Exploring romantic relationships on social networking sites using the self-expansion model

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ABSTRACT

Several hypotheses were derived from the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986) concerning romantic relationships and social networking sites (SNSs). A sample of 276 participants responded to questions about their relationship history and SNS use and a subset of those (N = 149) responded to additional questions about a current romantic partner. Results suggest that past self-expansion leaves a residue shown by more interests. This finding was moderated by overall Facebook use. Particular Facebook behaviors such as tagging one’s partner in status updates, appearing together in photographs, and listing similar interests on profiles are indicative of self-expansion processes typically found in romantic relationships.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are an increasingly important part of people's lives. They allow people to maintain useful relationships at long distances where they may have lost touch before (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Some turn to SNSs when they are stressed (Toma & Hancock, 2011). Some research suggests the social support people receive on SNSs is helpful in reducing their levels of stress (Wright, 2012).

Additionally, SNS use can have an impact on people's romantic relationships. Some research has documented the negative impact SNS use can have on romantic relationships by spurring jealousy (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009), especially among those with anxious attachment styles (Marshall, Bejanyan, Castro, & Lee, 2012). SNSs have also been associated with positive relationship outcomes. Hales (2012) found that many people report that they appreciate CMC as an additional means to communicate with their relationship partner. McGlynn (2006) found that in particular, quality interactions on SNSs can have a positive impact on overall relationship quality. Moreover, traditional relationship theories can provide scholars with tools to examine SNS interactions among relationship partners. For example, uncertainty reduction theory has been used to examine SNS use in relationship formation (Andon, 2006; Stern & Taylor, 2007). However, many studies examining romantic relationships and SNSs have neglected relationship theory in their research (e.g. Hales, 2012; Mod, 2010; Moorman & Bowker, 2011; Tokunga, 2011).

This lacuna is important for several reasons. First, relationship theories can help SNS research make novel predictions about SNS use that will expand our understanding of this rapidly expanding communication tool. It will also help with theory testing as these theories are applied in a new context to discover potential boundary conditions and places to expand these theories. SNSs also provide a unique window into relationship behavior at all stages as SNSs preserve what Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) call “behavioral residue” (p. 204) of current and past romantic relationships.

In order to begin filling that lacuna, the current study will explore the romantic relationships in a particular SNS context, Facebook, using the self-expansion model (SEM; Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004). This paper will review the SEM and use it to derive unique hypotheses about Facebook and romantic relationships. This model is an ideal fit for Facebook as it explores how the self changes as a result of romantic relationship development.

Facebook is a SNS that encompasses self presentation, relational development and maintenance, and networking opportunities for its users. Facebook users first develop their own profiles, including self-descriptions of where they have been, worked, etc., as well as what their likes and interests are. They may also upload photos onto their profile. The status update feature allows users to post information about a variety of topics ranging from what they think or feel, or comment on current events, or include a link to an interesting news article or video clip. They may also add other users as ‘friends’, and these friends comprise the user’s Facebook network. Once two users are connected (as ‘friends’), they have a variety...
of ways to interact with each other on the site. They may send each other messages publicly (as wall posts) or privately (in private messages), engage in synchronous chatting, and "tag" each other in their status updates and longer blog-like notes. So long as they use the site, they may add or delete information in their profile, photos they have uploaded, as well as who is in their friend network. It is likely that the effects of becoming closer to another user on the site would be revealed in a user's adding/editing of their profile. Given the site's inherent self-presentation and relational maintenance capabilities, it is an ideal medium to explore how the self expands as one gets closer to others listed on the site.

1.1. Self-expansion model

Aron and Aron (1986, 1996) developed the self-expansion model (SEM) to explain how initiating and developing close relationships causes relationship partners to expand their (sense of) self. They posited that people are motivated to expand themselves (interests, resources, opportunities, etc.) and that developing close relationships helps one expand their sense of self in two ways. First, during the course of the relationship, people may adopt and include aspects of their partner into their own sense of self. One's partner may have identity characteristics, friends, and interests that they adopt during the course of the relationship (Agniew, Loving, Le, & Goodfriend, 2004). The adoption of interests can transcend into actual inclusion into the sense of self once the interest is pursued not for relational purposes but instead for individual goals and enjoyment. For example if one's partner is into recreational running they may begin to engage in recreational running to spend time with as well as impress their partner. Over time, one may decide to run without their partner because they enjoy running independently of their partner. In this way, running has become an interest included into the person's sense of self: it began as an interest they pursued for relational purposes (to gain partner's liking) but remains an interest one does for their enjoyment, health benefits, etc. In addition to fitness activities, people may also learn about new bands, television shows, and books from their partner. After initial discovery, one may seek out these new forms of entertainment for their own enjoyment. The seeking out of new forms of entertainment independent of their partner suggests that one has expanded their repertoire of interests (i.e., they have expanded their sense of self).

