



## Exploring the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships and dating experiences



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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how adolescents perceive the ways in which romantic relationships are experienced and expressed through social networking sites. Eleven focus group conversations among 57 adolescents between 15 and 18 years old in Flanders, Belgium were analyzed. The findings demonstrate that social networking sites play an important role in relational information seeking. Pictures and status updates are regarded as the most important source of information about a potential romantic partner. In order to express romantic interest respondents indicated that they would *like* pictures and status updates from several years ago or that they would initiate a conversation through private messages. The respondents in our sample did not consider being Facebook Official as an important part of a romantic relationship. The adolescents recognized the potential of social networking sites to elicit jealousy and identified forms of controlling behavior such as sharing passwords or monitoring the partners' profiles. A romantic break-up often led to removing ex-partners from one's profile pages and adolescents most frequently observed the posting of emotional status updates by ex-partners as a result of the relationship dissolution. The discussion includes suggestions for future research and implications for practice.

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### 1. Introduction

Social networking sites have profoundly changed the way in which romantic relationships are experienced. They make it, for instance, simpler to find information about one's (potential) romantic partners and to communicate with them. Furthermore, social networking sites enable their users to disseminate information about their romantic relationship, such as pictures or public displays of affection, to a broad audience of online contacts such as family members, friends and acquaintances (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012). After a romantic break-up, social networking sites can be used to keep in touch with an ex-partner or to communicate one's feelings about the relationship dissolution (Fox et al., 2013). However, social

networking sites have also been found to elicit jealousy and facilitate abusive behaviors such as partner monitoring (Muisse, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2013).

The impact of social networking sites on how its users experience their romantic relationships, has only recently gained academic interest. Most of the present research focuses on the experiences of adults (e.g., Fox & Warber, 2013a; Fox & Warber, 2013b; Fox et al., 2013; Papp et al., 2012; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Surprisingly, there has been limited research on how social networking sites affect romantic relationship development among adolescents (Rueda, Lindsay, & Williams, 2014).

This is especially noteworthy, given that adolescents are avid users of social networking sites (Van Gool, Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2015). A recent study found that 71% of American teenagers use more than one social networking site, with Facebook being the most popular social networking site (Lenhart, 2015). Moreover, adolescence is an important period in which young people start to experiment with romantic relationships and start to spend more time with peers from a different gender (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Adolescents mostly begin dating at the

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ages of 15 and 16 (Phinney, Jensen, Olsen, & Cundick, 1990). Love and romantic relationships are also an important topic of conversation among teenagers and within adolescent popular culture, such as music lyrics or television series (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins, 2003; Ward, 1995), which stresses their importance within adolescents' lives.

Given the unique context in which adolescent romantic relationships take place, findings on the impact of social networking sites on the romantic relationships of adults might differ from adolescents' romantic encounters. Research into the influence of digital media on their experiences is therefore warranted. To the best of our knowledge, only two qualitative studies on the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships exist (Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden, & Lucero, 2014; Rueda et al., 2014). Both studies mainly focused upon the role of social networking sites within relational conflict and abusive behaviors. Rueda et al. (2014) found among Mexican American adolescents that the ability to connect with previously unknown peers and the flirtatious nature of interactions on Facebook contributed to the feelings of jealousy that adolescents experienced. The respondents further described that they monitored their partners by sharing passwords and logging into their accounts and that some boys tried to stop girls from adding other male contacts to their profile pages (Rueda et al., 2014). Similar results were found by Lucero et al. (2014) who noted that teenagers regarded password sharing as a sign of trust and of a committed relationship and that the monitoring of social networking accounts was common among male and female respondents. Our current study extends the findings of both studies by focusing on the use of social networking sites throughout all stages of a romantic relationship. Rather than investigating the role of digital media within relational abuse and conflict, our study takes a larger perspective and also concentrates on the positive experiences that social networking sites may provide during adolescents' romantic relationships.

When developing relationship and sex education lessons, aimed at teaching teenagers about how to develop healthy romantic relationships, practitioners might need to include scripts and examples that are relatable to adolescents and that are relevant to their experiences. Therefore, a deeper understanding of adolescents' use of digital media in their romantic relationships is warranted, as accounts from adults might not yet align with adolescents' experiences. In order to better understand the opportunities and risks adolescents' use of digital media poses to the development of adolescents' romantic relationships, our study aims to investigate young people's experiences by means of focus group research. The results of this study can better inform relationship and sexual education efforts and can offer guidance for a future more theory-driven approach in the studying of the role of digital media in adolescents' romantic relationships.

For orientation, we will first review the existing research on how social networking sites influence its users' romantic experiences during the initiation stage of a romantic relationship, during the romantic relationship and after a romantic break-up. Given the current state of research, our literature review summarizes research that was mainly conducted among adults. We then report on our own study in which we have incorporated young people's voices about how they perceive the use of social networking sites within adolescents' romantic relationships.

### 1.1. The role of social networking sites during the initiation stages of romantic relationships

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, play a key role during the initiation stage of a romantic relationship. When experiencing romantic interest and during the early phases of a relationship, they

enable their users to flirt and to communicate with their dating or romantic partner. Additionally, social networking sites can play a central role in the process of relational information seeking (Fox et al., 2013).

