light on how people incorporated relationship considerations into their Facebook activities.

However, even though collaborative privacy research has explored how to enhance individual control over joint content [6,21] and informed design for interdependence in managing privacy and regulating publicness of content, the relational subtleties involved in this negotiation process are yet to be explored. The negotiation and reworking of boundary rules does not happen in a vacuum, but in a relational context. A user taking down a wall post by her ex-boyfriend probably does not impact anyone else's privacy, but is driven by her intention to protect her relationship with her current romantic partner. In this vein, Petronio's communication privacy management theory (CPM) [30] views boundary management as a rule-based process and provides a rich framework to think about how people regulate the co-ownership of information, focusing on how people disclose within relationships.

Some earlier work on interpersonal communication also speaks to how boundary management takes place in a relational context. Baxter and Wildenmann [5] explore the topics that people in romantic relationships choose to reveal and conceal to their offline social networks, the strategies they use to manage disclosure of relationship information, and the reasons behind these decisions. This work uncovers a complicated pattern of information management activity that is contingent on a variety of factors including oneself, one's partner, third parties, and factors in the relationship.

We are interested in exploring how these relational dynamics affect people's boundary regulation behaviors on Facebook, a semi-public online environment. Aspects of Facebook such as having multiple audiences and being more visible, searchable, and easily accessible than offline interaction [8,9] may highlight tensions between partners related to disclosing information to others. These tensions also exist offline since interpersonal relationships are inevitably connected to each person's social network [27], but Facebook's gathering of one's personal connections from different spheres of life—"context collapse" [24,33]—complicates decisions about appropriate online disclosure. When romantic partners connect to each other on Facebook, their separate but increasingly overlapping networks [27] can further complicate the issue of context collapse by creating more needs that need to be served.

We are also interested in exploring the role that social networking sites play in people managing their close relationships. Previous work on social networking sites [22,25,28] has shown how Facebook use plays an important role in helping people to understand their intimate relationships. For instance, people sometimes make sense of others' relationships based on aggregated interaction data such as Facebook's "See Friendship" page [32]. Based on this after-the-fact use of interaction data, here we ask questions about the relational and identity goals behind people's decision making to self-disclose, how they negotiate and balance different relational and identity goals, and how features of the sites provide new resources for negotiating these goals.

STUDYING FACEBOOK PRACTICE

Following Child and Petronio's call for work that explores how people adjust SNS privacy management practices around life changes such as romantic relationships [10], here we explore how relational factors interact with boundary management on Facebook. We explore how and why people use Facebook to express their relationships, and when they choose not to. We also look at how people's relationships with others and the masspersonal nature of Facebook shape these decisions, highlighting aspects of privacy management, boundary negotiation, and the need to balance attention between individual needs, the romantic relationship, and relationships with third parties. Finally, we look at the impact these decisions and tensions, and Facebook itself, can have on people's relationships.

Data Collection

We collected data through pre-surveys, diary entries, and post interviews. The pre-survey asked questions about demographic information, the length of a participant's current romantic relationship, and communication tools they frequently used with their partner. After completing the survey, participants started a two-week long diary task. Each day they were reminded via e-mail to fill out an online form prompting them to reflect on how their romantic relationship affected decisions they made about what to do or not to do on Facebook or other social media, how Facebook and other social media made them think about their relationships, and what and why they chose to communicate in private rather than public. We used a diary method to capture the daily decision-making process close to when it happened, instead of asking participants to recall decisions after the fact, as well as to capture decisions of non-use that otherwise would not have been available to reflect on during the interview.

After completing the two-week diary task, we brought participants to the lab, asked them to review their diary, and conducted semi-structured interviews. We asked them to log on to Facebook and allowed them to reference both Facebook and diary content during the interview. We first asked them to reflect on the experience of doing the diary task, followed by questions about how they incorporate their romantic relationships into their Facebook profiles and how their relationship has or has not been affected by decisions around Facebook behaviors. While we focused mainly on Facebook because of its popularity, participants sometimes compared their Facebook use with other tools such as IM, email, phone, and Google+. Interviews were audio recorded and took about an hour.

