

A Qualitative Investigation of College Students' Facebook Usage and Romantic Relationships: Implications for College Counselors

Renee S. Sherrell and Glenn W. Lambie

The use of social media is a societal trend influencing the way that individuals communicate with and relate to one another. Moreover, Facebook use may facilitate or hinder individuals' relationship growth and development. The purpose of this article is to (a) review research examining Facebook usage and interpersonal relationships, (b) present qualitative insight into the Facebook experiences of college students ($N = 16$) from a large southeastern university, and (c) offer implications for college counselors.

Keywords: college counseling, Facebook, qualitative inquiry, romantic relationships

The college years present a distinct developmental stage for young adults between late adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2007). During this developmental stage, college students are discovering themselves, forming intimate relationships, and acquiring more responsibilities. Relationship problems are among the primary presenting issues in university counseling centers for both male and female students (Gibbons & Shurts, 2010). The use of social networking sites is popular among college students, who report averaging between 1 and 2 hours per day on Facebook (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). Facebook users can share information about their romantic relationships to a larger network of people much more quickly and easily than they can through traditional face-to-face communication (Fox & Warber, 2013). Given Facebook's role in the social interactions of college students, as well as the importance that undergraduate students place on their romantic relationships, it is imperative to investigate college students' lived experiences with Facebook during the development of these relationships.

Facebook and Intimate Couples

Facebook is a social networking website that launched in February 2004. As of fall 2015, there were 1.55 billion active Facebook users, making it the second most accessed website, second only to Google (Facebook, 2015). Facebook usage is linked to jealousy and relationship distress between undergraduate partners (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Because of increased jealousy, college students admit to regularly checking their partner's profile for signs of infidelity, such as inappropriate messages

Renee S. Sherrell and Glenn W. Lambie, Department of Child, Family, and Community Sciences, University of Central Florida. Renee S. Sherrell is now at Department of Counseling and Applied Behavioral Studies, University of St. Joseph. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Renee S. Sherrell, Department of Counseling and Applied Behavioral Studies, University of St. Joseph, 1678 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117 (e-mail: rsherrell@usj.edu).

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or photos (Darvell, Walsh, & White, 2011). In addition, relationship status and profile pictures are powerful gauges of relationship satisfaction within student couples who use Facebook (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012). Hand, Thomas, Buboltz, Deemer, and Buyanjargal (2013) examined the relationships between relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and Facebook usage and identified a positive relationship between relationship satisfaction and intimacy and a negative relationship between perceived partner Facebook usage and intimacy. Therefore, the influence of Facebook on intimacy and relationship satisfaction should not be overlooked.

Facebook and Romantic Relationships

Facebook influences emerging adults' romantic relationships both positively and negatively. Facebook may be viewed positively because it (a) is a beneficial form of social integration for shy individuals (Kalpidou et al., 2011), (b) relates to increased life satisfaction (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), and (c) helps people who struggle with social anxiety to feel less lonely and isolated (Sheldon, 2012). However, Facebook negatively influences relationships because it can (a) support less verbal communication between student partners (Bergdall et al., 2012), (b) support online infidelity (Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013), (c) sustain a lack of being present (Turkle, 2011), and (d) increase stress and health risks (Campisi et al., 2012).

Facebook has a mixed influence on college students' relationships; nonetheless, the majority of individuals seeking counseling services do so because of a relationship problem (Gibbons & Shurts, 2010). Therefore, college counselors should anticipate that Facebook is changing the way partners join with their significant others (Papp et al., 2012). College counselors may benefit from gaining an understanding of the influence Facebook has on students' interpersonal relationships; however, counselors report feeling unprepared to handle client issues related to Internet usage (Wilson & Johnson, 2013).

In addition, counselor preparation programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) are required to promote their counseling trainees' general understanding of societal trends (e.g., Facebook) and how to best support clients with issues relating to these trends. Hence, research examining college students' lived experiences with Facebook and their interpersonal relationships would contribute to the college counseling literature. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative investigation of college students' lived experiences with Facebook. The following two research questions guided our investigation: (a) What are undergraduate college students' lived experiences with Facebook? and (b) How do undergraduate college students make meaning of their lived experiences with Facebook during the development of their romantic relationships while in college?