Social networking sites offer several options to keep in touch and interact with each other through the chat function, e-mail, status updates, liking, commenting and posting on each other's profile pages (Fox et al., 2013). In a qualitative study among adults, respondents perceived Facebook as a casual and less threatening way to contact each other (Fox & Warber, 2013a,b), a rejection would be perceived as less painful than in a face-to-face context. A recent study among American adults from the Pew Research Center (Smith & Duggan, 2013) found that 15% of respondents had already used a social networking site to ask someone out for a date and 24% of internet users had flirted with someone online. Among the 18–24 year old age group, 47% of internet users had used the internet for flirtatious purposes.

Social networking sites are not only an informal channel of communication. They also play a key role in the relational information seeking process. During the initial stages of a romantic relationship, a lot of information that potential partners share during face-to-face conversations about their hobby's, interests and social circle, can also be found on their profile pages (Fox et al., 2013; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Profile pages bring multiple sources of self-generated content and content of friends together in one central location (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Fox et al., 2013). Moreover, the list of friends that is provided by a social networking site is regarded as an important source of information. Next to providing a list of common friends, it further allows users to identify individuals that can be approached offline to obtain more information about a love interest (Fox et al., 2013). By supplying this information, social networking sites speed up the process of self-disclosure compared to traditional offline conversations (Fox et al., 2013). Previous studies showed that adults had a particular interest in the photos of their love interests. According to the respondents, pictures uploaded by a friend were particularly of interest because they were believed to be more honest and to contain less manipulated information (Fox et al., 2013). This finding is, as Fox et al. (2013) noted, in line with the warranting principle, which states that internet users will be more inclined to trust information about a person, if they perceive the information to be difficult to manipulate by the individual to whom it refers (Walther & Parks, 2002).

### 1.2. The role of social networking sites during a romantic relationship

#### 1.2.1. Positive aspects of social networking sites during romantic relationships

Facebook provides its users with the opportunity to advertise their relationship status (e.g., single, in a relationship, it's complicated or engaged). When entering a romantic relationship, a couple can broadcast this status to their acquaintances, friends and family, who can then show their approval and support by liking or commenting on this update. Announcing the relationship status on Facebook is colloquially called being 'Facebook Official' (Fox et al., 2014; Fox & Warber, 2013a,b; Papp et al., 2012). Many adult couples regard being Facebook Official as an important step in their romantic relationship (Fox et al., 2014, 2013). Through this feature they formally confirm and announce their romantic relationship to all their online friends (Fox & Warber, 2013a,b). This act has been linked to higher relationship satisfaction (Mod, 2010; Papp et al., 2012). However, it could also be a potential source of relational conflict, as some studies also found that men and women have differing perceptions of what it means to be Facebook Official (Fox

et al., 2014; Fox & Warber, 2013a,b; Papp et al., 2012).

Next to indicating their relationship status, Facebook offers couples the ability to communicate with each other, and maintain their relationship through private and public messages (Billedo, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015; Fox et al., 2014; Fox & Warber, 2013a,b). With public messages romantic partners can, for instance, show their love through posts on each other's profile pages such as 'I like you' or 'I miss you', which are comparable to public displays of affection like holding hands or kissing in public (Mod, 2010). Another way of displaying love is by selecting a joint photograph with their romantic partner as a profile picture, which has been linked to relationship satisfaction among adults (Saslow, Muise, Impett, & Dubin, 2013). The act of making one's relationship visible on Facebook has been found to be dependent on the individual's attachment style. Avoidant individuals were less willing and less likely to make their relationship visible to others, whereas anxious individuals had more positive attitudes towards doing so and were more likely to post information about their relationship to Facebook (Emery, Muise, Dix, & Le, 2014). Another study found that respondents in a long distance relationship were more inclined to use Facebook for relational maintenance behaviors (e.g., saying 'I love you' or encouraging their romantic partner to share his/her feelings on Facebook) than those who were involved in a geographically close relationship (Billedo et al., 2015).

### 1.2.2. Negative aspects of social networking sites during romantic relationships

Next to having a positive impact on relational maintenance and relationship satisfaction, social networking sites have also been found to be a tool for surveillance and control. They make the social environment of one's romantic partner more visible as compared to the traditional offline context. A lot of interactions that would stay hidden without Facebook are visible through the website (e.g., the Friends List or public interactions on the profile page) (Fox et al., 2014). The ability to read interactions (e.g., comments or likes by unfamiliar others) can be perceived as 'threatening' and could subsequently lead to jealousy and the surveillance of the romantic partner through Facebook (Fox et al., 2014; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Research among adults indicated an association between the time that users spent on social networking sites and their Facebook-related feelings of jealousy (Muise et al., 2009). Utz and Beukeboom (2011) found that self-esteem was associated with feelings of jealousy that individuals experienced with regards to the social networking sites use of their partner. Individuals suffering from low-self-esteem were especially affected by need for popularity, jealousy, and monitoring behavior (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). As Muise et al. (2009) suggested, the link between Facebook use and jealousy might well be reciprocal, with exposure to the partners' Facebook information leading to more frequent profile page visits, which in turn leads to more jealousy.

