READING THE ROMANCE IN THE AGE OF WEB 2.0: A MIXED METHODS STUDY ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become immensely popular during the past few years. They constitute an important research area for scholars interested in how new communication technologies influence people’s social interaction.

The present study explored the role of SNSs in romantic relationships. It attempted to explain how romantic partners used SNSs to initiate relationships, how they sought information about their partner to reduce relational uncertainties, how they used SNSs to maintain relationships, and how the use of SNSs further influenced their relationship satisfaction. Given the exploratory nature of the topic, the study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods with the aim to provide rich, descriptive, as well as theory-driven, empirical data. Specifically, two studies (an in-depth interview and an online survey) were conducted.

Study 1 is built on Knapp’s staircase model of relationship stages and uncertainty reduction theory. Qualitative data from 33 interviewees suggested that SNS played a significant role in the entire life cycle of relationships, from initiation to dissolution. In the initiating stage of a relationship, romantic partners used SNS to send flirting signals. By frequently clicking the ‘Like’ button, sending speedy responses, and providing positive comments, partners showed their keen attention and enthusiasm to the potential target. Meanwhile, SNSs channel enabled romantic partners to carefully edit messages and photos so that they could present a more
favorable self-image to the target. When seeking information about the significant other, romantic partners employed passive, interactive, and extractive strategies to reduce their relationship uncertainties. As the relationship became steady, partners utilized different strategies to display togetherness to the online audience and to strengthen relationships. The strategies included posting affectionate words on the partner’s Wall, sending love-related emoticons, changing relational status to ‘in a relationship,’ or retweeting specific messages to declare their relationship. Moreover, through daily activities on SNSs, partners were able to learn more about their significant other’s personality, interests, deep thoughts and feelings. Although SNSs have brought quite a few benefits, they have also caused relational turmoil, such as privacy conflicts, social pressure from online friends, jealousy caused by ambiguous information, and disputes over public relationship declaration. When a relationship dissolved, people continued to use SNSs to seek information about the ex-partner, because they were curious about their ex-partner’s social activities or new relationship.

Building on qualitative data from Study 1, an online survey was conducted in Study 2 to investigate the role of SNSs in romantic relationships amongst a large population. Based on a sample of 525 participants, Study 2 revealed that romantic partners’ relational factors (relational uncertainty, commitment, and partner-trust) influenced three aspects of their SNS uses (SNS information-seeking, positive SNS uses, and negative SNS uses), which in turn affected their relationship satisfaction.
Specifically, individuals with lower levels of partner-trust spent more time gathering information about their partner on SNSs. Partners who were more certain about their relationships engaged in more SNS information-seeking behaviors. Individuals who were more certain about their relationships and had higher levels of partner-trust tended to engage in more positive SNS uses. On the contrary, less committed individuals, and individuals who trusted their partner less were more likely to experience relational conflicts caused by the use of SNSs. In addition, SNS information-seeking and positive SNS uses positively predicted relationship satisfaction. Negative SNS uses were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. More importantly, different SNS usage patterns mediated the effects of relational factors on relationship satisfaction. Specifically, SNS information-seeking mediated the relationship between commitment and relationship satisfaction. Positive SNS uses mediated the effects of relational uncertainty, commitment, and partner-trust on relationship satisfaction. Negative SNS uses mediated the effects of uncertainty and commitment on relationship satisfaction

Overall, the present study combined quantitative and qualitative data to provide a systematic and complete understanding of how SNSs may have altered our romantic landscape and relationships in the ever-changing new media environment.

**Keywords:** Social networking sites, computer-mediated communication, romantic relationships, uncertainty reduction theory, stage model of romantic relationships, relational factors, relationship satisfaction