Method

We used qualitative methodology in this investigation. Specifically, we used a phenomenological research approach to investigate how undergraduate students experience Facebook during their college years, as well as how they make meaning from their lived experiences with Facebook during the development of their romantic relationships while in college. The goal of phenomenological research is to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). From individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived (Moustakas, 1994). To understand the meaning making of lived experiences of undergraduate students, we (a) conducted, recorded, and analyzed semistructured interviews with undergraduate college students and (b) conducted, recorded, and analyzed focus groups with undergraduate college students.

The Researchers

The researchers (the authors) were a doctoral candidate and a tenured counselor education faculty member in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. Throughout our research, we were cognizant of our position in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, we attempted to bracket our “prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) to be able to observe the phenomenon under investigation with as much neutrality as possible (Creswell, 2013). Researcher positionality is vital to identify the position through which we interpreted our environment and our research (Glesne, 2011). To account for our positionality, we bracketed the significant assumptions we had about undergraduate college students’ experiences with Facebook, with the understanding that bracketing is seldom impeccably achieved (Moustakas, 1994).

The contents of our bracketing process included self-reflection on how we believed Facebook would influence undergraduate college students. We also considered our own experiences with Facebook (one author has an account, the other does not) and documented how we thought undergraduate college students would be using Facebook, as well as incorporating Facebook into their romantic relationships. Because the majority of our previous knowledge of students’ involvement with Facebook came from class discussions, we were unaware of how intensely Facebook may affect college students. In addition, we may have had other involvements with the participants (i.e., students) outside of the range of the investigation, feasibly influencing our analyses of the data. In particular, participants were students of one of the authors; therefore, this teacher–student relationship may have influenced the investigation, making bracketing vital to our study.

Context and Participants

The investigation was conducted at a large research university in the southeastern United States. Participants in this purposive sample were recruited

based on their previous enrollment in an undergraduate marriage and intimate relationships course. They were asked to participate in an individual interview, a focus group, or both. Both individual interviews and focus groups were conducted to establish methodological rigor and credibility (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). *Methodological triangulation* involves the use of various qualitative methods to study the phenomenon. For example, results from surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews may be compared to examine if analogous results are found. If emergent themes identified in the data for each of the three qualitative data collection methods are congruent, then qualitative validity is established (Guion et al., 2011).

Interview participants did not volunteer for the focus group, and focus group participants did not volunteer for individual interviews; therefore, the participants vary between interviews and the focus group. The individual interviews and focus group were conducted in a university-based community counseling and research center.

The individual interview participants included nine undergraduate college students, including seven women (77.8%) and two men (22.2%). Four of the student participants self-identified as Caucasian (44.4%), two participants identified as Hispanic (22.2%), one participant identified as African American (11.1%), one participant identified as Middle Eastern (11.1%), and one participant identified as biracial (11.1%). The students' ages ranged from 19 to 21 years ($M = 20.33$), including three 19-year-olds, one 20-year-old, four 21-year-olds, and one 22-year-old. At the time of the interviews, all participants were enrolled in college courses and held undergraduate student status. In addition, all participants reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship.

Seven female undergraduate college students participated in the focus group. Five participants self-identified as Caucasian (71.4%), one participant identified as African American (14.3%), and one participant identified as Jamaican (14.3%). The students' ages ranged from 18 to 32 years ($M = 22.57$), including two 18-year-olds, two 21-year-olds, one 22-year-old, one 26-year-old, and one 32-year-old. Six of the seven participants reported that they were in a romantic relationship.

Data Collection and Analysis

Upon approval from our university's institutional review board, all students ($N = 107$) previously enrolled in an undergraduate course on marriage and intimate relationships at our university were invited to participate in the investigation, and 47 (43.9%) students volunteered to participate. Students from the course were chosen for recruitment because of their experiences with learning about intimate relationships and relational problems. No students who were currently enrolled in the course were invited to participate. Inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: previous enrollment in a marriage and intimate relationships course, age 18 years or older, and current enrollment as an undergraduate student. After volunteers were screened against the inclusion criteria, nine students participated in individual interviews and seven participated in the focus group. The individual interviews and the focus group were conducted using a semistructured format.