Participants

We recruited participants from a student subject pool at a large Northeastern U.S. university. To satisfy study goals, participants were required to be active FB users currently in a romantic relationship. We recruited both individuals and couples, in the hope that interviewing couples would provide insights into how romantic partners negotiate their decisions together, while individuals would be more likely to present uncensored opinions about their Facebook behaviors. To recruit couples, we asked participants if they would like to bring their partners to the study as they signed up. Our goal was 20 participants (5 pairs, 10 individuals), so once we reached five couples, we stopped asking people to recruit their partners. All participants completed the pre-survey and diary entries individually, but those participating as couples were interviewed together. Participants were compensated with \$15.

We did find 5 pairs and 10 individuals, making a total of 20 participants who completed the study (9 male, 11 female; 9 White/Caucasian, 10 Asian, 1 Hispanic/Latino; average age 21). All participants were in heterosexual relationships, with an average relationship length of 15.6 months, ranging

from 1 to 48 months. Nine of the ten Asian participants were raised in the U.S., so our sample is rooted primarily in American culture and practices.

Data Analysis

Diary and interview data was analyzed using the grounded approach [17]. Diary and interview data, and data from both individuals and pairs, were analyzed together to support a holistic understanding of how people make decisions. After interviews were fully transcribed, two researchers together iteratively developed a codebook and coded the data using TAMSA Analyzer. We then used this coded data to identify themes across categories.

We found themes at a number of levels: meanings people attached to specific Facebook features, their role in managing both outwards concerns around relationship presentation and inwards conflict around autonomy and collectiveness, the interplay between these outwards and inwards tensions, and ways in which Facebook both highlights—and sometimes helps people negotiate—this interplay.

USE OF FACEBOOK FEATURES

Here we describe how participants use certain Facebook features in the context of their relationships and the types of relational meaning they attach to these uses. We focus on the most commonly mentioned features: relationship status, friending, photos, and wall posts. Participant numbers are noted after each quote ('I': individual participants; 'P': pair participants, numbered by pair; 'F', female participants; 'M', male participants; 'diary': quote drawn from a diary record instead of interview).

Relationship Status

A fundamental aspect of romantic relationships on Facebook is the relationship status feature, which appears as part of a person's profile. Besides providing a list of different types of relationship statuses such as "in a relationship", "it's complicated", and "married", Facebook provides flexible display options. People can choose whether they want to connect their profile with their partner's via relationship status, and can make this status visible to their whole network or to specific people via Facebook's privacy settings. This feature is an explicit indicator of "state of relationship", the most common topic that romantic partners choose to reveal or to conceal from their offline networks [5].

Further, there is a "Facebook official" norm that states that people in relationships should explicitly indicate this by using the relationship status feature. Over half of our participants recognize the norm and consider listing each other in a relationship on Facebook as "*the standard for knowing when someone is in a relationship.*" (I-9-F)

This public display of mutual connection explicitly verifies the identity of being a couple and signals territory to others [12]. People commonly described an affirming effect of listing each other as in a relationship, as well as an opposite

effect of doubt and confusion when the status was not displayed.

“Just seeing the fact that we are in a relationship and knowing that the online community can see that makes me feel good about our relationship. It’s like he’s proud to be with me.” (P-2-F)

“Because when we first started dating, his profile said single and I told him that girls tend to Facebook stalk other people’s Facebook profiles and if it said single then it sends out like the wrong message like I’m available when I’m not, and because there wasn’t really like any sign of me as his girlfriend on his page at all, I was like ‘can you just take off the single status?’” (I-25-F)

Even though “Facebook official” has become the norm for most participants, a small number of them acknowledge it also imposes pressures that could lead to the feeling of conformity and loss of identity as a couple.