### 1.3. The role of social networking sites during romantic relationship dissolution

When romantic relationships dissolve, people can keep access to the ex-partner's status updates and pictures by remaining friends or through shared friends or information that is publically available. With the help of status updates and pictures, users can still get a good overview of a person's life events, even after a break-up (Fox et al., 2014, 2013; LeFebvre, Blackburn, & Brody, 2015; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Tong, 2013). Almost a quarter (24%) of American adult social networking site users have searched for online information about someone they had dated in the past (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

Whether or not individuals decide to start monitoring their ex-partners depends on the context of the romantic break-up. Individuals who did not terminate the relationship themselves are more likely to search more information about their ex-partner than those who have initiated a break-up. They most likely resort to searching for information about their ex-partner as a means of uncertainty reduction (Tong, 2013). The exposure to online information about ex-partners on Facebook can slow down the healing process and personal growth after a failed romantic relationship and can heighten the pain about relationship dissolution (Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015; Marshall, 2012). Frequently visiting an ex-partner's profile page could further lead to increased feelings of stress about the end of a romantic relationship, more negative feelings, a higher sexual longing for the ex-partner and lower personal growth after a romantic break-up (Marshall, 2012).

The surveillance of each other's profile pages is not the only way in which ex-partners can keep in contact. They can also actively choose to post content in response to the romantic break-up (Fox et al., 2014). Lyndon et al. (2011) discerned in their quantitative study three main ways in which ex-partners could disturb each other: (1) "covert provocation", (2) "public harassment" and (3) "venting". Under the category covert provocation fall techniques such as posting poetry and lyrics in status updates as a reference to the ex-partner. These messages can be used as a means to bully and hurt the ex-partner or to communicate with the intention to get back together. Activities such as public harassment are less frequent and included changing one's relationship status to "in a relationship" with the intent to make the ex-partner jealous or posting embarrassing pictures of the ex-partner. Venting includes writing negative comments about the ex-partner and posting mean-spirited or hateful comments in a response to pictures of an ex-partner (Lyndon et al., 2011).

It is further found that respondents use additional strategies in response to a romantic break-up such as self-regulation from Facebook (e.g., actively choosing to limit their Facebook use), relational cleansing to show that one is single again (e.g., removing relationship statuses, updating the relationship status or deleting messages), or that they would engage in impression management to show that they were no longer affected by the break-up and that they had moved on (e.g., posting information about fun activities or checking in at new places) (LeFebvre et al., 2015).

### 1.4. The present study

Previous research indicates that social networking sites have an important impact on how its users experience their romantic relationships. Until now, a majority of studies focus on the impact that social networking sites can have on adults' romantic relationships and only scant research is available on the experiences of teenagers (Rueda et al., 2014). Given the unique nature of adolescents' romantic relationships and their importance for adolescent development, insights in their experiences and perceptions are warranted. The present study aims to focus on the role that social networking sites have in the different stages of a romantic relationship from initiating, maintaining, to terminating the romantic relationship. We explore, amongst others, how teenagers signal romantic interest to others using social networking sites, how they express romantic interest, how they perceive being Facebook Official, the role of jealousy, and the role of social networking sites in process of relationship dissolution. The results provide useful information for practice, such as the development of education efforts as a part of relationship and sexual education for teenagers.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Procedures

Given that only scarce research exists on how adolescents perceive the use of social networking sites within their romantic relationships, focus group methodology was deemed most appropriate to address our research questions. In total, 11 focus group interviews with each 3 to 8 participants were conducted in spring of 2015 as a part of the larger *Teen Digital Dating Study*, which focuses on the impact of digital media on adolescents' romantic relationships from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. We used same-sex focus groups (4 male-only focus groups and 7 female-only focus groups), which is recommended because of the sensitive nature of the research topic (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The focus group interviews lasted between 38 and 53 min. The focus group interviews were moderated by two researchers and one graduate student who received extensive training on focus group research before conducting the interviews. In the transcripts, the moderators are designated with the letter M. All focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The names of the respondents were removed from the transcripts and replaced by a code to respect their anonymity and privacy. The code consisted of the number of the focus group (e.g., F1) and a number that was assigned to the respondent (e.g., R3).

### 2.2. Participants

Participants were recruited in two secondary schools in Flanders, Belgium. A total of 57 respondents (66.66% females;  $n = 38$ ) participated in the focus groups. All participants were between 15 and 18 years old and they were all enrolled in the academic school track of the Flemish educational system. The respondents were recruited through announcements on the schools' digital learning environments and by asking students in-person whether they were willing to participate in the study. The study was conducted during the schools' lunch break or during hours in which there was a gap between two courses. As a compensation for their participation all respondents were offered refreshments and snacks. In one school participants were also offered a book voucher.

### 2.3. Measurements

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to guarantee a similar format across all focus group sessions. The questioning route was structured following the recommendations of Krueger and Casey (2009). The questions were created by the researchers or based on previous studies on the use of social networking sites within romantic relationships (Adams & Williams, 2014; Fox et al., 2014; Fox & Warber, 2013a,b; Lucero et al., 2014). The list of key questions is included in the appendix of this article. The interview started with an opening question, in which the moderator asked the respondents on which social networking sites they had a profile page. The aim of this question was to get an overview of the social networking site use of the respondents and to get everyone to talk. They were not intended to be included in the analysis. The opening question was followed by a general introductory question in which respondents were asked to provide an example of how social networking sites are used within romantic relationships. This question had the aim to make sure that the respondents became familiar with the study's topic. Depending on the topics that were brought up by the respondents, the moderator choose a related set of key questions to start with (e.g., if the respondents mentioned that social networking sites were used to flirt with a potential love

interest, the moderator would start with questions about this topic. Whereas the moderator would start with asking questions related to jealousy if that subject was mentioned by the respondents first). Depending on the participants' responses, the moderators rephrased some questions or asked additional questions if they wanted to delve deeper on specific issues that were brought up by the respondents.