The questions asked in both the individual interviews and the focus group were as follows: (a) Describe your level of social support; (b) In what ways, if any, does Facebook play a role in your interpersonal relationships? (c) In your experience in college, how does starting a new relationship unfold? (d) What does communication look like in a new romantic relationship for undergraduate college students? and (e) In college, how does Facebook play a role in a romantic relationship?

Individual interviews. Individual interviews with students were conducted over a summer semester. The semistructured individual interviews permitted spontaneous questioning based on the interviewees' responses (Creswell, 2013). The individual interviews were conducted by the first author. In addition, the interview process enabled a laidback and open-minded environment, and all interviews were audio recorded (Moustakas, 1994). The individual interviews averaged 22.30 minutes in length (range = 15.51 to 27.56).

Focus group. One focus group interview was conducted with the seven student participants. The focus group was conducted by the first author with the intent to gain multiple perspectives. The focus group increased our sureness in the developing emergent themes regarding undergraduate students' meaning making of their lived experiences with Facebook. The focus group interview lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes.

Trustworthiness. Creswell (2013) presented eight qualitative research procedures to contribute to trustworthiness: (a) persistent observation, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review, (d) negative case analysis, (e) clarification of research bias, (f) member checking, (g) thick description, and (h) external audit. Attending to all eight of these qualitative procedures increases study trustworthiness; however, all eight are not necessary in any one study (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, research integrity was achieved for our investigation through the use of (a) researcher positionality, (b) a researcher self-reflection journal, (c) triangulation, (d) member checking, (e) peer debriefers, (f) an external auditor, (g) an extensive review of the literature, (h) thick descriptions, and (i) a welcoming of disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 2013).

We described our positionality and the extent to which our positionality influenced our understanding of our findings (Glesne 2011). We maintained the position that Facebook would play a role in undergraduate college students' lives; however, we were unaware of the extent of Facebook's influence within college students' romantic relationships. Our study's integrity was reinforced through triangulation, which included the use of multiple sources of data to illustrate the research in question, the collection and analysis of individual interview and focus group data, and the checking and rechecking of the student interviews and focus group transcripts (Creswell, 2013). We were careful about bracketing and suspending our judgment while conducting our investigation and developing our research report (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011). We used member checking to support trustworthiness. Student participants were afforded the opportunity to review transcripts, initial findings, and near-finished reports. Specifically, after the interviews were transcribed and coded, themes

were identified, and final reports were written, participants were e-mailed the transcripts of their final interview, the results, and the reports to assess for accuracy and completeness. All participants who engaged in the respondent validation process approved the accuracy of the transcripts, identified themes, and final report. Furthermore, we used peer debriefing and external auditing to support the trustworthiness of our investigation.

According to Creswell (2013), peer debriefers act as sounding boards who challenge the researchers' methodologies. We met with three doctoral students completing qualitative analyses during the data collection and analysis to process our methodologies. Consensus among the peer debriefers was achieved regarding our methodologies as well as our codes and themes. In addition, a qualitative research professor from our university acted as the external auditor to examine our collection and analyses. The external auditor reviewed our findings, interpretations, and conclusions and reviewed whether the data supported these findings (Creswell, 2013). Our external auditor had no connection to our study participants, and she listened to audio-recorded interviews, examined the transcripts, and reviewed the initial and final data analyses. Aligning with Creswell and Miller (2000), the external auditor agreed to the rigor of our methodology and agreed with our codes and themes after listening to the recorded interviews.

Data analysis. The focus group interview and all individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were coded, and codes were combined into themes. Our phenomenological data analysis included (a) describing personal experience with the phenomenon under examination, (b) reviewing the written transcripts numerous times to compile a list of significant statements and codes, (c) identifying significant sentences and codes that relate to the experience, (d) interpreting meanings and chunking them into common themes across all the transcripts, (e) integrating the results into an all-inclusive description of the phenomenon, and (f) validating the findings with student participants and including their remarks in the final report (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). *Intercoder agreement*, the percentage at which different coders agree and remain consistent with their assignment of particular codes to particular data, was achieved by following Saldaña's (2009) rule of thumb of 85% to 90%.