In addition to expanding upon and incorporating new interests into their sense of self, people may simply enjoy the expanded set of social resources they gain access to through their relationship. For example, their partner's professional contacts may help them get a job. Their partner's friends may become incorporated into one's own friend network during ongoing interaction with the partner's friends. This is especially true if one sees members of their partner's friend network as their own friends independent of their partner. Aron and Aron (1986) suggested that people are motivated to create and maintain interpersonal relationships in order to expand themselves both in terms of their interests and their social resources.

1.2. Predictions regarding past romantic relationships and Facebook

One of the core ideas of the SEM is that romantic relationships allow one to expand the self by learning about and gaining access to new interests and resources (Aron & Aron, 1986). A seminal study in this area simply asked participants on a weekly basis "Who are you today?" (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995, p. 1105) and gave them 3 m to write down words or phrases they felt answered the question. In this longitudinal study, the researchers found that participants listed more items after falling in love during the previous week. They interpreted these results to indicate that falling in love gives expanded the self.

It is plausible that this process is shown by the addition of interests on a person's Facebook profile page as they develop and/or accumulate romantic relationships. Facebook has two primary functions, self-presenting on one's profile page and enabling site users/networks (i.e., "friends") to communicate with each other privately and publicly via the site. When developing a personal profile to represent themselves on Facebook, users are asked to list interests in a number of domains. As a person gets closer to a relational partner and begins to share interests with that person and expand their sense of self, they may add those accrued interests to their Facebook profile. Referring to our earlier example, the man who runs initially to impress his partner but continues running for his own enjoyment and health may add running to the list of "Sports" and/or "Activities" displayed on his profile page. The editing of his Facebook profile page thus becomes "behavioral residue" of his self-expansion stemming from his romantic relationship. This is consistent with SEM's contention that the self expands as one gets closer with other(s). In addition to activities, he may also add new television shows, bands, etc. that he has grown to enjoy alongside and independent of his partner on his Facebook profile. It is hypothesized then that the more romantic relationships someone has had, the greater the number of interests will be listed in their profile.

The SEM traditionally focuses on self-expansion that occurs during the beginning stages and development of a close relationship. This paper proposes that self-expansion processes that occur during a relationship can remain after that relationship has ended, and that self-expansion residue should be evident on one's Facebook profile. One previous study has looked at breakups using the SEM. Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, and Kunak (2006) conducted three studies examining how relationship termination affects one's self-concept. They found that people tend to feel as though a part of themselves had been lost after relationship termination (studies 1 and 2). They go onto argue that this finding does not necessarily indicate that relationship termination will cause a reduction in self-concepts implying that those interests and resources that are incorporated into one's sense of self during a relationship are unlikely to be lost after a relationship has ended. They did not explore that possibility, however. The current study posits that not only are these additional aspects of the self unlikely to be lost, they will build up over time such that people with more previous romantic relationships will have a more expanded sense of self.

In addition to a more expanded sense of self, having been in romantic relationships with a wider variety of people may also increase the size of one's social network. Although the end of romantic relationships often coincides with less network overlap (Parks, 2007), it is possible that not all newly formed friendships will be severed. As mentioned previously, one is likely to gain access to a partner's social network (family, friends, work contacts, etc.) during the course of their relationship (Agniew et al., 2004; Aron & Aron, 1986). Given the rise of SNSs like Facebook, it seems likely that expansion of one's sense of self would include becoming "friends" with some of their partner's contacts (i.e., "friends", the term appointed to all of one's contacts in their network on the site) on the site. Just as an increased number of past romantic relationships are predicted to be associated with an increased number of interests, it is predicted that the same positive relationship would be found with number of Facebook friends.