“Facebook like dulls the uniqueness of our partnership. Because everyone is just...it is Facebook official, we are a Facebook couple...it is an aspect of our relationship that is kind of standardized and gets weighted against a bunch of other couples.” (P-6-M)

Friending One’s Partner’s Friends

Participants reported that being Facebook official often led to an increasing overlap of Facebook friends. The linking feature of relationship status provides one partner’s friends easy access to their romantic partner’s profile, and the ease of friending someone on Facebook further enables this kind of “cross interaction” between one person and their partner’s friends.

As with posting a relationship status, romantic partners’ increasingly overlapping networks signal to them the importance of their relationship.

“Thinking about adding my boyfriend’s family on social networks made me think about how momentous a relationship step that is. I’m basically saying that I’m committed enough to my relationship with my boyfriend that I’m willing to treat his family as though they were my family, even though if our relationship should go bad I’ll likely never see them again...” (I-9-F-diary)

The trend of increasing mutual friends on Facebook could also bring an affirming effect to romantic partners, both as a natural part of relational development and as a strategic move to increase closeness.

“He probably went out of his way to friend them (my friends) as well, at least like my close friends, when we were starting to date, and getting to know them but he probably didn’t really reach out to them that much as when we started dating I mean on Facebook, like writing on their profiles and stuff.” (I-17-F)

A small number of participants also feel defensive about the increasing number of mutual friends, because of the

pressure to maintain relationships with their partners’ friends, and the increased cost if the relationship goes bad.

“I would feel much worse if anything went bad in our relationship because these other bonds have been created and that’s going to be probably difficult to sever.” (I-9-F)

Photos

Friending a partner’s friends is one way to express tangible connection in Facebook; another common way to do this is through uploading photos that picture both partners together. Unlike relationship status, posting a photo does not require mutual agreement—but tagging another person’s presence in a posted photo does require negotiation, because people can un-tag themselves. Besides their own postings, one’s photo collection also contains pictures they are tagged in that are uploaded by their romantic partners and other friends in the network, which raises interesting control and privacy management issues.

Participants attached relational meaning to photos because they depict who people spend time and attend events with; such activities and events around a relationship are another topic that people often revealed to their offline social networks [5].

Facebook users can choose one “profile picture” to represent themselves in Facebook; it is displayed in a prominent place in the profile and alongside the user’s other content such as comments and wall posts they make. Because people use profile pictures for explicit self-presentation, choosing profile pictures that contain both romantic partners has important relational meanings. Most participants who don’t have their relationship status listed see profile pictures as an alternative to announce the existence of their relationships.

“Well definitely that we’re in our profile pictures together, that I’m listed on his profile and he’s listed on my profile definitely shows a lot.” (I-17-F)

Reciprocity of profile pictures can also be used to signal the quality of relationships, for better and for worse.

“Yeah we were both always in our profile pictures and then when we had our like first fight he took me off of his and then that was kind of like we stopped putting each other in our profile pictures and that was kind of an indication.” (P-5-F)

Uploading pictures is commonly used to signal possessiveness, especially among female participants.

“I posted these photos and made them public to friends of friends, because I knew that his ex girlfriend would see them...” (I-17-F-diary)

A less mentioned but interesting point is, because others can contribute to a Facebook user’s photo collection, third-party photos can also have important affirming effects for romantic partners.

“My boyfriend’s friend putting me in his profile picture made me see our relationship positively.” (I-17-F-diary)

Wall Posts

Unlike photos, which are usually visible to the whole network, wall posts are always directed to a specific person. However, they are still visible to those who can see both partners’ profiles, including their overlapping mutual friends. Thus, third parties often use wall posts to understand relationships from the outside [32], while couples use them to think about their partner’s relationships with third parties. Common tactics that people use to reveal or conceal relationship information, such as affect display [5], often happen in wall posts.

“And we have this thing where we’ll always post one more heart than the last person posted.” (P-5-F)

Most participants talked using wall posts to communicate with their partners in a playful or indirect way. Such posts could be *“mysterious and subtle”*, as in this description of using the status update *“like...here is to a great two years”* (P-6-M) to quietly celebrate an anniversary.