Upon receiving feedback from the participants confirming the accuracy of the transcripts, we followed Creswell's (2013) steps of data analysis: (a) Each statement was considered to be of equal weight, (b) the most relevant and significant statements were electronically highlighted, and (c) highlighted statements were reread and assigned a code. We also followed Patton's (2002) steps for qualitative data analysis. We (a) identified significant statements (i.e., words, phrases, and sentences) that had direct relevance to the phenomenon being studied; (b) made a list of their interpretations of the significant statements, otherwise known as *meanings*; (c) searched for themes in the data, or a combination of the meanings and themes; and (d) constructed a statement of the experience that created a vicarious experience in the reader of the description.

Results

An analysis of the data revealed subthemes and codes that fell within six overarching themes: support, communication, intimacy, relationship status, steps in dating, and the public nature of Facebook. Themes were developed following methods suggested by Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994). To provide a thick and rich description of the data, we included statements from at least one student per theme. Moreover, we included participants' voices to support the credibility of the results (Patton, 2002).

Support

Student interviewees reported that the number of Facebook friends they have ranges from 300 to 1,000. They all indicated that they include their "real" (or face-to-face) friends as Facebook friends, but that their Facebook friends are also composed of acquaintances, classmates, friends from high school (or earlier), and family members. The participants reported that they cannot rely on the majority of their Facebook friends the way that they rely on their real friends, and that they feel a greater sense of support from the friends whom they make a conscious effort to see on a regular basis. For example, Student 4 stated,

The people I know who I can trust and who got my back, I don't really converse with them on Facebook or do a lot of interactions with them on Facebook. But as far as other people, it's like a lot of other people that I really don't trust or anything, like, that's on my page or that may comment on things that don't know really what's going on.

Student 9 noted that she has 600 Facebook friends but could rely on only one or two of them if she needed help. Four students (Students 10, 12, 15, and 16) indicated that they allow anyone who "friends" them to have access to their profile, whereas the other students reported that they have only people whom they have met at least one time on their profile.

Communication

Texting and Facebook are the ways couples initially communicate. The students reported that they enjoy using Facebook as a way to communicate because it offers them things to talk about, such as topics brought up by their profile pictures or status updates. Student 8 stated,

Like, when I was looking at my boyfriend's profile at first, like, he listed music and stuff, and I, like, remember texting with him about music for a really, really long time because we had, like, very similar tastes, and just making that connection. Being, like, "Wow, this person admires and appreciates the same things I do. That's really awesome."

Students also reported that online communication allows them to perfect what they want to say, in that they can erase what they write before posting

it, or they can retype their posts to make them more funny or amusing. Student 7 indicated that Facebook offered convenience not found in face-to-face conversations: “Face-to-face communication is more difficult because you have to collect your thoughts before you speak.” Student 2 reported that chatting on Facebook (a form of instant messaging) was even more convenient:

Facebook messaging can be a lot of work because you have to open up the computer and then either “like” a comment or make your own. I prefer Facebook chatting because it’s faster than scrolling through the news feed looking for something to comment on.

Intimacy

The majority of the sample ($n = 15$) reported that developing intimacy through Facebook is possible; however, 12 students reported that difficulties arise because of an inability to see the facial expressions or to hear the voice tone/intonation of the other person. In addition, Student 5 stated, “You can create some intimacy [on Facebook] but for the most part, for me at least, I just find it, I don’t really know how you can define a person through Facebook.” Alternatively, Student 1 reported that “Facebook is more intimate than texting because you can look at the other person’s picture while Facebook chatting,” and Student 4 indicated that “Facebook emoticons help you develop intimacy within your relationships.”

Relationship Status

The student sample collectively agreed that listing oneself as “in a relationship,” commonly referred to as “Facebook official” (FBO), is a major step in the stages of one’s relationship. Although all respondents reported that being FBO was not important to them per se, 14 students reported listing their relationship status when they are in long-term relationships. Student 3 stated, “Oh my God, that’s it. I’m showing everyone that’s he’s mine or that she’s mine and that’s it. There is no going back!” when describing how it feels to update a relationship status from single to in a relationship. In addition, all students stated that the converse of this is also true. Having to change one’s relationship status to single appeared to be a sensitive subject for the students, as indicated by Student 5’s statement, “If a guy changes his status to single, then that will kill the girl.” Student 10 reported that at these times Facebook is “like cancer” in the way that once friends see a changed relationship status, a growing number of comments ensue. The students reported that both consoling and mean-spirited comments are posted, such as “Sorry you are sad” or “Now it’s my turn to get with him/her!”

