

INTERPRETATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS THAT
UNDERMINE COMMITMENT IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Jessica Drum

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Louis Medvene, Committee Chair

Anthony DiLollo, Committee Member

Rhonda Lewis, Committee Member

Barbara Chaparro, Committee Member

Darwin Dorr, Committee Member

Accepted for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Ron Matson, Dean

Accepted for the Graduate School

Dennis Livesay, Dean

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ABSTRACT

Interdependence theory is often used to understand how positive and negative experiences within romantic relationships impact a partner's behavior. The theory postulates that as one romantic partner witnesses the other partner behaving in prosocial ways there is an increase in trust, dependence, and commitment, a cycle known as mutual cyclic growth. The current study was interested in the opposite direction of this cycle, mutual cyclic decline, where behaviors that are interpreted as anti-relationship in nature would undermine trust, commitment, and dependence. Specifically, the current study was interested in behaviors enacted through social media. One hundred seventeen students who were in a romantic relationship participated in an online survey and 11 female participants completed a follow-up interview. Forty-eight percent (n=56) of survey participants who used social media indicated their partner had enacted at least one social media behavior that negatively impacted their relationship. Forty participants experienced a negative behavior by their partner via Facebook, 21 participants via SnapChat, 15 participants via Instagram, and 29 participants via Twitter. Directed content analysis was used to analyze the interpretations of behaviors for both the interviews and the survey's open ended questions. Codes for interpreting behaviors included the categories of lack of loyalty/fidelity, lack of supportiveness, lack of openness, lack of similarity display, and lack of personal connection. The first four categories were previously discovered by Baxter (1986) and Sheets (1997) when studying face-to-face communication behaviors, and the final category was newly discovered. In addition, a common theme mentioned by participants was that part of the reason behaviors were perceived as negative was due to the virtual presence of others witnessing the behavior. This study provided further evidence that behaviors enacted through social media can be interpreted as undermining relationships across multiple forms of social media.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Interdependence theory provides a comprehensive account of relationship formation and dissolution. The majority of the interdependence theory research has been focused on interactions which increase commitment in relationships. In addition, the majority of interdependence theory research has focused on face to face (FtF) interactions. This theoretical framework was used in the current study to explore communication behaviors on social media which are interpreted in ways that weaken commitment in relationships. First, interdependence theorists' account of how commitment to relationships develop and interactions that may weaken commitment is reviewed. Then, additional perspectives outside of interdependence theory about behaviors that weaken commitment in FtF and online contexts are discussed. The current study of relationship communication behaviors on social media is intended to contribute to the literature by expanding our understanding of the types of communication behaviors which can be interpreted in ways that undermine romantic relationships. Relatively little research on romantic relationships has focused on behaviors enacted through social media or on negative relationship behaviors. It is important to study communication behaviors via social media because we know that relationships are being maintained through online mediums (Tong & Walther, 2011). Face-to face behavior has been found to predict online behavior and online behavior has been found to predict face-to-face behavior; the two mediums of communication seem to function as feedback loops for each other (Wright & Li, 2011). These findings suggest that the behaviors enacted through online mediums such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. do impact romantic relationships and are important to study.

Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory explains the relations between individuals in terms outcome interdependence, meaning behavior in any given situation is influenced by how the other person behaves. The theory assumes behavior is influenced by the positive or negative outcomes that each person expects as a function of the behavioral choices each person makes (Rusbult et. al, 2004). Using a two-by-two outcome matrix whereby each person has a choice of two possible strategies, four possible outcomes can be expected. The two most commonly posed behavioral alternatives are selfish and “other-oriented” behaviors intended to promote the other’s welfare. A process of motivational transformation can occur whereby each person is perceived as behaving in more “other oriented” ways, even though they start out with self-interested motivations. Commitment to the relationship can be created through a process of motivational transformation (Rusbult et. al, 2004).

Interdependence theory assumes that people are initially primarily self-interested, however partners can change to become more other-interested through the transformation of motivation process. The transformation of motivation allows people to act based on the broader context of a situation rather than immediate “gut” reactions (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). This process allows an individual to stop acting solely on self-interest, with a focus on immediate positive or negative outcomes, and instead act based on longer term outcomes and motivations which take into account their partner’s interest, and the future of the relationship. For example, in a romantic relationship, in specific situations, a partner may “self-sacrifice” certain interests in order to please the other partner if they think it will be beneficial long-term to the relationship. In these situations, a partner is not only reacting to a specific “given” situation, but also future situations – i.e. the “effective” situation”. This also can be seen when one person forgives and

moves forward after their other partner has done something that is hurtful and where the partner has benefitted at the actor's expense.

Mutual Cyclic Growth

The current study will focus on the process of transformation of motivation, but in a negative direction rather than in a positive direction. The positive transformation of motivation process is enacted through a process called mutual cyclic growth. Mutual cyclic growth is theorized to be the result of a series of reciprocal prosocial relationship interactions. That is, behaviors that are perceived as being “other-oriented,” rather than selfish. As one partner interprets the other partner as behaving in pro-social ways there is an increase in three factors: trust, dependence, and commitment. So, as one person acts in a prosocial way, the other's trust increases, as well as the other's comfort with dependence, causing their commitment to increase. The reciprocal increase in each of the factors of the cycle causes an increase in prosocial behavior. In other words, perceptions of prosocial behavior in a relationship can lead both partners to increase their sense of commitment, trust, and dependence on one another (Weiselquist, 1999; Coleman, 2007). This cycle can be viewed in Figure 1. (Coleman, 2007).

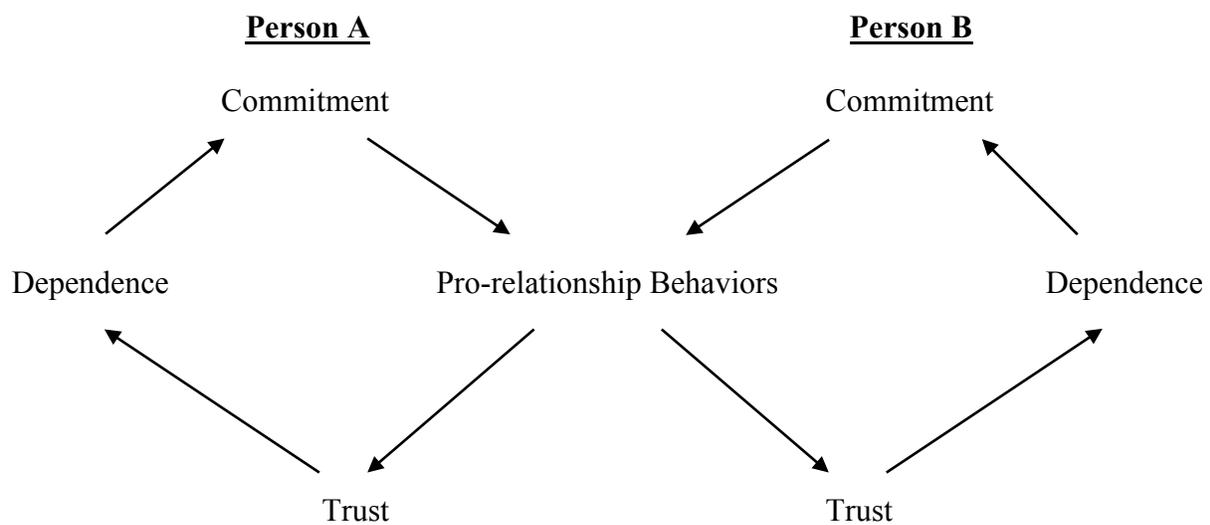


Figure 1: *Pro-relationship Behaviors and Mutual Cyclic Growth*

While the mutual cyclic growth model explains the development of relationships through prosocial behaviors, the model is not necessarily uni-directional. If prosocial behavior increases trust commitment and comfort with dependence, then behaviors interpreted as selfish might be expected to undermine these factors and thus lead to a weakening of relationship commitment and perhaps to the dissolution of the relationship. This model can be seen in Figure 2.