1.3. Predictions regarding current romantic relationships and Facebook

According to Aron and Aron (1986, 1996), increases in romantic intimacy are associated with an increased likelihood of including the other in the self. Theoretically, one comes to associate their partner's identity and experiences with one's own. Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) describe the inclusion of other in self scale
(IOSS) as a means of measuring the extent to which self-expansion processes have produced this overlap. Their scale validation work demonstrated that the scale possessed good test–retest reliability and convergent and discriminant validity. It also predicted whether or not the couple was still together 3 months after measurement. Agnew et al. (2004) discussed a variety of studies demonstrating the validity of the scale. The IOSS represents the extent to which self-expansion processes have occurred such that people feel that their self-concept is intertwined with their partners’. As the scale represents an individual’s perception of their current state of overlap, it will therefore be predicted to be associated with aspects of individuals’ and their partners’ profiles as well as Facebook behaviors associated with the relationship.

First, as the foregoing analysis of self-expansion indicated, part of the way that people expand themselves in a romantic relationship is through including aspects of their partner’s identity into their own (Aron & Aron, 1986). There are, therefore, several areas in which IOSS scores are predicted to be associated with Facebook behavior. First, self-expansion is associated with sharing interests (Agnew et al., 2004). As it was predicted that past relationships would leave someone with an expanded sense of self, the current relationship should reflect that overlap. As people begin to see their own identity merging with that of their partner, this process is predicted to be expressed by the interests they list on their Facebook page. Although similarity has long been known to be associated with attraction (Byrne, 1961), as the relationship becomes closer, that similarity is predicted to increase as additional aspects of their partners are integrated into people’s identities.

In addition to sharing interests, gaining a shared social network is part of including the other in the self. Agnew et al. (2004) found that perceived overlap in social areas was one of the strongest predictors of general IOSS scores. The more people start to see themselves as a single unit, the more likely they are to share friends. Social network overlap is often associated with relational development (Parks, 2007). On Facebook in particular, IOSS scores are predicted to be associated with how many FB friends the relationship partners have in common. As a couple’s social networks merge, they are likely to invite their partner’s Facebook friends to be their Facebook friends. Therefore it is predicted that IOSS scores will be associated with a greater overlap between the characteristics people list in the various interests listed in their Facebook profiles. For example, as IOSS scores increase, people would be increasingly likely to list the same bands or movies amongst their favorites.

In addition to sharing interests, if a couple’s Facebook interests are becoming increasingly interconnected, one might expect the couple to appear in photos together. SNs such as Facebook enable people to post pictures of themselves and to indicate who is in that photo by tagging it with those in the photo’s names. If people are increasingly becoming a single unit, it is likely that they would appear together at social events where people are taking photos. This study will therefore also test the hypothesis that IOSS scores will be positively associated with the proportion of the most recent five photographs posted on Facebook in which participants and their partners are both tagged.

In addition to profiles, IOSS scores may also be associated with Facebook behavior. Research on friendships found that a collection of Facebook communication with friends was associated with relational closeness with those friends (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Moorman and Bowker (2011) also looked at general Facebook use but did not find a relationship with romantic relationship quality. Rather than looking at a broad collection of behaviors, this study will look at a particular behavior suggested by applying the SEM to Facebook. Tagging one’s partner in status updates and notes may be an expression of self-other overlap. When Facebook users tag their partner’s in a status update or a note, they are indicating that they believe that information is relevant to their partner. As people’s identity begins to overlap with their partners’ they are predicted to be increasingly likely to believe that their communication will be relevant to their partner. It is predicted then, that IOSS scores will be positively related to frequency of tagging one’s partner in status updates and notes.

1.4. Facebook use as a moderator

People vary in their use of SNs such that some log on multiple times a day, update their interests and status regularly whereas some may only logon less frequently. This fact may affect the above proposed relationships between different Facebook behaviors and relationship outcomes. If people do not invest much time into their Facebook profile they might not bother to list many or even any interests. As a result, they are less likely to add interests they perceive during the initiation, development, and termination of their romantic relationships. In addition, infrequent users may not actively add new Facebook friends when they meet new people through their partner. If one’s Facebook use is minimal, it is less likely to reflect if someone has experienced self-expansion that has occurred during and after their relationship(s). As their Facebook interests and friends vary little with their actual interests and actual number of friends, they will be unlikely to covary with the number of relationships they have had. Therefore the relationships concerning self-expansion are hypothesized to be much smaller among infrequent Facebook users than heavier users.