“I mean if you don’t really have any context going in...it could have been about anything. Here is to two great years of college or two great years of whatever...” (P-6-F)

Even though people don’t often directly communicate about their relationships in public, both because some topics are private and there are norms around appropriate levels of public display of affection, they do pay attention to how other couples interact via this feature and make judgments about their relationships. For example, people can learn or infer aspects of other relationships from seeing changes in language use and communication frequency in wall posts.

“Because of Facebook I got to know that my friend T and her boyfriend broke up. I guess like from the tone of their messages it started getting less intimate.” (I-5-F)

OUTWARDS AND INWARDS TENSIONS

In this section we discuss the overarching themes that cut across people’s decision-making for incorporating their romantic relationships into specific Facebook features: managing both outwards and inwards tensions.

Outwards Tension: How Public Should We Be?

The outwards tension comes about from people’s need to balance disclosing their romantic relationships in the public context and protecting themselves from exposing too much or being seen in a negative light in public. The mixture of audiences on Facebook, the ease of becoming friends, and the possibility of losing control over content linked to an individual all highlight difficulties in trying to reveal an appropriate amount of relationship information, which for most people falls somewhere between completely public and completely private.

On one hand, going public is important for people in romantic relationships, and participants frequently used a

variety of features to signal elements of their relationship to others. This is largely attributed to the need to inform network members about their relationship information. Most people feel this need to maintain a shared image by interacting with third parties.

“I certainly have an image to I guess to keep up... You have got to keep up your appearances on her wall...if I’m never with my girlfriend...people are like why aren’t you ever around?” (I-2-M)

Another commonly mentioned reason for going public is to satisfy third parties’ curiosity about their relationships or partners.

“I didn’t want to [post a relationship status]. I never had a boyfriend before. I was like no I don’t know what is going on... But now they (my friends) would make fun of me if it wasn’t there.” (P-6-F)

Participants had mixed feelings about this interaction with third parties. Positive feedback motivates people to be more open about the relationship, because *“It keeps the high going when people are all just congratulating me and like think it is cute or whatever.”* (P-6-M). However, people also worry that going public might bring negative feedback or indifference from the audience.

“If I want to send him something sort of cheesy...like animal pictures that we both love...I won’t necessarily put them all on his wall just because his friends...they are just going to make fun of him...” (P-2-F)

“See the reason [not to disclose] is most people tend to ignore us. There is always this other couple that gets more attention than us. And they get more positive feedback.” (P-4-F)

People also worry that disclosing relationship information might be inappropriate for a mixture of audiences.

“We just want to let know our close friends and share it with them. But not everybody, all our friends on Facebook.” (P-3-M)

“I also tend to keep it private...and also his parents go on his Facebook so I can’t really...that is a major influence.” (P-4-F)

Over half of participants feel the need to balance the presence of friends and romantic partners. People worry that having too much interaction with their partners via wall posts or uploading too many “couple pictures” will alienate others or be misinterpreted by some audiences.

“Since he and I talk so frequently, posting on his Facebook wall every time I wanted to tell him something would mean that his entire wall would be made up of comments from me, which would decrease the privacy of our relationship and alienate others.” (I-17-F-diary)

“Even though there are a lot more pictures of me and her than there are of other people, I make sure to include

certain other people in there...if I see someone else, like a good photo like the kissing is alright really romantic like in Rome or whatever. But if it is constant like picture after picture, they don't put any pictures of their friends but just the two of them I would think that that is just a little strange." (P-2-M)

Inwards Tension: How Autonomous Should We Be?

The inwards tension refers to the control and interpersonal influence a couple has over each other's behaviors. The fact that Facebook affords awareness of others' activities and interactions can lead to tensions within the relationship about how partners expect each other to behave in public. For example, reciprocity is often important—and sometimes required, as when linking profiles together via the relationship status—in decision-making around how to use Facebook. When one partner posts this status, the other often feels obligated to reciprocate. These tensions can lead to compromises or feelings of giving in.