Specifically, the current study seeks to identify communication behaviors which are interpreted in ways that can have a negative impact on commitment, comfort with dependence, and trust. For the purposes of continuing with the language of interdependence theory, we will call such behaviors “anti-relationship behaviors.”

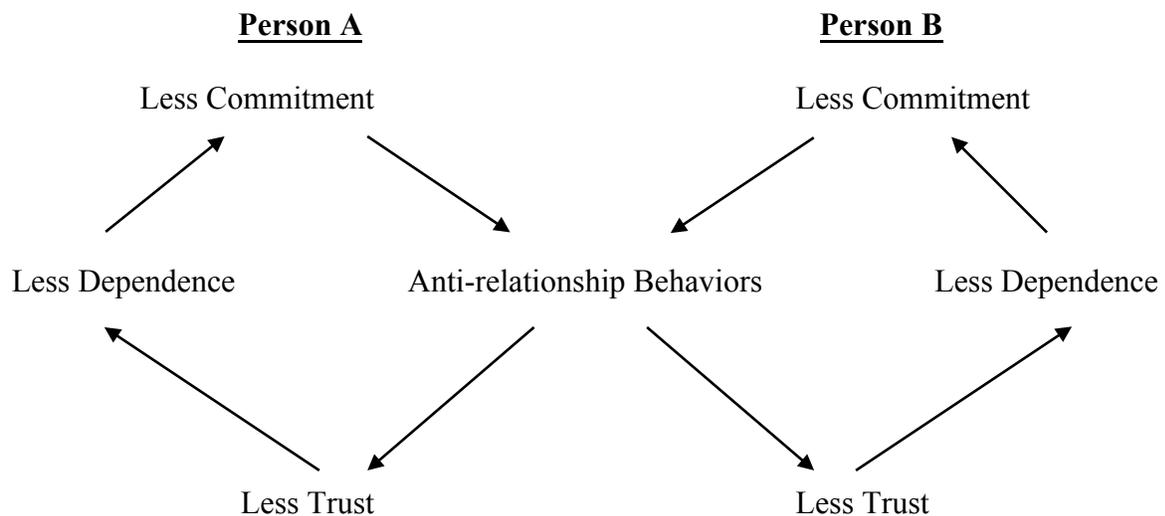


Figure 2: *Anti-relationship behaviors and Mutual Cyclic Decline*

Anti-Relationship behaviors

In this study anti-relationship behaviors are communication behaviors which are interpreted in ways that lead a partner to decrease their trust, commitment or comfort with dependence on the relationship. Such behaviors are those that are interpreted as being selfish or that are not consistent with expected prosocial behaviors. These behaviors may be interpreted as

hurtful to their partner and therefore undermine the partner's commitment to the relationship. Behaviors can only be anti-relationship in nature if they are interpreted in that way. Some interdependence theorists have explored the dissolution of relationships as a consequence of sexual infidelity and a partner's failure to accommodate – i.e. “to turn the other cheek”. In the context of interdependence theory, accommodation describes a person's willingness to inhibit tendencies to react destructively within the relationship in response to a partner's hurtful behavior (such as committing an equal infidelity) and instead react constructively (such as by forgiving) (Rusbult & Verette, 1991). Rusbult and Verette (1991) determined that willingness to accommodate is dependent on the amount of interdependence in a relationship as developed through the transformation of motivation process. Furthermore, Rusbult and Verette (1991) found that commitment level and the three components of dependence (satisfaction, investments, and alternatives) were related to willingness to accommodate. For example, accommodation is more likely to happen when satisfaction and investment are high and there are few attractive alternatives.

While the current study is not the first study to look at the negative aspects of relationships, the previous literature on willingness to accommodate focuses on only one type of hurtful behavior, infidelity (Rusbult & Verette, 1991). In addition, the previously mentioned study provides a fairly obvious example of something that may undermine commitment to a relationship, however behaviors enacted on social media are likely to be more open to interpretation. These interpretations come from attributions made about the behavior based on current schemas that a person has. These schemas include patterns of behavior based on an actor anticipating their partner's behaviors. For example, when one's partner likes a picture of another person of the opposite sex, the actor might interpret this behavior as a form of flirtation, or

giving the outside party attention. The expectations that people have about their partner's behaviors are based on both previous behaviors within the relationship, norms of behavior, and previous experiences that the person has had related to the current situation (Baldwin, 1992; Baldwin 1995). While infidelity may be a clear violation of commitment, it is suggested that there are other communication behaviors that may also be selfish in nature or are not consistent with partner's expectations, which could be interpreted in ways which negatively impact commitment to the relationship as well. The current dissertation uses interdependence theory as the framework for cataloging behaviors enacted through social media that are interpreted as undermining commitment to the relationship. More on social media communication will be discussed later.

Other Conceptual Frameworks for Studying Relationships

Because the majority of interdependence theory has focused on prosocial behaviors, it was important to look at other research to explore behaviors that undermine relationships. While studying face-to-face interactions, Baxter (1986) identified eight specific "rules" of a relationship when assessing break-ups of 157 college students. Violation of these rules could be thought of as anti-relationship behaviors in the conceptual framework proposed here. The first rule is autonomy, meaning that each partner accepts that the other has a life outside of the relationship. A violation of this rule would be not allowing your partner to behave in an autonomous way. The second rule is similarity display, meaning that partners express similar beliefs. A violation of this rule would be if one expressed dissimilar beliefs from their partner. The third rule is supportiveness, meaning that one enhances their partner's self-worth. A violation of this rule would be communicating in some way that would negatively impact their partner's self-worth. The fourth rule is openness, meaning being authentic and open with one's partner. A violation of

this rule would be not being open with one's partner. The fifth rule is loyalty/fidelity, meaning staying loyal and faithful to a partner. A violation of this rule would be infidelity or lack of loyalty to one's partner. The sixth rule is shared time, meaning spending time with one's partner. The violation of this rule would be not spending time with one's partner. The seventh rule is equity, meaning rewards from the relationship maintain some sense of proportionality between partners in terms of what each partner contributes and how each person is benefitted. A violation of this rule would be if one partner perceives themselves as contributing more to the relationship, but receiving fewer rewards than the other. Finally, the last rule is romance, meaning a mysterious "magic" in the presence of the partner is maintained. A violation of this rule would be a lack of romance with one's partner. For purposes of this dissertation the violation of these eight rules Baxter identified will be considered "anti-relationship" behaviors or behaviors that are likely to undermine commitment to the relationship. While Baxter terms these as "rules," the current study will refer to these as "expectations" in order to maintain consistency with the cognitive orientation of interdependence theory. When these expectations are not met, trust may be undermined, causing a weakening of commitment to the relationship.