A similar hypothesis is proposed for the IOSS and Facebook hypotheses. If people do not use Facebook regularly they are unlikely to tag anyone in status updates, post photos, add new friends, or update their interests due to including their partner in their self. People who rarely use Facebook will rarely perform these behaviors regardless of the extent to which they are close to their partners. Essentially, people cannot express including their partner in their self on Facebook if they are not using Facebook very often. Therefore, the hypotheses concerning IOSS are predicted to be moderated by Facebook use such that the hypothesized relationships are expected to be insubstantial among infrequent Facebook users and substantial among more frequent users.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A sample of 276 participants (167 female, 106 male, 1 “mixed”, 1 “alien”, M age = 24.76, SD age = 9.76) was recruited by students in an undergraduate research methods class. They asked members of their social network to participate in the study. The students in the class received course credit for recruiting participants. The participants were not compensated. Of these, 201 were college students, 75 were not, and one did not respond.

Several participants did not have a romantic partner who was also a Facebook member. There were 149 participants whose romantic partner was also on Facebook (92 female, 55 male, two did not indicate a sex, M age = 24.69, SD age = 9.91). Of these, 109 were college students, 39 were not, and one did not respond to this question. Those who did not have a romantic partner who used Facebook were not used in any hypotheses concerning their current romantic partner. When asked the sex of their romantic partners 56 indicated female, 92 indicated male, and one chose the “other” option but did not describe her or his partner’s sex.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited via email and Facebook posts. They were informed that they must be a Facebook user to participate. They were provided a link to an online consent form. If they clicked
their consent, the survey appeared. Questions about the participants’ own Facebook use appeared first. Then they were asked questions about their partner’s Facebook use. The inclusion of other in the self scale (IOSS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) followed. Demographic questions were last.

2.3. Measures

Before any variables were examined, the distribution of the scores was examined. If any participants provided a response that fell more than two standard deviations from the mean score, their score was replaced with the score that was two standard deviations from the mean in order to reduce the leverage of outliers.

First, participants were asked, “How regularly do you use Facebook?” The response options included 1-rarely, 2-occasionally, 3-sometimes, 4-often, and 5-constantly (M = 3.86, SD = 1.09). The scores were negatively skewed as only 5.8% chose rarely, 6.5% chose occasionally, 12.7% chose sometimes, 45.7% chose often, and 29% chose constantly.

Participants were next asked how many “serious romantic relationships” they have had. Two participants chose not to answer. Of those who responded the mean was 2.3 (SD = 1.95) and scores ranged from 0 to 14.

Next, participants were asked how many Facebook friends they had. The average number of friends was 730.15 friends (SD = 503). Despite the reduction of extreme scores, the distribution was positively skewed. The number of friends ranged from 0 to 2424.

The participants were then asked how many interests they had listed in each of the categories provided on Facebook profiles. These were totaled to create a total number of Facebook interests score (M = 41.79, SD = 47.74). Scores were positively skewed and ranged from 0 to 212.

Next, participants were asked to open their romantic partner’s profile in a separate window. They were then asked how many of the last five photos in which they were tagged their partner was also tagged. Scores ranged from 0 to 5 after any scores above five were replaced with a score of five (M = 1.78, SD = 1.92). Participants were next asked how many mutual friends they have with their partner on Facebook. The average was 115.09 (SD = 121.29) and scores ranged from 0 to 504.

Two different questions were asked to uncover how many mutual interests they have with their partner. First they were asked to count up the total of how many of their partner’s interests listed in the various categories provided were the same as their own. Scores ranged from 0 to 134 (M = 8.77, SD = 19.59). Scores were skewed positively. Given that this score may represent most or only a few of the participant’s total interests, the number of mutual interests was divided by the participants’ total number of interests to obtain a proportion of interest overlap. Any scores above 1 were changed to 1 as theoretically, the participants’ partners could not list more mutual interests than were already listed on the participants’ profiles. The scores ranged from 0 to 1 (M = .17, SD = .23). Additionally, participants were asked to estimate the proportion of interest overlap using a 6-point scale ranging from “1-none” to “6-all” (M = 2.94, SD = 1.23).

Next, participants were asked, “How often do you tag your partner or friend when you post a status update or a note on Facebook?” Response options ranged from 1-rarely to 5-constantly (M = 2.09, SD = 1.15).

Next was the IOSS (Aron et al., 1992). The IOSS consists of seven pairs of circles, each representing the participant and their partner. The overlap of the paired circles ranges from not at all (1) to almost completely (7) and participants indicate which of the pictures best represents their relationship (see Fig. 1). Previous research has found the scale is both reliable and valid (Aron et al., 1992). The distribution of scores were somewhat negatively skewed (M = 5.22, SD = 1.51).