### 2.4. Data analysis

Two researchers reviewed the transcripts before agreeing that data saturation was reached. Data were analyzed by two researchers using NVivo 10. First, the researchers carefully read the transcripts to become familiar with the conversations. Using an open coding procedure the researchers identified every answer that was given by the respondents and provided these answers with a code. This was done for the transcripts of 3 focus group conversations. Then, the researchers connected the different codes that were identified during the coding process, according to their thematic similarities. Through discussion, the researchers found common themes that emerged from the data and that were related to the research questions. Codes that were determined to be overlapping, were merged so that only one overarching code remained. The codes were structured according to several thematic categories that could provide an answer to our research question. The transcripts of the 8 remaining focus group conversations were coded based on this tree-structure. Afterwards the transcripts of all focus group conversations were reviewed again to make sure that every response was properly coded. The results below are structured according to the different stages of a romantic relationship. The quotes were translated from Dutch into English by the researchers and were kept as close as possible to the original expressions that were used by the respondents.

### 2.5. Ethical procedures

Prior to the interview, respondents received a fact sheet with more information about the study's purpose and procedures. The researcher explained the content of the fact sheet to the students and emphasized that their participation was voluntary, that they were under no obligation to answer all questions, and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Students were assured that their responses would be processed anonymously. The participants also received the contact information of organizations that provide more information about interpersonal relationships or safer internet use. After this introduction, written consent of the participants was obtained and a passive parental consent procedure was used. The study's methodology was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Antwerp.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. The use of social networking sites when initiating a romantic relationship

A first common theme that emerged from the focus group conversations was that social networking sites were already vividly used before the start of a romantic relationship as a source of information about the potential partner and to attract the other person's interest. When experiencing romantic interest in someone else and before starting a relationship, respondents indicated that they looked through the profile pages on social networking sites to find out more about the significant other. Pictures were deemed to be an important source of information. According to the

respondents, they enabled them to assess the character and personality of the other person. As one male respondent (F7R1) puts it, by looking at a girls' pictures "you can more or less feel her character and such". Girls indicated that boys who had posted pictures of their muscles were generally considered to be vain. According to them, it signaled that they just had too much self-confidence. Moreover, some girls indicated that their judgment about boys was negatively affected if their profile pages contained pictures of cars, video games, movies or female models. This was considered to be a sign of immaturity.

F1R3: [...] how he is depicted in the picture says a lot about his personality.

F1R4: Yes

F1R3: Like for instance, if he is depicted half-naked, then you know he has a huge ego.

F1R4: Yes

F1M: mmm

F1R4: Or if he stands like this ... [sits with a curved back]

F1R3: Then you know that he won't start a conversation with you.

(Focus group 3, girls)

Other sources of information that participants used to assess a (potential) romantic partner were status updates, the list of friends, and the interests that were visible on one's profile page. With regards to status updates, male as well as female respondents indicated that posting too many status updates about routine or frivolous activities could negatively affect their judgment of their love interest. According to one girl (FG10R1) it exemplified "that they want to share too much". Furthermore, the use of deviant spelling in status updates was also considered to negatively affect respondents' appraisal of their potential love interests. Boys as well as girls indicated that pictures of previous romantic relationships negatively affected their evaluation of the other person. The respondents expected that this information should have been removed from the profile page after a break-up to show that he is ready for a new relationship.

F2R2: But also if you see that someone had a whole lot of relationships. Like every two months another girl. That's like ... I think that's a let-down ... I do think so ... Then he doesn't seem serious about it ... Like a player.

(Focus group 2, girls)

Next to finding out more information about another person, social networking sites were used by respondents to subtly express romantic interest in an effort to get noticed by the other person. The most common way to get noticed, was to actively like or comment on pictures and status updates of the person of interest. They did so through 'favorites' on Twitter and 'likes' on Facebook or Instagram. Several focus group members indicated that a particular sign of romantic interest for another person consists of going through one's Facebook history and liking old pictures. This should signal that they went through the effort of scrolling through the entire Facebook history and was a testament to one's particular interest in that person's life.

F7R3: Out of nowhere everything gets liked. For example from a few years ago or three years ago or something like that. Then I do the same back.

(Focus group 7, boys)

F3R4: That's very funny. You notice for example when somebody takes a particular interest in you when someone, for example, likes your post from, for example, 2012.

(Focus group 3, girls)

As a next step in the effort of getting noticed, respondents indicated that they would send private messages through the social networking sites. They noted that the lack of face-to-face contact with the other person made it easier to initiate a conversation and to express one's feelings. Respondents described that initiating a conversation through Facebook was less intimidating than starting a real-life conversation and made them feel more at ease. However, alongside discussing the benefits of online flirting a majority of respondents also indicated that there was a risk that the other person would take screenshots from these conversations, "which are forwarded and forwarded and forwarded. 'You can't tell anyone, you know' and then ... [implies that the receiver will tell others, although he or she promised not to do so]" (FG9R2; girl). Multiple respondents across several focus groups suggested that a special way to spice up a flirtatious conversation on social media consisted of using emoticons like smileys, hearts or kisses, as exemplified by the following conversation:

F4R4: Yes, if you don't use it [emoticons] then you're so dry.