In another study by Feeney (2005), the same violations of relationship expectations were assessed through a survey of 224 college students. Participants were asked to describe a hurtful event and describe what relationship expectation was violated. Through qualitative analysis, the researchers found the most frequent expectation violations were lack of supportiveness, lack of loyalty/fidelity, lack of openness, and lack of trust. Trust was previously added to Baxter's (1986) relationship expectations and referred to situations where the participant felt the partner did not instill trust in participant. Again, for purposes of this dissertation, violations of these

rules will be considered anti-relationship behavior and will be expected to undermine the mutual cyclical growth process.

Another way that anti-relationship behaviors have been categorized is by jealousy evoking situations. During a series of studies, Sheets and colleagues (1997) were able to catalog four specific face-to-face jealousy evocation tactics and develop a 24-item questionnaire from interviews with undergraduate students. Jealousy evoking tactics are behaviors that one would commit that would cause their partner to be jealous. The first type of behavior is “partner shows interest in another,” and includes behaviors such as flirting with someone else. The second type of behavior is “another shows interest in your partner,” and includes behaviors such as one person telling their partner that another person asked him/her out. The third type of behavior is “prior relationships,” and includes a partner referencing a past relationship. The final type of behavior is “ambiguous scenes,” and includes scenarios where - the motives behind a partner’s behavior are unclear, such as being dressed up or going to another guy/girls house. Such behaviors could elicit feelings of jealousy from partners and potentially hurt the relationship.

In summary, Baxter’s research identified eight categories of “rule violations” or expectations, and Sheets’ identified additional categories of jealousy evoking behaviors that could be interpreted as anti-relationship. In addition, Sheets’ jealousy evoking behaviors could be thought of as examples of behaviors that would violate Baxter’s loyalty/fidelity rule. With this being said, behaviors that could be interpreted as anti-relationship might be expected to play a part in the reversal of mutual cyclic growth: i.e. behaviors which evoke jealousy may undermine a partner’s trust, commitment, and comfort with dependence to the relationship.

The current study further explored behaviors that were interpreted as anti-relationship by surveying and interviewing college students about their experiences of communicating via social

media to partners in “committed” romantic relationships. The goal was to explore whether the categories of rule violations identified by Baxter and Sheets were sufficient for coding the interpretations of potentially negative social media communication behaviors in the present study, or whether new categories would be discovered.

Computer Mediated Communication and Social Media

While the previously mentioned literature has been based on face-to face (FtF) communication, the current study explored the extent to which this research applied to understanding how romantic relationships can be undermined via computer-mediated-communication (CMC), and most specifically, via social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, etc. Facebook is the most widely used social networking website and is a large part of many people’s lives today. As of June 2015, Facebook reported having 968 million daily active users and 1.49 billion monthly active users (newsroom.fb.com/company-info). Pew Research Center reported that in 2014, 71 percent of online American adults use Facebook and 87 percent of adults ages 18-29 use Facebook (Duggan et. al, 2015). Other popular social media websites include Instagram, Twitter and SnapChat. According to Pew Research Center (2014), 26 percent of online adults and 55 percent of online adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use Instagram. In addition, 23 percent of online adults and 32 percent of online adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use Twitter (Duggan et. Al, 2015). While statistics of Snapchat users have not specifically been reported, Pew Research Center did report that 14 percent of online adults and 41 percent of online adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are using “auto-delete apps” such as SnapChat (Duggan, 2015). “Auto-delete apps” are defined as smartphone apps that automatically delete texts and/or pictures. While emerging adults are using multiple types of social media, the majority of social media research has focused on Facebook.

A plethora of research involving Facebook's impact on relationships has focused on the negative interpretations of communications on Facebook. For example, one study by Muise and colleagues (2009) assessed Facebook jealousy of 308 undergraduate students. They found that time spent on Facebook was related to Facebook jealousy. While the study did not determine whether time spent on Facebook was causing jealousy, or if jealousy was causing more time spent on Facebook, the authors presumed that it may be both scenarios. Because Facebook is such an open-ended environment with many opportunities for interpretation of vague interactions, it may foster a culture of jealousy. It could be the case that more time spent on Facebook could increase the number of vague interactions one must interpret, leading to more jealousy. However, it could also be that as one sees more jealousy evoking interactions via Facebook, he/she may increase the amount of time spent looking for such interactions.

Further evidence of Facebook communication behaviors that undermine comfort with dependence, trust, and commitment can be seen in Drouin and colleagues (2014) study of 148 undergraduate students. Based on the previously mentioned Facebook jealousy scale by Muise et al. (2009), Drouin and colleagues (2014) considered one type of anti-relationship Facebook behavior: accepting and making friend requests with an attractive alternative while being in a self-identified "committed relationship." Their results indicated that those participants who were making and accepting friend requests with attractive alternative partners were less committed to their current partners. While this type of behavior assumes that the lack of commitment is causing the behavior, the current study was interested in how a partner interprets such behaviors and how these interpretations impact that partner's commitment to the relationship. For example, how does one's partner adding or accepting friend requests with attractive alternatives impact the other person's commitment to the relationship (or trust; or comfort with dependence)? If such

behavior was interpreted as flirting, it might be thought of as a violation of Baxter's loyalty/fidelity rule.

While the previously mentioned research focused on Facebook jealousy and reactions to Facebook behavior it did not determine which behaviors were interpreted as jealousy evoking. The Facebook Jealousy scale (Muisse et al., 2009) did focus on some behaviors that may be interpreted as undermining commitment, however the current study does not assume this is an exhaustive list. The behaviors included in the Facebook jealousy scale included accepting and sending friend requests to attractive alternatives, posting pictures on Facebook with an arm around a member of the opposite sex, posting pictures with ex partners, and posting sexually provocative pictures. The current study will develop a more complete list of what can be interpreted as an anti-relationship social media behavior. It is expected that behaviors interpreted as other rule violations besides loyalty/fidelity will be identified.

A few studies have assessed behaviors interpreted as anti-relationship on Facebook, however, some were not specific to romantic relationships. Tokunaga (2011) asked participants about behaviors that were interpreted as hurtful. These behaviors took place within a variety of relationship, including friends, family, significant others, acquaintances, and strangers via Facebook. By questioning 197 undergraduate students Tokunaga determined ten events that could be interpreted as hurtful to the relationship. These included a denied or ignored friend request, deletion of a message or identification tag, ranking disparities on Top Friends applications, personal surveillance of profile, ignored question or remark, disparaging remarks posted on message boards, gossip about the participant was discovered on third party's message board, restricted access to friend's page, removed as a friend, and not allowed to join a group/created undesirable group about participant. Furthermore, in a follow up study, Tokunaga

(2014) found that the publicness of the behavior impacted whether the Facebook behavior impacted the relationship expectations.