"I want to do that, not like be more lovey dovey... I don't know because I'm a girl or whatever. But he didn't really want to do that. He wants to keep it super private, so I kinda felt that and like, OK, if that's what you want I'll either have to deal with it or break up with him. So I just dealt with it." (I-5-F)

Facebook's affordances can make these tensions more salient. The visibility of Facebook activities allows people to "watch" how their partner interacts with their own personal networks. Participants, especially those in long-distance relationships, sometimes take advantage of this visibility to keep up with each other's personal life.

"I certainly spend the most time on his profile. So like I'm checking his profile all the time [laughs] ...and certainly more since it's been long distance..." (P-5-F)

A common theme across most couples is that the visibility can serve more explicit surveillance functions, such as reading wall posts between their partner and third parties as a way to understand their partner's relationships.

"My boyfriend wrote on one of his friend's walls about going to an Asian restaurant. I'm unsure if the restaurant was the one he went to last night with visiting friends from his high school (his ex girlfriend included)." (I-17-F-diary)

A few participants also felt pressure from being in a relationship to change their behaviors toward their friends.

"Due to the fact that I am in a relationship, I tend to not check as many of my male friends' profiles than I might have when I was single." (I-24-F-diary)

"I made a naughty joke or something on our friend's wall, she was like, J! You know, you really embarrassed me...and I just go yeah, I took it down." (I-23-M)

Similarly, the visibility of others' interactions on Facebook also creates expectations for a couple's own relationship.

"Yeah, yeah. So sometimes I would be like oh I wish we can be like more like them. Mainly like when I see couples upload like couple pictures together and it's usually like they do a lot of things together and they're always taking pictures and then I wish I have more of that." (I-25-F)

Differing expectations bring an important question of whether romantic partners should reach an agreement over how to behave, and how much control or influence they have over each other's Facebook behaviors.

"During the summer he is like purging his photos and I actually specifically asked him to remove certain photos of him. It was at a party and he was like...he was drinking. That part always bothered me." (P-4-F)

"I upload a lot more pictures than he does and I haven't actually uploaded a lot of our pictures together just because like I feel like he doesn't really want them on there." (I-25-F)

However, these expectations are balanced with the desire to claim one's own autonomy, such as making one's own decisions on how to manage their online photos, show their relationship status, and interact with third parties. For example, this participant expressed his unwillingness to let his girlfriend "friend" his friends.

"The friends I do have on my own, I try and make it as my escape zone and if she gets in there then I have nowhere to go, I guess I've got to keep that curtained off. She can have her own friends if she wants...if she ever gets sick of me they need to be there...you've got to have something to yourself." (I-2-M)

This kind of negotiation of expectations rarely discussed explicitly. Most of the time it is by using understanding or "intuition" (P-3-M) developed in offline interactions, or by observing each other's online behaviors. For example, this participant talked about how she uses the boyfriend's behavior as a reference point for her own behaviors.

"Yeah because I mean I wouldn't like it if he would respond to other people in a way that's somewhat flirtatious or made it seem that he was interested in that person. So I would kind of like to reciprocate that because he hasn't done that so I try not to do that too." (I-24-F)

Two extreme cases of this negotiation of expectation came about where people accessed their partner's account and changed public content—a source of conflict.

"I changed his profile picture to include (me)...then I guess he didn't like it so he took it off." (I-25-F)

Finally, people sometimes use the negotiation of Facebook features such as asking one's partner to post relationship status to explicitly raise or resolve relationship issues.

"There was a point two years ago when he cheated on me, and I was like really upset... He was super private about his relationship with me... I was like, it's on and off, and I

want you to [post our relationship status]. So he just did that... It was such a point of contention for our relationship. He finally just gave in I guess..." (I-5-F)

INTERACTION BETWEEN OUTWARDS AND INWARDS

We see that each individual involved in a romantic relationship is dealing with both the outwards tension which is concerned with their relationship with third parties, and the inwards tension which is concerned with their relationship with their romantic partner.