Steps in Dating

All participants reported that Facebook and texting are the initial ways to get to know a prospective significant other. They expressed that when they initially meet someone of interest, they friend them on Facebook. Student 7

stated, "Facebook allows you to know what she does, where she hangs out, who she hangs out with, if she really is who she says she is, if she already has a boyfriend or girlfriend." Seven students referred to this process as "scoping out their Facebook page," whereas five students referred to this Facebook inquiry as "stalking." These 12 students indicated that reviewing a new romantic interest's profile is necessary to be sure that he or she is someone whom the student may be interested in. In addition, students likened this Facebook inquiry process to speed dating, and all participants shared that they believed that everyone did this and that it is "normal" to allow a grace period during which time is allotted where no communication is done except for possible likes of an updated status or photographs.

Overall, the participants reported that the stages of dating are (a) talking, (b) seeing each other, (c) FBO, and (d) together. Within the talking stage, newly introduced partners use Facebook and texting as a means to communicate and get to know each other. The students indicated that minimal to no face-to-face communication takes place during the ironically titled "talking" phase. Within the seeing-each-other stage, partners have moved on from simply talking to each other to occasionally spending time together in groups of friends and, at times, on a one-on-one basis. Interviewees indicated that it is appropriate to be "talking to" more than one person at a time and that it is common to do so. If things progress and both partners agree to become more exclusive, then they may still be in the talking phase; however, they will communicate to each other that they believe that it is no longer acceptable to be "talking to" anyone else.

When both partners are comfortable with the relationship, they may discuss becoming FBO. The students indicated that becoming FBO is a ceremonious event. Students shared ways in which they became FBO, including one story of taking a computer to the beach to have a more romantic atmosphere, and another story discussing how they chose whose computer was used for the event. Seven students interviewed likened the importance of becoming FBO to discussing engagement and the potential of getting married. However, 10 students indicated that some of their online friends see becoming FBO as commonplace, updating the status back and forth from "single" to "in a relationship" every few days. The practice of regularly changing the relationship status for this group of college students appeared to be perceived as unacceptable, as indicated by nonverbal indications of shaking their heads back and forth and eye rolling. While discussing a friend's tendency to update her relationship status too soon, Student 2 stated, "Oh come on! They are going FBO after 2 weeks! Whatever!" For this sample of college students, becoming FBO appeared to be a vital part of their romantic relationship development.

The last stage was referred to as being "together." At the together phase, the couple is exclusively dating, with neither partner "seeing" or "talking to" anyone else. Texting, Facebook chatting, and dates within groups of friends continue, with time spent as a couple occurring as well. For 14 students, couples are considered to be together only if they have decided to become

FBO. When asked how individuals without Facebook profiles handled this predicament, the students shared that they have never had that experience occur, but they believed that at least one partner would have access to Facebook and could then update his or her own relationship status on behalf of the couple.

Public Nature of Facebook

The students offered many examples of the public nature of Facebook and the sharing of personal information with a large number of people. A common concept discussed was the speed at which information was shared. The students discussed how changes in relationship status can be stressful, especially finding out from someone else on Facebook. For example, Student 11 shared how she found out from her grandmother that her significant other had changed to a single relationship status. Additionally, Student 1 remarked,

That's another stupid thing is you find out from your friends, like, "Did you see so and so put himself as single?" and you don't even know and you're the partner and then you call them or meet up with them and say, "What the hell? I had to find out from my sister or my friend that you put yourself as single."

Student 16 stated that "how other people can find out things about an intimate relationship before the actual people in the relationship is stupid to me." All interviewees reported that breaking up over Facebook, with the high numbers of friends who could see the change in relationship status, was stressful and sad. In addition, seven students shared that because of the public nature of Facebook, they continued to see their ex-partner's profile page, including photographs and comments made by new partners. The students reported that the public nature of Facebook results in feelings of sadness, frustration, desperation, and embarrassment.