One limitation to Tokunaga's work is that it did not differentiate between relationship types. The transformation of motivation process of Interdependence theory indicates that due to the nature of a long-term relationship, costs will be perceived differently in the context of a romantic relationship versus in the context of a friendship (Rusbult et al, 2004). With that in mind, the current study sought to identify communication behaviors enacted within romantic relationships which could be interpreted as undermining commitment, trust and comfort with dependence.

In addition to Tokunaga's study, Clayton (2013, 2014) conducted a series of studies about behaviors interpreted as anti-relationship in nature that were enacted through social media. In the first study, Facebook-related conflict in romantic relationships was assessed (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). Of interest for the current study was the Facebook-related Conflict Scale, which asked participants about the amount of conflict they experienced with their partner related to various Facebook activities. In addition, to the Facebook-related conflict scale, Clayton adapted the scale for Twitter usage in a second study (Clayton, 2014). While these studies provided further evidence that social media behaviors can undermine commitment, the scales they used did not create an exhaustive list of social media behaviors that could be interpreted as undermining commitment. In addition, the studies did not capture how people were interpreting the behaviors. It was hoped that the current study would lead to a more complete list of social media behaviors that can be interpreted as anti-relationship in nature, as well as how they are interpreted, i.e. what - the behavior means to the participants.

While the interpretations and attributes of social media behaviors have been studied very little, one study, by Hand (2013), involved 223 undergraduate's interpretations of their partners' social media usage. This study, instead of looking at specific behaviors, looked at interpretations of usage as a whole. Results indicated that there was a negative relationship between perceived partner usage and intimacy, meaning the more the participant perceived their partner as using social media, the less intimacy they experienced. In addition, there was no relationship between participants' social media usage and intimacy. While previous research suggested that increases in social media usage lead to negative relationship outcomes and social media-related conflict (Clayton et al., 2013; Clayton, 2014), Hand's study provided an alternative interpretation. Participants in Hand's study may have been making attributions about what their partner might be doing while using social media, such as being disloyal or unsupportive. Because their own usage was not related to any negative factors, it can be assumed they did not feel their own behaviors were "anti-relationship" in nature (i.e. disloyal or unsupportive). However, schemas and attributions were likely activated because of the ambiguity of what their partner could potentially be doing while they were using social media. It is likely that similar attributions and schemas will be relevant to the current study about specific social media behaviors that are interpreted as undermining commitment to the relationship.

Anti-relationship Social Media Behaviors and Interdependence Theory

Communication behaviors on social media can have a real impact on relationships. Tong and Walther (2011) reviewed the literature around computer-mediated communication and relational maintenance behaviors. They reported that computer-mediated communication can play a large part in the maintenance of romantic relationships. For example, in romantic relationships where one partner is deployed, email is the most frequent form of communication.

At the time of this review, the most frequent use of Facebook for college students was keeping in touch with old friends or people from high school, however Facebook was also being used to maintain romantic relationships (Tong & Walther, 2011). As previously discussed, much research has assessed the development and maintenance of relationships, however little research has been carried out regarding behaviors which undermine relationships.

The current study assessed the interpretations of communication behaviors, enacted on social media, which negatively impacted mutual cyclic growth.

Conclusion

The current study identified social media behaviors which were interpreted in ways which undermined commitment, trust, and/or comfort with dependence, within committed romantic relationships. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed

R₁: What communication behaviors on social media are interpreted as undermining commitment, trust and/or comfort with dependence?

R₂: Can a set of categories be developed to code these interpretations of behaviors?

R₃: To what extent will the categories that are developed overlap with previously developed categories, (i.e. categories developed by Baxter and Sheets) and to what extent will they involve the creation of new categories?

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Overview of the Method

Data were collected over a two-month period of time, from March to April 2016, using WSU's SONA system. The SONA system is an online website that allows psychology students to earn points by participating in studies through the psychology department. These points are then used for credit in their enrolled psychology classes. The first step in the study was a survey, completed by 117 students. At the end of the survey, students were invited to participate in a personal interview. Twenty-seven were invited to participate and 11 actually participated. The interviews were then conducted by the author.

Participant Characteristics

Online Survey: WSU students who participated in the survey, the first phase of the study, were primarily female and Caucasian. Inclusion in the study required that participants be in a committed relationship at the time, meaning that they had to have been romantically involved exclusively for at least 1 month and that they currently used social media. In addition, participants could have been dating or married, as long as they were exclusive to one partner. Demographics of participants from the survey can be found in Table 1. In order to determine if the proportions of gender and ethnicity in the current sample were the same as those proportions in the WSU population, two chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were performed. WSU's student population racial breakdown includes 65% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, 7% International, 7% Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% African American, 2% Multiracial, and 4% unknown. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that there was a significant difference in the proportion of students' ethnicity identified in the current sample as compared to the proportion the ethnicity of the

university population, $\chi^2 (5, n=117) = 30.28, p < .01$, indicating that Asians were over-represented in the current sample (17% vs 7%). WSU's student population breakdown by gender is 46% male and 54% female. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that there was a significant difference in the proportion of male and female students identified in the current sample as compared to the proportion of males and females of the university population $\chi^2 (2, n=117) = 115.22, p < .01$, indicating that females were over-represented in the current sample (80% vs 54%).

Table 1. *Survey Demographics*

Variable	%, <i>n</i>
Gender	
Male	19.7% (23)
Female	79.5% (93)
Other	.9% (1)
Age mean (SD)	22 (3.97)
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	60.7% (71)
Asian	17.1% (20)
African American	6% (7)
Hispanic/Latino	7.7% (9)
Multiracial	5.1% (6)
Other	3.4% (4)

Personal Interviews: A sub-set of WSU students who responded to the survey were invited to participate in a 20-minute personal interview, the second phase of the study, to provide a deeper understanding about how the participants' cognitive and emotional reactions to their partners' social media behaviors could negatively impact romantic relationships. Those that participated in the interviews were entered into a drawing for two gift baskets worth \$50 each. Inclusion criteria for the personal interview were (a) students' willingness to participate in a follow-up interview, (b) indicating identification as female, and (c) indicating they experienced at least one social media behavior as negatively impacting their relationship. Only female

students were recruited because the researcher who conducted the interviews was female and it was expected that males would not feel comfortable opening up about such sensitive topics during an interview. A total of 27 participants met the criterion for the interview and a total of 11 interviews were conducted, indicating a 40 percent response rate. The goal of the current study was to complete 20 interviews, however it was difficult to elicit a response from participants when requesting to schedule the interviews. It was assumed that because the interviews were conducted toward the end of the Spring 2016 semester, students may have been too busy to take time to participate. The demographics for the interview participants can be found in Table 2. Again, there was a high number of Asians (18%) in the interview subsample, indicating a good representation of the survey sample.