F4R3: Otherwise you're so dry.

F4M: Yes yes

F4R3: Short and dry. Because you can make such a boring conversation fun with just emoticons.

(Focus group 4, boys)

### 3.2. The use of social networking sites during a romantic relationship

Facebook offers users the option to show others that they are currently in a relationship. A majority of respondents did not consider it to be important that couples use this function to show others that they are in a relationship. They considered this to be a more private matter that "not everyone had to know about". Only after being in a relationship for a few months or even a few years, some respondents would consider posting their relationship status on Facebook. One often voiced concern was that posting this information on their profile page could evoke jealousy among their friends. By not providing their relationship status, the respondents could avoid jealousy or hurtful comments of others. Furthermore, some respondents wanted to keep their relationships secret for others like their friends, parents, and other family members. The following conversation illustrates the adolescents' main concerns:

FG6R6: Actually, nobody posts on Facebook that they're in a relationship.

FG6M: No one does that?

FG6R1: Usually not, I think.

FG6R6: Usually not, no ...

FG6M: And why not?

FG6R6: Because they want to keep it a secret.

FG6R3: And because no one has to know this.

FG6R1: Yeah

FG6R3: They do not want that others know it.

FG6M: Uhu

FG6R1: Or they are scared that their parents will find out about it. [Laughter]

Although respondents did not consider being Facebook Official an important marker to their friends that they were in a relationship, they did find it important to give a signal to others that they were “unavailable”. A more subtle way to show others that they were involved in a romantic relationship and were not interested in flirtatious messages of others, was by checking in together via Facebook or apps like Swarm or by posting a few pictures on social media platforms from which others could derive that they belonged together:

FG1R6: And pictures of them will come.

FG1M: Yeah?

FG1R6: Yes yes, and then you will see like “okay they are together”. And if they do not post it on their status like “yes, I am in a relationship or something like that” then you will see pictures in which they are kissing and such. And then you know “they are in a relationship”.

(Focus group 1, girls)

Respondents identified the potential of social networking sites to elicit jealousy as one of the most important negative effects of digital media on their romantic relationships. In all focus group conversations, respondents indicated that they became jealous when their romantic partner liked or commented on pictures and status updates of other boys or girls. Especially, if those comments included compliments on one's appearance.

FG3M: So if your boyfriend likes another girl's picture.

FG3R3: [nods yes]

FG3R6: That is mostly with comments. Less with likes.

FG3M: With comments too?

FG3R4: You can ‘like’ quickly. For example, if they are good friends, that doesn't really matter. But if there are comments with hearts or kisses, you need to consider “is this really normal?”.

(Focus group 3, girls)

A particular instance in which, according to some respondents, jealousy was evoked, was through the now removed feature of Snapchat to see one's top 3 best friends. If a romantic partner was not part of this list but an ex-partner or other boys or girls were, this could lead to jealousy and conflict. Moreover, respondents indicated that they would feel jealous if other boys or girls commented on pictures or status updates of their boyfriend or girlfriend. This would cause their romantic partner to ask questions about who this person was. Likewise, respondents would feel jealous, when their boyfriend or girlfriend appeared in a picture together with respectively another girl or boy, as evidenced by the following conversation:

FG7R1: For example ... I will just give you a simple example. So, I am, for example, together with a girl.

FG7M: Uhu

FG7R1: And a girl takes a picture with another boy and puts it on Facebook.

FG7M: Uhu

FG7R1: Even if I were used to this, I wouldn't really like it.

FG7M: Yeah

FG7R1: And then I can say: “who is this?” And if she is offended by this, a fight can ensue because of such a small issue.

(Focus group 7, boys)

Another way in which social networking sites sometimes cause negative experiences for adolescent romantic relationships is situated in the ability to exercise control over one's romantic partner by means of digital technology. Three major forms of control emerged from our analysis: (1) sharing passwords in order to have the ability to control each other's social networking site accounts or logging into the partners' account without their permission, (2) controlling whether messages sent through Facebook or apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp to the romantic partner are read, and (3) controlling the friends' list on one's profile pages. Across focus group conversations, adolescents considered it to be common practice that they would read their partners' e-mail messages or private communication on social networking sites. Some respondents would gain access to their social media account and read through their online communication when their boyfriends or girlfriends forgot to logout or when they had left their smartphone unattended. Others indicated that they would ask their partner for their passwords in order to get access to their social media and e-mail accounts. They noted that they just wanted to have their login information as a symbol of mutual trust and love, although they did not intend to use it, as the following conversation among some boys exemplifies:

FG7R2: It is just .... If you exchange passwords, then you can see information. I mean, what she does and she can also see what you do. But ...

FG7M: But ... Yeah ...

FG7R2: But sometimes as well ... What I've experienced, I had exchanged passwords with my girlfriend. The one I told you about earlier. And I tried to provoke jealousy. So I posted something on her account and she said something like that. So I logged on to my account and I told her: “Why did you do this? Blablabla”. She said that she didn't do this and that's when I knew that I could trust her, you know?”