Discussion

The six themes emerging from the data in our study appeared to align with findings in the literature on Facebook; however, differences existed. For example, the first theme, support, aligned with findings identifying that individuals who spend more time on Facebook have larger social networks (i.e., Facebook friends) and report higher levels of online social support than do those who spend less time and have smaller social networks; however, having more friends online is not associated with emotional support in offline friendships (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). Moreover, participants indicated that they enjoy Facebook because of the support they feel regarding others being interested in their lives. All participants indicated that they cannot rely on their Facebook friends as much as on their friends whom they see face-to-face; nevertheless, all participants indicated feeling special to and accepted by their Facebook friends. Furthermore, Yust, Hyde, and Ota (2010) suggested that with increased usage of Facebook and substantial time spent by individuals

on the site, users develop a sense of connectedness to the site, in which like-minded seekers are connected across a range of geographic locations.

The second theme, communication, was consistent with research findings examining social media, texting, and interpersonal relationships. Specifically, couples report increased happiness and greater intimacy with more frequent face-to-face communication (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). However, Bergdall et al. (2012) identified that text messaging and mobile Internet are the most common forms of communicating relationship goals among college student couples. In addition, individuals often try to minimize negative impressions resulting from their Facebook communications, so they take extra time and several attempts to convey their message (Walther, Van, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Therefore, Facebook allows users multiple opportunities to perfect their messages before posting them, which aligns with previous research indicating that Facebook promotes a false sense of self among users (Darvell et al., 2011). Nine participants differed from published literature on Facebook by indicating that they do not enjoy getting to know someone over Facebook and would prefer to get to know an individual in person or over the telephone; however, because “everyone” else uses Facebook in this manner, they follow the trend.

The third theme, intimacy, was congruent with research findings examining intimacy and social media usage (Park, Jin, & Jin, 2011), suggesting that honest self-disclosures on Facebook may not lead to increased intimacy. Conversely, truthful self-disclosure may play a part in augmenting feelings connected with Facebook. Park et al. (2011) identified that frequent profile posting and sharing more positive personal information may foster intimacy; however, because self-disclosure on Facebook tends not to be as honest and spontaneous, self-disclosure on Facebook is not as damaging to intimacy as it would be in face-to-face contexts. New to the literature within our research findings was that participants indicated that it can be difficult to know when someone is being honest on Facebook. One participant explained how frustrating it is to have spent time Facebook chatting with someone else, only to find out that, in person, that someone is not what he or she seemed online. Therefore, seven participants indicated that they consistently question what a person says on Facebook and whether it is consistent with other things that person has posted previously. This thematic questioning of others makes building intimacy difficult and influences the development of relationships.

The fourth theme, relationship status, was consistent with previous research findings that identified that relationship status and profile pictures are direct indicators of relationship satisfaction (Papp et al., 2012). Specifically, female participants reported a sense of affection from their male partners when their name was included in their partner’s relationship status, and male participants reported a sense of affection from their female partners when they were included in their partner’s profile photo. Therefore, couples reported that these relationship statuses and profile photos were direct displays of their affection and appreciation of each other. Our findings aligned with those of Fox and

Warber (2013), who studied the act of becoming FBO as an interpersonally momentous experience that marks how students perceive the strength and level of commitment of their romantic relationships. Moreover, deciding to become FBO is not just a decision between the couple; it also serves as public broadcasting from the couple to their respective social networks. However, our relationship status theme differed from our research findings in that participants indicated how they may change their status to make a point to their significant other. Specifically, six participants indicated that they have changed their relationship status to single after an argument with a partner as a way to signify their anger. Moreover, three participants indicated that the relationship status option on Facebook did not mean anything because people change it often, whereas five participants indicated that the relationship status option was a way to show commitment to their partner and to their entire network.

The fifth theme, steps in dating, was not identified in published research concerning social media. Therefore, the findings relating to this theme can neither align with nor differ from what was identified in the literature. Our results provide college counselors with an introduction into the lived experiences of undergraduate college students with Facebook and the development of intimate relationships, albeit with a small population. The experiences shared by these students illustrate the influence of Facebook on the romantic relationship development and interpersonal functioning of college students.