Table 2. *Interview Demographics*

Variable	Percent (n)
Gender	
Male	0% (0)
Female	100% (11)
Other	0% (0)
Age*	m=23, SD=5.44
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	63.6% (7)
Asian	18.2% (2)
African American	9.1% (1)
Hispanic/Latino	0% (0)
Multiracial	9.1% (1)
Other	0% (0)
Current Enrollment Status	
Freshman	27.3% (3)
Sophomore	27.3% (3)
Junior	0% (0)
Senior	45.5% (5)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	90.9% (10)
Bisexual	9.1% (1)
Marital Status	
Married	27.3% (3)
Unmarried	72.7% (8)
Partner's Gender	
Male	100% (11)
Female	0% (0)
Other	0% (0)
Partner's Ethnicity	
Caucasian	54.5% (6)
Asian	18.2% (2)
African American	0% (0)
Hispanic/Latino	18.2% (2)
Multiracial	9.1% (1)
Other	0% (0)
Partner's Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	100% (11)
Bisexual	0% (0)

Ethical Considerations and Procedures

Approval for both parts of the study was given by the University's Institutional Review Committee prior to the beginning of the study. All survey participants gave their consent online and interview participants also signed a second consent form at the time of the interview which explained part two of the study. All interview participants agreed to being audio recorded.

Measures and Data Collection

Online Survey: The survey asked participants about their partner's social media behavior (see Appendix A for copy of the survey). It began by asking what types of social media both their partner and they themselves used. Specifically, there were four types of social media asked about: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and SnapChat. Then, depending on the type of social media they indicated, participants were asked about potential behaviors their partner may have enacted that negatively impacted their relationship. If participants indicated that their partner used Facebook, they were asked about nine specific Facebook behaviors. For example, "*Has your partner ever posted a picture on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?*" If participants indicated that their partner used Twitter, they were asked about seven specific Twitter behaviors. For example, "*Has your partner ever 'favorited someone's tweet that negatively impacted your relationship?*" If participants indicated that their partner used Instagram, they were asked about five specific behaviors. For example, "*Has your partner ever posted a picture on Instagram that negatively impacted your relationship?*" If participants indicated that their partner used Snapchat, they were asked about three specific behaviors. For example, "*Has your partner ever sent a picture on Snapchat that negatively impacted your relationship?*" The behaviors asked for each type of social media were meant to be an exhaustive list of specific behaviors that can be enacted through each site.

Within each group of questions that participants answered (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, etc.) about behaviors that negatively impacted their relationship, participants were asked to elaborate on one of the behaviors that they had indicated their partner enacted. For example, if a participant indicated that their partner had “updated his/her status on Facebook that negatively impacted their relationship,” then they had the opportunity to then elaborate on this behavior and what it was about the behavior that influenced their feelings about the relationship. This allowed for open-ended responses.

Personal Interviews: The interviews were structured so that participants were first asked to think about their current relationship and their cognitive and emotional reactions to their partners’ social media behaviors that negatively impacted their current romantic relationship (see Appendix B for copy of the interview script). Specifically, participants were asked if their partner had ever done anything via social media that undermined their trust, commitment, or comfort with dependence. In addition, the participants were given printed definitions of trust, commitment, and comfort with dependence. Then, participants were asked about each relationship they may have been in prior to their current relationship that lasted at least one month. This process continued sequentially going back a total of two years. No participants however identified more than one relationship. At the conclusion of the interview participants were asked basic demographic questions including gender, age, current enrollment status, ethnicity, length of current relationship, sexual orientation of the participant and their partner, and the gender of their partner.

Data Analysis and Ensuring Rigor

A directed content analysis technique (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to develop themes of cognitive interpretations and emotional reactions to their partner’s social media

communication behaviors. These themes were based on the work of Baxter (1986) and Sheets (1997) in addition there was openness to new themes that emerged. The technique of directed content analysis has been typically used when prior research exists which the researcher wants to apply. While at the same time, it is used when the researcher wants to be open to new learning about the phenomenon and new categories that might emerge. Therefore, the goal for the directed content analysis used in the current study was to determine if the work of both Baxter (1986) and Sheets (1997) could be found to undermine relationships through social media communication behaviors and if any new themes also emerged.

The interviews were transcribed, unitized, and coded as to whether or not responses to the interview questions could be captured by the coding categories developed by Baxter (1986) and Sheet (1997) when describing anti-relationship social media behaviors. A unit was identified as a communication behavior enacted through social media by the participants' partner. Overall, 37 units were found in the eleven transcripts. Coders each made unitizing decisions separately and disagreed about two units. Those two units were missed by one of the two coders and, after some discussion, were eventually agreed upon based on the previously mentioned definition of a unit. The rate of agreement was .95.

Once units were agreed upon, the two coders then went back to identify if the cognitive interpretations and emotional reactions related to their partners' communication behaviors could be categorized in previously developed categories or if they belonged in new categories. As discussed previously, Baxter (1986) included eight relationship rules and Sheets' (1997) included four jealousy evoking behaviors. For clarity purposes these rules were framed in the opposite direction than originally named, for example instead of "loyalty and fidelity" they are called "lack of loyalty and fidelity." For the purposes of this analysis, any overlap in these rules and

behaviors were looked for. Sheets' jealousy evoking behaviors, "Partner shows interest in another," "another shows interest in your partner," "prior relationships," and "ambiguous scenes" might all be considered a violation of Baxter's rule of lack of loyalty/fidelity. For the purposes of the current study, however only behaviors enacted by the partner were of interest, therefore, "another shows interest in your partner" was not used. Because of this, when analyzing the data, the following coding categories were used, lack of autonomy, lack of similarity display, lack of supportiveness, lack of openness, lack of loyalty/fidelity, lack of shared time, lack of equity, and lack of romance. The eight codes came from Baxter's rules with three of Sheet's jealousy evoking behaviors coded for within Baxter's lack of loyalty/fidelity category. In addition to these categories, the coders were open to new categories. One new category was found, named lack of personal connection. Descriptions of these categories can be seen in Table 3. It is important to note that the researchers expected that the behaviors previously mentioned that were discovered by Tokunaga (2011) might present themselves in the current study. These behaviors, however would fit into one of the categories already being used, and therefore additional coding categories were not needed. Overall 48 codes were identified and reliability of $K=.93$ was obtained (Cohen, 1960). Results of the codes will be further discussed in the results section.

Table 3: *Coding Categories*

Lack of Autonomy	A partner fails to recognize their partner's individual identity and life beyond the relationship.
Lack of Similarity Display	Expressing dissimilar attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests.
Lack of Supportiveness	Negatively impacting a partner's self-worth and self-esteem.
Lack of Openness	A partner fails to be open, genuine, and authentic with their partner.
Lack of Loyalty/Fidelity (also includes jealousy evoking behaviors)	Infidelity. Includes partner showing interest in another, (i.e. through any social media communication), or anything involving prior relationships. In addition, this category may include a partner enacting social media behaviors that may seem ambiguous or skeptical.
Lack of Shared Time	A partner fails to share time with a partner.
Lack of Equity	A partner feels that they are not benefitting in the same way that their close other is.
Lack of Romance	Things that seem unexplainable, however are expressed as missing within the relationship. Some type of "magic" or "chemistry" that is missing.
Lack of Personal Connection*	Missing the ability to see how someone is being effected by something. Missing human connection in some way as a result of the media being used instead of face-to-face.