FG7M: Yeah Yeah

FG7R2: And then I could trust her better. That's when I told her: “No more passwords. I don't want that anymore.” And then we moved on, you know?

FG7M: Yeah Yeah

FG7R2: I believed that exchanging passwords could strengthen our trust. I believe so.

FG7M: Yeah?

FG7R2: Because when the trust was established, I told her: “you don't have to do this anymore”.

FG7M: Uhu

FG7R1: That's kind of a personal matter, actually, because like FG7R2 says, if you trust that person, then you don't need a password, actually.

FG7R4: Yeah

FG7R1: But, for example in my case ... I would definitely ask for it.

FG7R2: At the start, for sure.

FG7M: Password?

FG7R1: Yeah, I will never access it, if I never have doubts or something. But I would definitely ask. First, she would trust me to give it and that's how I can see if she has any secrets. But I wouldn't really control her and access her account. I wouldn't actually do that.

(Focus group 7, boys)

The respondents further mentioned that the ability of Facebook or apps like Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp to show when a message has been read was often used to control a romantic partner to control whether they had read the messages. It would cause conflict or mistrust when the symbol would indicate that their partner had received the message but when he or she would not answer promptly. As one girl (FG9R2) indicated: "It is rude actually. Yeah, if they say something to you in the real world, you would answer as well right?" A majority of respondents indicated that they considered it important that their other friends answered their messages promptly once they were received. Respondents indicated that within their romantic relationships they would feel "neglected" by their partner and this would subsequently cause conflict and mistrust.

FG4R2: Or someone sends you messages and you can see whether they have read it.

FG4M: Uhu

FG4R2: And they have read it but they won't answer. So it can be ...

FG4R3: Oh yes

FG4R2: That could cause mistrust.  
(Focus group 4, boys)

A last major form of control was situated in the ability to access the Friend Lists on one's profile pages. Respondents would indicate that they themselves had experienced or that they had observed that some adolescents would go through their romantic partners' Friend Lists and would ask questions about their friends. Some respondents had observed that some of their friends would even go as far as to ask their romantic partners to remove some contacts from their Friend Lists:

FG5R2: It is just a friend of mine. Well, I didn't ... And every time she has a boyfriend, the first thing she does is to look at the friends of her boyfriend, you know.

FG5M. Yeah?

FG5R2: And if there are pretty girls or so, then she asks: "Why do you have them as a friend?" And then they have known each other for years and so. That is really so ridiculous.

FG5M: Yeah Yeah So ...

FG5R2: You know, she gets jealous or angry, because he is friends with a beautiful girl.

FG5M: On Facebook?

FG5R5: Yes

FG5R2: Yes

(Focus group 5, girls)

### 3.3. Relationship dissolution and social networking sites

A final theme that emerged from our conversations was the role of social networking sites in romantic relationship dissolution. After the end of a romantic relationship respondents generally reacted by halting all forms of Facebook interaction, such as liking or commenting on each other's posts. Subsequently, some indicated that they would unfriend or block their ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends from their profile pages. Others indicated that they would remain friends, as they considered unfriending each other on Facebook childish. A majority of respondents told that they would delete all or almost all pictures of them as a couple as to avoid the impression that they were still involved in a romantic relationship. After a break-up some adolescents expressed their hurt feelings through status updates on their profile pages. A few respondents noted that they had observed that some adolescents would even post mean-spirited status updates or pictures in which they would insult their ex-partners, as one girl (FG3R3) observed: "He posted a status with her name and then he wrote: 'She is a whore. She did this and this with me'". A lot more common were observations of adolescents who witnessed that their Facebook friends would post emotional status updates or memes with emotional quotes on Facebook and Instagram, which referred to the end of the romantic relationship and that expressed their hurt feelings:

FG1R4: Girls are more dramatic than boys, I think. They say stuff like: "oh I thought you would love me forever, and now we have broken up ..."

(Focus group 1, girls)

FG4M: Emotional status updates. Could you explain that?

FG4R4: Just sentimental ... Like 'I thought you were different ...'

FG4R3: 'I thought you were different', 'the life I'm in right now is just a black hole' or something like that.

FG4M: Yes Yes. And what else?

FG4R3: 'And the lowest point, that is you', or something along those lines.

(Focus group 4, boys)

Another commonly observed behavior was the attempt to make the ex-partner jealous by posting pictures with either boys or girls. These pictures should suggest to the ex-partner that they had already begun dating someone else. Another strategy consisted of posting pictures to their profile page suggesting that they were happy and were not bothered by the end of their relationship. One respondent explained that some young people do this in order to "show that person: 'look at me, I am not hurt at all'" (FG3R4).

## 4. Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore adolescents' observations of the role of social networking sites within adolescents' romantic relationships. The study revealed several similarities to the observations among adults but also came across some notable differences between adolescents' and adults' romantic experiences, which we will discuss in the remainder of this article, along with suggestions for future research and practice.