The final theme that emerged from the data, the public nature of Facebook, was consistent with previous research (e.g., Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012; Fox & Warber, 2013). Specifically, Christofides et al. (2012) found that Facebook offers individuals opportunities to engage in inappropriate behaviors, such as bullying and meanness. In addition, students reported experiencing misunderstandings within their relationships as a result of misinterpreted disclosures on Facebook (Christofides et al., 2012). Furthermore, Fox and Warber (2013) identified that, because of the public nature of Facebook, the broadcast of changing one's relationship status, along with the potential for comments from one's social network, is influential on the intra- and interpersonal decision making that take place during relationship development.

The results of our study provide insight into how undergraduate college students experience and make meaning from their lived experiences with Facebook during the development of their romantic relationships. Participants indicated that Facebook is a part of their everyday lives, not only for social connection but also for social support. Facebook was also used by these students as a way to get to know potential partners and to communicate with potential partners until they felt prepared to meet face-to-face. Facebook remains a part of their romantic relationships both positively and negatively, playing a role in the maintenance and the dissolution of these relationships. Therefore, the meaning that emerged from our data was that Facebook is a societal trend experienced daily by college students. Furthermore, Facebook provides students a platform to display their romantic relationships, highlighting the commitment and status of each relationship. College students are aware of

the public nature of Facebook and tend to consider it when accepting friend requests from acquaintances and family members. Facebook has secured a spot in the contemporary stages of dating.

Implications for College Counseling

The results of this study identified that Facebook plays an important role in college students' social lives and romantic relationships. College students reported similarity in their usage of Facebook, as well as how they revealed their relationship on their Facebook profiles. In addition, the use of Facebook as a means of communication and intimacy held importance for college students' relationship development and maintenance. Moreover, the participants reported that Facebook is associated with stress and heartbreak, thus supporting that Facebook may be problematic for relationship satisfaction and relational well-being. Moreno et al. (2011) indicated that emerging adults often disclose more about themselves on Facebook than they do in person; therefore, once trust and rapport have been built, college counselors may consider asking clients to share their profile page while in session, as a means to more fully understand and grasp college students' outlets of expressions. It is anticipated that the use of technology changes the way couples communicate and relate to each other. Furthermore, the influence of Facebook friends on romantic relationships cannot be underestimated. Sprecher (2010) noted that when Facebook friends approve or disapprove of a relationship, they attempt to influence that relationship. College counselors may consider these outside relationships and inquire about them to gain deeper understanding about their clients' presenting concerns. Questions regarding friends' influences on their romantic relationship may provide student clients with insight into other interpersonal relationships. As college counselors, we can no longer disregard the involvement of technology on intimate relationships, and we need to be aware of how to best help our clients who are struggling with issues connected to their social media use.

On the basis of our findings and previous research, college counselors need to support their clients' relationship functionality related to Facebook. College counseling centers may benefit students by informing staff on the role of Facebook in students' lives and relationships. College counselors should work to develop relationships with clients to create a safe place to discuss issues related to their Internet use. Specifically, counselors should inquire about clients' Facebook usage, similar to how one would ask about any excessive behaviors. Counselors need to promote the development of coping skills by teaching problem-solving, decision-making, communication, assertiveness, and mood management skills, while assisting students in forming offline supportive relationships with peers. Furthermore, college counselors may consider using the support clients feel from their Facebook friends

to help build resiliency and coping strategies in offline relationships. In addition, counselors may consider their clients' Facebook usage as a way to investigate other potential relationship issues, such as jealousy, power, and control.

Limitations and Future Directions

As a phenomenological investigation, this study offers insight into the lived experiences of college students with Facebook and their intimate relationships. However, our findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. First, the results based on this sample of students may not be generalizable beyond college students at this particular university who have taken an elective course on marriage and intimate relationships. Second, although our results support the continued study of Facebook and romantic relationships of college students, the role of Facebook in couple relationships encompasses many other Facebook behaviors (e.g., jealousy, loneliness). Nevertheless, our study's findings encourage continued study of the role of Facebook in relationship development and satisfaction of couples. Although we chose to focus on college students, future studies should include the perceptions of all age groups. In addition, future studies may include quantitative research methods to examine Facebook usage and intimate relationships.

Conclusion

As Facebook users experience more crossovers between their Facebook behaviors and their offline relationships, counseling research is warranted to examine individuals' Facebook experiences and their relationship development and maintenance. This study's findings support that Facebook does not merely facilitate college students' interactions; Facebook establishes, shapes, and defines their intimate relationships.

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