*Newly developed category.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Survey: Quantitative Data

One hundred and seventeen undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses met the study criteria and filled out the online survey. The average length of relationship was 28 months, and 116 participants indicated that they used social media. Participants were then asked which social media websites they used and which social media websites their partner used. Facebook was the most commonly used site for both participants and their partners. These results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: *Social Media Usage*

Type of Social Media	Participant Used	Partner Used
Facebook	91.4%	85.3%
Snapchat	77.6%	74.1%
Instagram	71.6%	59.5%
Twitter	61.2%	58.6%

n=116

Based on their previous answers, participants who indicated their partner used a specific social media website were then asked follow up questions about types of behavior that could be enacted through each site. Forty-eight percent (n=56) of participants who used social media indicated their partner had enacted at least one social media behavior that negatively impacted their relationship. Of those participants, they ranged from experiencing 1 to 24 behaviors, with an average of 5 behaviors and median of 3 behaviors. The breakdown of behaviors across each social media type are reported in the following sections.

Facebook. Participants who indicated their partner used Facebook were asked about nine different Facebook behaviors that could potentially hurt their relationship. Participants

were asked to indicate whether or not their partner had ever enacted the behavior in a way that negatively impacted their relationship. Forty percent (n=40) of the 99 participants who indicated their partner used Facebook also indicated that their partner had enacted at least one behavior via Facebook that negatively impacted their relationship. Participants ranged from experiencing 1 to 8 behaviors, with an average of 2 behaviors per person and median of 2 behaviors. The behaviors experienced by the 40 participants who reported at least one negative Facebook behavior enacted by their partner can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: *Facebook Behaviors Enacted by Participants' Partners Experienced as Negatively Impacting their Relationship*

Facebook Behaviors	Percent (n)
Sent a private message	63% (25)
Sent or accepted a friend request	48% (19)
“Liked” a picture, status, or post	35% (14)
Posted a picture	33% (13)
Shared an article	33% (13)
Commented on someone’s picture, status, or post	28% (11)
Updated a status	25% (10)
Used the “poking” function	8% (3)
Sent or received a game request	8% (3)

n=40

Snapchat. Participants who indicated their partner used Snapchat were asked about three different Snapchat behaviors. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not their partner had ever enacted the behavior in a way that negatively impacted their relationship. Twenty-four percent (n=21) of the 86 participants who indicated their partner used Snapchat also indicated that their partner had enacted at least one behavior via Snapchat that negatively impacted their relationship. Of those participants, they ranged from experiencing 1 to 3 behaviors, with an average of 2 behaviors per person and a median of 1 behavior. The behaviors experienced by the

21 participants who reported at least one negative Snapchat behavior enacted by their partner can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6: *SnapChat Behaviors Enacted by Participants' Partners Experienced as Negatively Impacting their Relationship*

SnapChat Behaviors	Percent (n)
Posted a "story"	52% (11)
Sent a "text"	52% (11)
Sent a picture	52% (11)

n=21

Instagram. Participants who indicated their partner used Instagram were asked about five different Instagram behaviors. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not their partner had ever enacted the behavior in a way that negatively impacted their relationship. Twenty-six percent (n=15) of the 69 participants who indicated their partner used Instagram also indicated that their partner had enacted at least one behavior via Instagram that negatively impacted their relationship. Of those participants, they ranged from experiencing 1 to 5 behaviors, with an average of 2 behaviors per person and median of 2 behaviors. It is important to note that 12 cases were missing data, therefore the following percentages are reported based on an n of 57. The behaviors experienced by the 57 participants who reported at least one negative Instagram behavior enacted by their partner can be found in Table 7.

Table 7: *Instagram Behaviors Enacted by Participants' Partners Experienced as Negatively Impacting their Relationship*

Instagram Behaviors	Percent (n)
“Favorited” a picture	73% (11)
Followed someone or was followed by someone	40% (6)
Commented on a picture	33% (5)
Posted a picture	20% (3)
Sent a direct message	13% (2)

n=57

Twitter. Participants who indicated their partner used Twitter were asked about seven different Twitter behaviors that could potentially hurt their relationship. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not their partner had ever enacted the behavior in a way that negatively impacted their relationship. Forty-three percent (n=29) of the 68 participants who indicated their partner used Twitter also indicated that their partner had enacted at least one behavior via Twitter that negatively impacted their relationship. Of those participants, they ranged from experiencing 1 to 7 behaviors, with an average of 3 behaviors per person and median of 2 behaviors. The behaviors experienced by the 29 participants who reported at least one negative Twitter behavior enacted by their partner can be found in Table 8.

Table 8: *Twitter Behaviors Enacted by Participants' Partners Experienced as Negatively Impacting their Relationship*

Twitter Behaviors	Percent (n)
“Favorited” a tweet	69% (20)
Tweeted or retweeted someone	52% (15)
Was “favorited” by someone	48% (14)
Followed someone or was followed by someone	45% (13)
Was tweeted or retweeted by someone	35% (10)
Sent a direct message	24% (7)
Posted a picture	14% (4)

n=29

Interviews

As previously mentioned, female participants who experienced at least one negative social media behavior were invited to participate in a follow up interview. A total of 11 participants were interviewed and 15 behaviors were identified during those interviews. These behaviors were interpreted in five different ways, based on the directed content analysis previously discussed in the methods section. It is important to note that the same behaviors were interpreted in different ways by different participants. For a complete list of the social media behaviors mentioned during the interviews and the categories in which they were interpreted, see Table 9.

Table 9: *Social Media Behaviors and Responses from the Interviews*

Social Media Behaviors	Cognitive and Emotional Responses
Add/accept someone as friend Send message Comments Send pictures share picture Like someone's status Favorite others' tweets Favorite pictures Follow or accept follow Use chat function Like someone's picture	Lack of Loyalty and Fidelity: Infidelity. Includes partner showing interest in another (i.e. through any Facebook communication), or anything involving prior relationships. In addition, this category may include a partner conducting Facebook behaviors that may seem ambiguous or skeptical.
Add/accept someone as friend Comments Send pictures Share Post Share picture Search someone Favorite others' tweets Follow or accept follow Use chat function Save someone's pictures	Lack of Supportiveness: Negatively impacting a partner's self-worth and self-esteem.
Send message Share Post Subtweet Search someone	Lack of Openness: A partner fails to be open, genuine, and authentic with their partner.
Send message Comments Share Post	Lack of Similarity Display: Expressing dissimilar attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests.
Use chat function Send pictures	Lack of Personal Connection*: Missing the ability to see social cues. Missing human connection explicitly explained as a result of the social media being used.