Next to signaling romantic interest by liking one's status updates and pictures, social networking sites were used by adolescents for the purpose of relational information seeking. In line with

previous qualitative findings among adults, pictures were regarded as an important source of information to evaluate their crushes and potential romantic partners (Fox et al., 2013). As Fox et al. (2013) noted, this finding is in line with the warranting principle (Walther & Parks, 2002), which asserts that individuals are more inclined to believe cues that are difficult to forge by the subject to whom it refers (e.g., pictures). Compared to other cues on one's profile page such as preferences or status updates, pictures might be considered by internet users as difficult to forge (Fox et al., 2013). The warranting value of pictures has for example been supported in the context of online auctions. Researchers found that eBay-listings with seller-made pictures and a good reputation score were more likely to have higher sales prices as compared to listings that used stock photos. This might be explained by the fact that seller-made pictures reveal more about the item's quality and condition as compared to stock images and consequently have more warranting power (i.e., are believed by individuals to more accurately reflect that the claims made about the product are true) (Van Der Heide, Johnson, & Vang, 2013). As qualitative research suggests that the warranting principle plays a role in relational information seeking, future studies could more deeply explore how the warranting theory can explain the role of Facebook pictures in the context of relational information seeking as compared to other cues on social networking sites.

Respondents found it easier to initiate conversations with their crushes and romantic partners as compared to starting a face-to-face conversation. This finding is in line with previous research among adults (Fox et al., 2013). The fact that starting a conversation through Facebook was found to be less intimidating and more relaxed than offline conversations reflects the online disinhibition effect, which offers an explanation for why internet users feel usually less restrained to talk about their emotions in an online context (Suler, 2004). Especially the fact that users do not have to worry about how they look or sound when they send a message and the asynchronous nature of the communication, which enables them to think about their response, might contribute to the perception that it is easier to have flirtatious communication through Facebook as compared to face-to-face settings (Suler, 2004). The lack of emotional feedback in computer-mediated-communication comes, however, with the risk that messages might be misinterpreted by the receiver (Heirman & Walrave, 2008). In an effort to make sure that the right emotions are transferred and in order to lessen the tension between the formality of written speech and colloquial conversation, our respondents indicated that they would insert emoticons such as smiles or kisses into their conversations to make them less formal (Derks, Bos, & Grumbkow, 2007; Vandekerckhove, 2007). Moreover, it has also been argued that emoticons could be a digital substitute for flirtatious non-verbal gestures such as glances or eyebrow flashes (Whitty, 2003). Future research could focus on whether the lack of direct feedback during flirtatious communication could lead to situations in which adolescents overshare personal information, which could lead to regret afterwards. Moreover, it might be useful to investigate whether and when online flirting might lead to transgressive behavior, when one party, due to the lack of feedback, crosses certain boundaries. Furthermore, research could focus on which types of personalities benefit the most from using digital media to initiate first romantic contacts and from flirting online.

In contrast to previous research among adults which found that being Facebook Official was regarded as an important step in their romantic relationship (Fox et al., 2014, 2013), adolescents in our focus group study did not share this sentiment. This difference could be explained by the more transient nature of adolescent romantic relationships as compared to those of adults.

Consequently, adolescents might be more hesitant to formally announce their romantic relationship status on Facebook. Furthermore, respondents feared that formally announcing their relationship status on Facebook would be met by social disapproval from peers as well as family members. Previous research found that this was also a prime motivation to keep the existence of a romantic relationship secret from others in offline contexts (Lehmiller, 2009). As an alternative to formally announcing their relationship status, adolescents were found to signal their romantic relationship status through more casual acts, such as posting joint photographs. This suggests that, like for adults, teenagers view visual representations of their romantic relationships as an important marker of their bond (Saslow et al., 2013). The use of pictures to signal the change in relationship status rather through making it Facebook Official, was in part motivated by the desire to keep the relationship a secret from parents and family members. Future research could focus on whether this practice might be a form of "social steganography" (Boyd, 2014, p. 65), the procedure of including subtle cues in public messages that are easy to understand for peers but might be differently interpreted by adults who are not aware of the context. The contrast between the perceived importance of being Facebook Official among adult and adolescent samples, indicates that more comparative research is warranted into the impact of digital media on romantic relationships among different age groups.

Consistent with other studies (Fox et al., 2013; Rueda et al., 2014), respondents indicated that feelings of jealousy were elicited when others would comment on their romantic partners' status updates or photos or when their boyfriend or girlfriend appeared with someone else in a picture. One often mentioned way of coping with jealousy and relational insecurity was asking the romantic partner's password. The adolescents in our sample regarded it as a mutual token of love and trust but also as a kind of insurance policy against unfaithfulness. This extends the accounts of US adolescents, who also regarded password sharing and social networking site monitoring as a common practice within their romantic relationships (Lucero et al., 2014; Rueda et al., 2014). Given the fact that romantic break-ups are common during adolescence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009), the exchange of passwords among romantic partners might be particularly risky as information from private accounts could get published online by a revengeful ex-romantic partner. Moreover, sharing passwords with friends has been linked with cyberbullying victimization (Aricak et al., 2008; Meter & Bauman, 2015; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Vandebosch, 2015; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Next to controlling one's partner logging in to their private accounts, respondents also mentioned controlling the Friends Lists of their romantic partners and the checking whether they had read and would respond to their messages. The fact that social networking site use within the context of a romantic relationship is found to elicit jealousy is troubling given the fact that research found that feelings of jealousy were often a precursor of dating violence perpetration and abusive behaviors in an offline context (Adams & Williams, 2014; Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014; Fenton & Rathus, 2010). Future research could investigate whether and how feelings of jealousy could contribute to online forms of control and abuse and whether they might be linked with offline dating violence.