3. Results

3.1. Analysis plan

The hypotheses will be tested by testing a series of regression equations. The hypothesized moderation by Facebook use will be tested by entering standardized product terms and conducting simple slopes analysis. The correlation matrix for all continuous variables is displayed in Table 1.

3.2. Self-expansion residue

It was hypothesized that past romantic relationships would leave a self-expansion residue such that the greater the number of past relationships, the more interests the participants would list on Facebook and also the more Facebook friends they would have. Self-expansion residue was analyzed by regressing the total number of Facebook interests onto Facebook use, the number of past relationships, and their product. Facebook use (β = .20, p < .01), number of past relationships (β = .23, p < .01), and their interaction (β = .19, p = .01) were statistically significant predictors. Simple slopes analysis revealed at the slope for the effect of number of relationships on number of interests at one standard deviation below the mean of Facebook use was smaller (b = .11) than at one standard deviation above (b = .35). As the slope was more positive when Facebook use was heavier, this finding was consistent with the hypotheses that the number of past relationships would be

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1 This data trimming process reduced the scores of six participants for the number of Facebook friends, three for the number of past romantic relationships, seven for total counted interests, 11 for number of mutual friends, and three for the counted number of mutual interests. Including the original scores did not have any effect on the results except for the regression equation predicting number of interests. Although the predictors were all in the same direction, none were statistically significant.
positively related to number of total interests and that this relationship would be stronger when FB use was higher. Additionally, the relationship between number of relationships and interests may simply be a spurious relationship caused by age as a third variable. The regression equation was recalculated with age as an additional predictor but the effect on the other relationships was trivial.

On the other hand, regression analysis revealed that the number of past romantic relationships was not substantially related to the number of Facebook friends regardless of use of the site. This finding was not consistent with hypotheses.

### 3.3. Inclusion of other in the self

It was predicted that among heavy Facebook users, IOSS scores would be positively associated with the number of mutual friends a couple shares, the number of interests they share, number of recent photos with both members of the couple tagged, and how often the participant tags his or her partner in status updates and notes. The number of mutual friends the partners had was regressed onto IOSS scores, Facebook use, and their product. None were substantial or statistically significant predictors. This finding was not consistent with hypotheses.

Next, the proportion of counted number of shared interests was regressed onto the same two predictors and interaction. None were substantial or statistically significant predictors. Yet, when the participants’ general estimate of interest overlap was regressed onto the IOSS, Facebook use, and the interaction, both IOSS scores (β = .24, p < .01) and Facebook use (β = .22, p = .01) were both statistically significant predictors. The interaction was not (β = .11, p = .15). The positive relationship between IOSS scores and general interest overlap was consistent with the hypothesis although the data were not consistent with the hypothesis of moderation by Facebook use.

It was also hypothesized that IOSS scores would be positively associated with the number of photos both members of the couple had been tagged in and that this relationship would be stronger among more frequent users of Facebook. Again, IOSS scores, Facebook use, and the interaction were entered into a regression equation as predictors of the number of photos. IOSS scores were a substantial and statistically significant predictor of the number of recent photos in which both partners were tagged (β = .20, p = .02) whereas Facebook use (β = .13, p = .12) and the interaction (β = .07, p = .44) were not. The positive relationship between IOSS scores and being tagged together was consistent with the hypothesis although the lack of moderation by Facebook use of this relationship was not.

Next, the hypothesis that IOSS scores would be positively associated with tagging the romantic partner in status updates and notes and that this relationship would be stronger among more frequent Facebook users. Tagging the partner was regressed onto IOSS scores, Facebook use, and the interaction. Only IOS scores were a statistically significant predictor (β = .34, p < .01). Facebook use was nearly statistically significant (β = .15, p = .06) but the interaction was not (β = .10, p = .22). The positive association between IOSS scores and tagging the partner were consistent with hypotheses but the lack of moderation by Facebook use was not.

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1. Interpretation of results

Relationships facilitate self-expansion by the inclusion of a romantic partner’s (or friend’s) interests and resources into the self. Using the SEM, hypotheses were developed to determine if self-expansion residue would be displayed on the SNS Facebook. Consistent with the SEM, the number of past romantic relationships was positively associated with the number of interests listed in a participant’s Facebook profile for heavy users of the site. For light or infrequent users, their report of the number of relationships they have been in was weakly associated with the number of interests listed on their profile. Also, the number of Facebook friends was not related to the number of past relationships for either type of Facebook user.