Lack of loyalty/fidelity: The most common category mentioned by participants was *Loyalty/Fidelity* (n=26). This category was defined as a behavior that was perceived as their partner showing interest in another (i.e. through any social media communication), or anything involving prior relationships. In addition, this category included a partner conducting social

media behaviors that may have been interpreted as ambiguous or skeptical. As seen in Table 9, 11 different behaviors were interpreted as a lack of loyalty/fidelity. Examples of participants who perceived their partner's behavior as lacking loyalty/fidelity can be seen below. In the first example, a participant described her partner "liking" or "favoriting" a picture of another girl on Twitter. In the second example, a participant described how her partner had sent private messages via Facebook to other females:

"Liking things like that, or pictures that I feel are inappropriate. Like girls that are dressed like, not dressed. Yeah. I mean, just inappropriate, like something that you wouldn't post for your mom for, just like, not a good picture. I feel like it's- it's inappropriate, ya know? Obviously, by the way, they're posting these pictures that there's some... I mean, they're single I guess you could say, but that they're looking for something, looking for attention. And I feel like you're just feeding into that by liking it, because now that you've liked it you've just opened this other- you've opened another gateway for them to try to come and communicate with you now."

– interview participant 3

"He used to talk through messaging with other girls, especially girls who knew me before they knew him. Stuff like that, or his exes even which I thought was inappropriate because if she was just a friend why would you have to privately message them? Rather than commenting. So, that didn't sit right with me." – interview participant 10

Lack of Supportiveness: *Supportiveness* was the second most commonly experienced category (n=11). This category was defined as a behavior that was perceived as negatively impacting a partner's self-worth and self-esteem. As seen in Table 9, 10 different behaviors were interpreted as lack of supportiveness. Examples of participants who perceived their partner's behaviors as a lack of supportiveness can be seen below. In the first example, the

participant described how she felt when her partner accepted and sent friend requests with other females. In the second example, the participant described her reaction when their partner shared a post via Facebook.

“Accepting or requesting other girls. That doesn't sit right with me. Umm, it's like, almost undermining my relationship, like disrespecting me, thinking that you can do that and get away with it.” – interview participant 10

“There was one instance where he had shared a post. I can't remember what it was, but I felt like it was disrespectful, (it said) something like ‘when your girl catches you watching your snapchat’ or something, I just felt like it was inappropriate. Like, what do you mean? I felt like it was disrespectful.” – interview participant 3

Lack of Openness: The *Openness* category was experienced four times. This category was defined as a behavior that was perceived as a partner failing to be open, genuine and authentic with the participant. As seen in Table 9, four different behaviors were interpreted as lack of openness. Examples of participants who perceived their partner's behavior as a lack of openness can be seen below. In the first example, a participant described how her partner shared a post via Facebook that she felt implied a message to her without explicitly saying it. In the second example, a participant described a reaction to her partner sending messages to other females through Facebook.

“He shared something too, uh what did it say? It said ‘guys deserve to be spoiled and told how handsome they are on the daily, how do you expect to be treated like a queen when you treat him like a servant?’ And, I felt like that was kind of like, borderline trying to, like, I don't know, say something to me, without saying it TO me.” – interview participant 3

“He would talk to girls and stuff like that. He wouldn't know that that was something he needed to talk to me about. He didn't think it was necessary to tell me, like, I didn't find out until, like, months later. I'm like, are you serious? Like, why wouldn't you tell me that? It was a communication problem, he just would not communicate, like, it's not that I'm, like, threatened by her or, anything like that. It was just about the communication, like, he just didn't communicate at all.” – interview participant 2

Lack of Similarity Display: The *Similarity Display* category was also experienced four times. This category was defined as a behavior that was perceived as a partner expressing dissimilar attitudes, beliefs, values, and interest. As seen in Table 9, three different behaviors were interpreted as lack of similarity display. Examples of participants who perceived their partner's behavior as a lack of similarity display can be seen below. In the first example, a participant described how she felt when her partner would comment on her posts regarding politics with a dissimilar view. In the second example, the participant described how she and her partner would send videos through private messages on Facebook, however some of the videos were interpreted in a negative way.

“Comments on different stuff, my political views and just- umm, the uh, lack of support. Um, I just, people can have different views and I just feel like you shouldn't necessarily disagree with your spouse on things within that realm.” – interview participant 4

“We send videos back and forth sometimes, like that, ya know, like, entertain us or something. Um, they make me feel kind of, I don't know exactly how to explain it, but they make me feel a little bit uncomfortable. Like, they're kind of sexist or racial or something and that really bothers me. And sometimes, it's like 'you know this bothers me, why do you send them?' I don't appreciate humor in them or anything, so, Um, I mean I guess it kind of ties, makes me

question, like, commitment a little bit, because it's like, do I want to be, do I want to continue be with somebody who subtly thinks these things, even though it doesn't come out all the time? Like that they're still there. Do I want to be with somebody who's like that? And that, kind of, the commitment, like on my part, that would be a little questioned.” – interview participant 5

Lack of Personal Connection: The newly developed category, *Personal Connection*, was experienced twice. This category was defined as a behavior that was perceived as missing the ability to see social cues. In addition, it was any behavior perceived as missing human connection and explicitly explained as a result of the social media being used. As seen in Table 9, two different behaviors were interpreted as lack of personal connection. An example of a participant who perceived their partner's behaviors as a lack of personal connection can be seen below. In this example the participant described her perception of Snapchat causing a lack of human connection during an argument with her partner.

“Snapchat: if we're fighting about something then and we're, like texting on the text part of it. And something will pop up and, like, he'll say something, and, like, it won't save, so that kind of bothers me that I can't, like, go back and see what he said, um.... Umm, it's kind of hard, I don't really know how to tie it in. But, um, I guess it would be, part of it is, like, that he won't, like, that we can't, like, call from the phone and talk about it. So, it's like I can't hear the emotions in his voice, and, that, sometimes that makes me feel like he doesn't, I mean, I know he's mad and I know that I'm mad. But, I still wanna know how, like, what I say is affecting him and I want him to know how what he says is affecting me. And you can't really get that via text or via picture.” – interview participant 5

Survey: Qualitative Data

The screener survey also contained open-ended questions that asked participants to describe behaviors that their partner enacted via social media that negatively impacted their relationship. Therefore, the categories developed via directed content analysis, which were used for the interviews, were also used to code participants' open-ended questions from the survey. Forty-eight survey participants gave open-ended responses that could be used for the analysis. Overall, 97 units were found among surveys. Coders each made unitizing decisions separately and disagreed about 18 units. Four units were missed by one of the two coders and, after some discussion, were eventually agreed upon based on the previously mentioned definition of a unit. In addition, 14 units were removed as determined unqualified as a unit. The rate of agreement was .84.