These observations have been made before in the interpersonal communication literature [5] when they found the couples' boundary regulation strategies depend on a various factors including needs from the self, the partner, and third parties. However, our results suggest this picture may be even more complicated on Facebook because these concerns often arise simultaneously.

At times these different relational goals harmonize nicely. A fairly common theme was that the public nature of Facebook provides opportunities for the couples to have necessary interactions with their social networks, as suggested by Parks [27]. Information such as relationship status could be both affirming for couples and informing for third parties. A few participants also noted that revealing romantic relationships could align with personal needs for third party validation around self-identity.

"I guess I was always a dork and I always tried to get a girlfriend in high school and it never worked. And I just wanted to gloat a little bit that look at me I'm at the beginning of college and I already have a girlfriend." (P-6-M)

However, publicity also creates problems. Facebook's "context collapse" of connections from different spheres of life [24] complicates decisions about appropriate disclosure. Unlike the offline world, where people can manage their communication with romantic partners and with third parties in separate spaces and develop different disclosure management strategies, users often have to balance these needs when they publish content in Facebook. Male participants, in particular, tended to worry that putting up a relationship status might alienate friends.

"Like being part of a frat is like, when you take your girlfriend...even though there is no intention to, it puts a divide between the guys a little bit... So for me it was a lot bigger than saying well we are in a relationship. We are dating. We are going to spend some time...I'm calling you my girlfriend. It was more than that." (P-2-M)

The mixture of audiences created by the increasing overlap of social networks creates another kind of context collapse. Personal networks associated with each partner might have different needs and expectations that need to be satisfied, and somehow couples need to work out strategies to present their relationships appropriately in front of their separate but somewhat overlapping networks.

"I'd get rid of [relationship status] if she didn't really care." (P-6-M)

"You don't have engineering boys to worry about though." (P-6-F)

The need to publicly affirm relationships also sometimes conflicted with norms for public behavior. For instance, almost all interviewees reacted negatively to excessive public displays of affection, ranging from sending "lovey dovey messages", constantly uploading intimate pictures, hints for sexual activities, and so on.

"I have one friend who's always like, I love my girlfriend so much, blah-blah...it makes me want to vomit." (I-23-M)

Affordances of social media sites, such as visibility, highlight the need to simultaneously manage outwards and inwards tensions. The following two quotes from the same participant shows how individuals both exploit visibility and recognize the problems it can create.

"I don't think I really trust him as much as I thought I did... I went on his Facebook one day, he set his Facebook to private, I was like, is he doing something he doesn't want me to see, so I checked [his Facebook]." (I-5-F)

"I think a lot of things could be misconstrued on Facebook. Like friendships between two people, it can be interpreted as two-way romantic attention; you see you are still friends with your ex...and that causes problems too." (I-5-F)

Thus, people weigh the relative importance of romantic relationships and relationships with third parties when they make decisions. In fact, we found people weigh these relationships differently at different relational stages of romantic relationships. For example, evidence suggests in the initial stage of the romantic relationship, more energy is geared towards managing the inwards tension, while as the romantic relationship develops, people might be less likely to sacrifice their concern for third parties to protect their partners' feelings. This finding is partly consistent with studies that suggest the dialectic between openness and closedness is most salient early in relationships [4].

"I just certainly feel a lot more confident now than I did at that time [the beginning of the relationship] about Eric caring about me and about displaying affection." (P-5-F)

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING TENSIONS

So far we have mostly focused on the ways in which Facebook's affordances such as specific features, privacy controls, and visibility intensify tensions and bring potential problems to relationship management. However, these features also support strategies that can help people manage these tensions.

Mutual rules, mediated by others

In dealing with the tension, one common strategy developed by couples is to develop rules within their own relationships with regard to how they use Facebook.