A romantic break-up mostly resulted in removing the ex-partner from one's profile and the removal of joint pictures and messages, which might be beneficial in light of personal growth after a failed romantic relationship (Marshall, 2012). As discussed in the literature review, previous research has identified several ways in which social networking site users cope with a romantic break-

up (LeFebvre et al., 2015; Lyndon et al., 2011). Our respondents most often observed behaviors that fall under Lyndon et al.'s (2011) category of “covert provocation” such as posting emotional status updates or trying to make the ex-partner jealous by posting images and status updates. Future research could focus on how these provocations might psychologically and emotionally affect both their creator as well as the ex-partner, who is the victim of these actions. Furthermore, future studies could focus on which digital coping strategies might be effective in reducing the emotional harm after a romantic break-up.

#### 4.1. Implications for practice

The findings in our study hold implications for teachers and health practitioners and could be discussed with teenagers during media literacy classes or relationship, and sexual education classes. First, adolescents in our sample had distinct opinions on what was off-putting and interesting on the profile pages of their romantic partners. Especially girls considered certain content, such as pictures of cars, video games or female models to be a sign of immaturity. Girls as well as boys held negative opinions towards profile pages that contained information about previous romantic relationships. It has been suggested that media literacy practitioners could use this information, while discussing the importance of online reputation management. Adolescents could be asked what they find attractive or off-putting on the profile pages of their crushes, as an introduction to the importance of a good online reputation and an illustration of how online self-disclosure might affect future personal relationships (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2014).

Second, feelings of jealousy that were caused by social networking site use, were common among adolescents in our sample. Among our respondents, jealousy was discussed along with controlling behaviors such as sharing one's password and controlling the romantic partner's social networking profiles. Practitioners could discuss how social networking sites could invoke jealousy in romantic relationships and could discuss strategies on how to deal with these feelings in the light of social media use.

Third, sharing passwords with a romantic partner was found to be perceived as a sign of trust. During relationship education classes and media literacy classes, the importance of not sharing one's password with others could be discussed within the context of the long term risks that are associated with this behavior such as the distribution of private information after a romantic break-up or cyberbullying victimization (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Moreover, strategies for trusting one's partner without having to rely on social networking sites monitoring could be discussed.

Last, whilst our study focuses on how teenagers perceive the use technology within romantic relationships, it has been noted by Zweig, Dank, Yahner, and Lachman (2013) that adolescents' favorite digital applications could be used as a part of awareness campaigns about digital transgressive behavior within romantic relationships and that social media sites could be employed to report abusive behaviors by others.

#### 4.2. Limitations

Although our study has provided some useful insights in the way in which social networking sites influence the romantic relationships of adolescents, it also comes with certain limitations that should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, our study draws on the use of a convenience sample of focus groups, which might limit the generalizability of the results. Alternative research methods could be used to confirm our

findings among a representative sample. Second, it is possible that our sample suffered from self-selection. Although we did not explicitly inform students about the nature of our study, we told them that the focus group interviews would be about their media use and romantic relationships. It might be that individuals with a particular interest in either one of those topics were more likely to attend our focus groups than others. Third, we used data from individual participants without involving their romantic partner. Dyadic interview research with both members of the couple could yield a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the partners. Fourth, although the moderators took measures to reassure the participants that their responses would remain confidential, it is possible that the responses suffered from social desirability bias. Future research could build on the findings of this study by employing other qualitative research techniques such as interviews or open-ended written questionnaires. Fifth, this study did not assess the respondents' sexual orientation. Future studies could investigate the perceptions of sexual minority youth with regards to dating and the use of digital media. Finally, our exploratory study focused on the role of social networking sites in the dating experiences of adolescents. Future research could broaden this scope by investigating to which extent adolescents are using online dating sites and online dating apps such as Tinder.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide new insights in adolescents' perceptions of the role of social networking sites within adolescents' romantic experiences. Although there were similarities between previous studies among adults, our study was able to find some differences. Most notably, adolescents' did not regard being Facebook Official as an important marker of their romantic relationship as compared to previous findings among adults. Furthermore, our study extends previous studies that found that social networking sites are a source of jealousy within romantic relationships. These feelings were discussed by adolescents along with the fact that they would engage in control behavior such as profile monitoring, sharing passwords and checking whether messages had been read. Our study enables practitioners and educators to identify the unique role of social networking sites within adolescents' romantic experiences, which could guide the development of prevention and intervention efforts.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Appendix

### Opening question:

Which social media (websites or apps) do you use to communicate with friends?

### Introductory question:

Social networking sites have profoundly impacted every aspect of our lives, also with regards to romantic relationships. Could you provide an example of how social networking sites are used within romantic relationships?

### Key questions:

- If you romantically like someone and you add this person on Facebook, to which information will you pay attention? What types of content do you find most important?
- How would someone signal on Facebook that he/she romantically likes the other person?
- Do you consider it to be important for people of your age to signal that they are in a romantic relationship on Facebook? Why (not)?
- Are there aspects that annoy you when you observe see how couples use social networking sites such as Facebook?
- Did you hear about negative things that couples have experienced by using social networking sites within their romantic relationship?
- Social networking sites have the potential to elicit jealousy. In which ways could this happen?
- How is a romantic break-up reflected in the way in which a couple uses social networking sites?

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