In addition, the IOSS was not related to the number of mutual friends or the counted proportion of shared interests. However,
the IOSS scale was related to being tagged together in photos, their estimate of general interest overlap, and frequency of tagging their partners in statuses and notes. These findings are consistent with the prediction that IOSS would be expressed on Facebook. Finally, it was found that Facebook use did not moderate the relationships among IOSS scores and the Facebook variables.

There are a few potential reasons why heavy users exhibited more self-expansion residue than light users. First, heavy users may be more knowledgeable about how to manage and edit profile content than light users (Sun & Wu, 2011). One is better able to edit profile content if she or he knows how to edit profile content. In addition, the more people are using the site, the more opportunities they have for being active on the site, which possibly explains why heavy users exhibited more self-expansion residue than light users. However, if heavy users are better at editing site content, one might ask why they do not simply delete content from their profile once a relationship has passed? This explanation would be plausible if there was no relationship between interests and the number of past relationships the users had, but that is not what the data indicated. Our results suggest that interests survive relationship termination because they are incorporated into a user’s self thus extending the SEM to examine the long term effects of self-expansion.

The number of friends in a user’s network was not related to the user’s number of past romantic relationships. This finding may have occurred because once people have broken up with a romantic partner, their desire to distance themselves from that partner means discontinuing interactions with friends they had acquired through their relationship. It is common that after a break up, people wish to distance themselves from their former romantic partners as much as possible (Chung et al., 2003). However, given the taboo against de-friending Facebook contacts (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012), it appears that self-expansion from romantic relationships does not necessarily lead to maintaining additional Facebook friends.

The fact that the number of former partners was associated with the number of interests but not total Facebook friendships might also be related to the lack of differentiating between different kinds of friends on the site. As mentioned previously, users can add others as friends whenever they visit the site (via a request and acceptance invitation procedure). Once friended, users can distinguish between friends by listing them as a close friend, an acquaintance, or as a restricted friend (http://www.facebook.com/help/friends/lists). In addition, people can activate privacy settings that restrict the common friend’s access to their profile and/or restrict communication opportunities with the common friend. To better gauge if relationships with common friends survive the termination of a relationship, future research should consider adding measures that capture extent and frequency of interaction one has with friends they have in common with their former partner.

4.2. Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study that need to be addressed. This article used a convenience sample of primarily, though not exclusively university students which has negative implications. Facebook began as a university-oriented SNS, as such, it was designed to attract younger users and maintain them as members as they mature. However, since Facebook has become accessible to people of all ages and educational backgrounds, it is worthwhile to conduct more studies with more diverse samples. In addition, this data set did not allow for the analysis of additional relationship variables (e.g., length and strength of relationship) that may further illuminate how and when self expansion occurs and how it is captured on Facebook. Seeing as how site efficacy may determine whether or not people edit content on their profile (and thus be displayed as self-expansion residue on Facebook) future studies may want to include internet and SNS efficacy measures as well.

Future research should also explore how additional aspects of relationships (1) increase the likelihood of expansion and (2) how this expansion leaves behavioral residue on Facebook. There were no measures assessing at what point in a relationship that the interests were added. If an interest is added early on in the relationship, it may have been intended as a means of attracting a potential romantic partner. On the other hand, if an interest is added further on in the relationship (e.g., while spending time with the partner), one may actually become engaged with interest, thus increasing the likelihood that the interest will be incorporated into one’s self-concept. Future research would profit from assessing this issue.

Additionally, this study was entirely cross-sectional. SEM posits that self-expansion occurs as relationships develop, with more expansion occurring as relationship partners grow closer. The current study was able to look for evidence of the hypothesized results of these processes that are thought to have occurred previously to the participants completing the survey but it cannot establish causal directions for the uncovered relationships. Future work is required to determine if the self-expansion occurred as posited by the model. The current results are suggestive but not at all definitive evidence of the SEM.

5. Conclusion

Traditional relationship theories can be used to explain how SNSs become reflections of long-standing human identity and relational processes. The SEM offers a new way to understand how a user’s edits to their profiles on the site reflect changes in their self-concept as a result of becoming close to and growing apart from their romantic partners. Facebook is not just a medium for communication but also an electronic record of how ourselves and relationships evolve.

References