“It varies from person to person. We have decided that we don’t want to put anything related to our relationship on Facebook. So it is our decision.” (P-3-M)

The visibility that Facebook affords makes it possible to use other couples’ behaviors as a reference point for regulating their own presentations, such as avoiding excess displays of affection.

“I mean, there are couples...we both talked, how we don’t want that, like I love you baby, on the wall, it’s just so corny to us.” (I-23-M)

Shared meanings but separated behaviors

Another common way to negotiate these issues is for one person to “specialize” in a behavior that is more appropriate for their social network than their partner’s. For instance, one person might upload a photo and tag both themselves and their partner. This would support relational goals of having a shared image, but are not as salient a self-presentation act as uploading pictures to one’s own photo album, allowing people to finesse friends’ expectations.

“If someone is just looking at Leslie’s page you know they’ll see a bunch of photos of us together. Like I’m not asking her to take those out, like I don’t want her to take those down. But on my wall personally, I kind of make sure that everything stays that both of us like it a lot.” (P-2-M)

Shared meanings but different affordances

Couples also leveraged the variety of Facebook features available to communicate closeness, choosing features that allow partners to manage the inward tension, presenting the relationship while maintaining some autonomy.

“I guess I’ve asked him before...why he doesn’t have a [profile] picture that has me in it but he has never really given me an answer besides that he’s not ashamed of me because obviously like his Facebook status says that he’s in a relationship with me.” (I-25-F)

Selective presentation through privacy features

Another way to resolve outwards versus inwards tensions, though least mentioned by our participants, is to use Facebook’s privacy controls to present different inwards and outwards faces. This participant did not want to make the relationship status public, but her boyfriend wanted the affirmation, so she strategically made her relationship status visible only to her boyfriend.

“He actually didn’t know that I hid it for a while because I set it so that only he can see it so he just assumes that everyone else can see it too.” (I-25-F)

Likewise, people can control the notifications Facebook generates on their behalf, allowing actions such as setting a relationship status to serve relational goals but without as many public side effects, such as appearing “corny”.

“Immediately when I found the newsfeed (of my relationship status), I removed that post because I hate that... I don’t know, it’s corny. Just weird to me.” (I-23-M)

FACEBOOK CAN PROVIDE RELATIONAL CONTEXT

Finally, Facebook can also serve a place where people understand their romantic relationship, both in the context of others—as a platform for enacting the embeddedness of interpersonal relationships [27]—and in the historical context of their own relationship.

Third parties as references and support

For instance, Facebook provides a gallery of behaviors for people to reflect on, adopt, or avoid. The visibility of how other couples interact creates reference points not just for choosing appropriate behaviors, as described earlier, but also for people to reflect on the quality and value of their own relationships.

“When I see people fighting on Facebook, it makes me think of how lucky I am to be in a relationship with my boyfriend, in which we don’t fight but rather discuss our disagreements.” (I-24-F-diary)

Facebook also allows couples to get external affirmation for their relationships. Publicizing the relationship doesn’t just satisfy third parties’ needs for information, but allows those third parties to provide social support necessary for relationship development [13].

“I think it’s a relief to know that my [Facebook] friends are just as open as I am because no one has really like judged me for dating someone who’s African American.” (I-25-F)

Reviewability as a mirror

The reviewability of prior Facebook activity allows partners to reflect on or reminisce about their relationship, a theme also seen in earlier studies of using social media content for reflection [29, 32].

“It’s strange, just going back now that I’m doing this experiment and looking at our wall posts. Normally I wouldn’t really read old posts but now I’m going back and looking. It makes me remember what we’ve talked about, then actually planned and done.” (P-2-M)

During our interview, one participant reported that thinking about how they and their partner use Facebook even helps her value the relationship differently.

“I think this experience of doing the activity makes me realize I was not as happy as I thought I am in this relationship. I question a lot of things, I’m leaning towards breaking up with him. I guess.” (I-5-F)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our study shows the need to better understand interpersonal boundary regulation when people are dealing with tensions emerging from multiple relational contexts on Facebook. It also suggests that affordances of social networking sites such as Facebook highlight the tensions that arise as individuals simultaneously manage the need to interact and maintain relationships with both personal network members and romantic partners.

These findings about inwards and outwards tensions extend previous research on romantic relationships and social media [e.g. 25, 34], which suggests that the use of social media might have negative effects on the relationship, increasing jealousy and relationship dissatisfaction. Our description of the layers of tensions people manage offers a different lens to think about the issue of online disclosure and close relationships and the role social media plays in resolving or intensifying these tensions.

Our findings also have the potential to extend previous theoretical perspectives on relationship maintenance. For example, previous research on relational dialectics mostly examined internal and external relational tensions separately [4]. However, our findings highlight the need to examine internal and external tensions simultaneously, as new technologies blur the boundary between interpersonal communication and communication to a mass audience.

From the design side, our focus on affordances of social media features people used, rather than specific features themselves, and our asking people about not just their behaviors but the reasons behind them, may help designers apply these findings in new contexts. For instance, we explicitly prompted people to reflect on past content and behavior in order to examine the effect of reviewability in media. In the 2011 version of Facebook, such review is somewhat artificial, and prompting it may have affected people's responses. However, with the advent of features such as Facebook's Timeline that make historical content more salient and accessible, we expect this kind review and reflection to become increasingly common in social media. This may in turn change people's interpretations and norms around behavior in social media—but that itself would be interesting to study. Further, it points out the need to go beyond the observation that social media are *in principle* reviewable and consider about how well the interface supports such review and the goals people might serve by reviewing this content [31].

As another example, many participants compared Facebook to Google+, and their comments suggest that its privacy management mechanisms will lead to new strategies. Google+ makes it easier to set different levels of publicness for relationship status, as one of our participants did. This will give partners more flexibility in managing the openness of their relationship, but the level of display might then itself become a point of controversy. Google+ also allows people to create custom audiences through its circles that might reduce context collapse and allow for more nuanced expression of the relationship.

"I do have a circle that's for like really close friends. I think if I were to share my relationship status on Google+ I will only do it for the really close friends and it'll be not showing for any of the others." (I-25-F)

However, this would reduce the visibility of each other's social media activity, which people valued, and could

change the ways people think about enacting their relationships and interpreting their partner's behavior.

"I would say I would prefer to see what he's doing like publicly to everyone, I guess I prefer the Facebook way just because I feel like almost if I'm in a circle but I can't see a lot of stuff that he's doing in other circles... It just makes me wonder what is it that is like so like secretive almost that you don't want me to see." (I-28-F)

Our study focused on a tool and participants rooted in American culture, but many other design and cultural contexts exist. For instance, the Lover Space feature of the Chinese social networking site Renren¹ allows couples to construct a shared user profile for presenting "their relationship". Based on our analysis, we might expect that such a profile would help manage the outwards tension but explicitly highlight inwards negotiation over how partners should manage their online presentation in this shared space. But, this would also depend on how Lover Space interacts with other features of RenRen, the values, norms, and practices of RenRen users, and more generally how relationships are perceived and publicized in Chinese culture, which may be quite different from the "WEIRD" (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) [20] context of our study.

There is plenty of other future work beyond culture. Our sample was too small to look deeply at sub-groups, but some of our data suggests that gender (e.g., males being more worried about friends' reactions), relationship stage (e.g., needing more affirmation early on), and relationship types that might lead to social stigma (e.g., worrying about reactions to an interracial relationship) may all impact both design and theory around online disclosure of romantic relationships.

Still, our work casts light on the fundamental observation that the technical affordances and norms of online social networking sites create a number of situations in which couples must—and do—manage both inwards and outwards tensions in their relationships simultaneously. We hope it provides useful examples and ideas for thinking about the design of social network sites and for theorizing about how they affect the ways people manage information privacy, tensions between individual and relational needs, accountability to existing friends' relational dynamics, and other fundamental aspects of relationship development.

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¹ www.renren.com.

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