Once the communication behaviors were identified, the two coders then went back to identify if the cognitive interpretations and emotional reactions related to their partners' communication behaviors could be categorized in the categories used for the interviews, while also remaining open to new categories. Cohen's Kappa determined high level of reliability at .82 (Cohen, 1960). Lack of loyalty/fidelity was the most experienced category (n=64), followed by lack of similarity display (n=20), lack of supportiveness (n=19), lack of openness (n=3), and lack of personal connection (n=2). The breakdown of how each behavior was interpreted can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10: *Social Media Behaviors and Responses from the Surveys*

Social Media Behaviors	Cognitive and Emotional Responses
Add/accept someone as friend Send message Comments Send pictures Share picture Like someone's post Like someone's status Post a story Favorite others' tweets Share an article Favorite pictures Follow or accept follow Use chat function Tweet or retweet someone Like someone's picture	Lack of Loyalty and Fidelity: Infidelity. Includes partner showing interest in another (i.e. through any Facebook communication), or anything involving prior relationships. In addition, this category may include a partner conducting Facebook behaviors that may seem ambiguous or skeptical.
Add/accept someone as friend Comments Favorite pictures Share picture Post a status Like someone's picture Use the poking function Tweet or retweet someone Send message Follow or accept follow	Lack of Supportiveness: Negatively impacting a partner's self-worth and self-esteem.
Share post Tweet or retweet someone	Lack of Openness: A partner fails to be open, genuine, and authentic with their partner.
Favorite others' tweets Share an article Like someone's picture Like someone's post Like someone's status Tweet or retweet something Post a story Post a status Follow or accept follow	Lack of Similarity Display: Expressing dissimilar attitudes, beliefs, values, and interests.
Use chat function Tweet or retweet something	Lack of Personal Connection*: Missing the ability to see social cues. Missing human connection explicitly explained as a result of the social media being used.

A Public Audience

During the directed content analysis, the coders noticed a common theme mentioned by participants. This theme involved the acknowledgement that the behavior enacted by their partner was viewable by others. Part of the reason that participants perceived the behaviors as negative was due to the virtual presence of others witnessing the behavior. A new category, however did not feel appropriate, because the interpretations still belonged and fit in one of the previously mentioned categories. Instead, once the directed content analysis was completed, the interpretations were re-assessed for the number of times that a public audience was mentioned. Acknowledgement of a public audience was identified a total of 11 times during the survey and 4 times during the interviews. Examples where participants mentioned the public audience can be seen below.

“When my boyfriend likes pictures of other girls (nothing but that girl in the picture) it makes me feel jealous and hurt. It is almost like he is publicly announcing that he finds that girl attractive which not only hurts me but is also embarrassing because then other people wonder about the stability of your relationship.” – survey participant 85

“It probably sounds silly, but recently my partner replied to one of my posts and publicly corrected a mistake I made on a post, which made me feel patronized.”

“Giving a certain kind of attention to someone on social media that isn't me is inappropriate in my opinion. Especially since it is public.” – survey participant 123

The mention of the public nature of these communication behaviors was not anticipated and seemed worthy of notice, if not of a new category. This will be further discussed in the discussion section.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Overview of Research

The purpose of the current study was to understand behaviors enacted through social media that are perceived as undermining commitment to romantic relationships. Using interdependence theory as a theoretical framework it was expected that there were going to be communication behaviors that were perceived as anti-relationship in nature, and thus undermined trust, comfort with dependence and commitment through the reverse direction of mutual cyclic growth. While previous research has focused on the pro-social aspects of interdependence theory, such as perceptions of prosocial behaviors that can increase a partner's sense of commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence on another (Weiselquist, 1999; Coleman, 2007), the current study used the same framework to explain the reverse process of mutual cyclic decline. Instead of assessing prosocial behaviors, behaviors that were interpreted as anti-relationship in nature and thus undermined commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence were further explored.

Behaviors interpreted as anti-relationship in nature have been previously studied in face-to-face interactions and through CMC. The current study focused on CMC behaviors, and more specifically those enacted through social media. Previous research was particularly interested in reactions related to jealousy (Muisse et. al, 2009), however the present study sought to determine other relevant reactions to and interpretations of behaviors. Specifically, the present study had three main goals, (1) gain a more complete list of behaviors that may be interpreted as anti-relationship in nature, (2) determine if a set of categories can be developed to code these interpretations, and (3) determine if the interpretation of such behaviors reflect the interpretations

of anti-relationship behaviors that have been previously reported in the literature (i.e. through the work of Baxter (1986) and Sheets (1997)). The extent to which these goals were achieved and suggestions for further research are discussed below.

Identified Behaviors

One goal of the current study was to determine which social media behaviors could be interpreted as undermining commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence. A multitude of behaviors were identified in the current study. Just under half of the survey participants indicated that their partner had enacted at least one social media behavior that negatively impacted their relationship. These results are consistent with previous findings by Clayton (2013, 2014), who found that social media behaviors can be interpreted as undermining commitment. The current study differs, in that it found a more complete list of behaviors that could be so interpreted. Social media users have a range of behaviors that can be enacted, and the current study provided further evidence that these behaviors can be interpreted by romantic partners as undermining their relationship.

It is interesting that only 48 percent of participants experienced these behaviors in negative ways, as one might expect this number to be higher. These social media behaviors are common behaviors enacted through social media, however not everyone interpreted them in negative ways. While the current study provided evidence that these behaviors are happening, it also provided evidence that these behaviors are not always being interpreted in negative ways. While this exploratory study can't answer the question of why some partners experienced behaviors in a negative way, and why others did not, some possible reasons are discussed in the next section.

Interpretations of Behaviors

A main finding from the current study was that participants often had different interpretations of the same identified behaviors. It is important to note that when thinking about anti-relationship behaviors, what is of most interest is the interpretation of such behaviors. Behaviors can only be anti-relationship in nature if they are interpreted in that way. These interpretations came from attributions made about the behaviors. The behaviors identified in the survey and during the interviews in the current study were interpreted in five different ways. Four of the categories of interpretations were previously found in a study by Baxter (1986) and included jealousy evoking situations previously found by Sheets (1997). Baxter studied interpretations of face-to-face behaviors that lead to breakups and identified eight different rules that, when violated, could lead to a breakups of romantic relationships. Lack of loyalty and fidelity, lack of supportiveness, lack of openness, and lack of similarity display were all identified in the current study. Sheet's jealousy evoking situations were relevant and fit within Baxter's lack of loyalty/fidelity category as well. However, four of Baxter's previously discovered categories were not found in the current study: lack of autonomy, lack of shared time, lack of equity, and lack of romance. There are a few possible explanations for why these categories did not emerge. The first explanation could be related to limitations of the current study. One sample of college students is far from representative of all romantic relationships. Studies of other emerging adults may find that these categories emerge. A second explanation could be that the current study was not focused on breakups, while Baxter's original study was. In this study, participants had to be in an ongoing relationship, rather than discuss previous relationships. It could be that some of Baxter's previously developed categories are exclusive to those who have already ended their relationship. A final explanation could be that some of the

categories that were not found in the current study may be less likely to occur on online. For example, the lack of romance category, defined as “some type of ‘magic’ or ‘chemistry’ that is missing,” may be difficult to be enacted through social media. This may also be the case for the lack of equity category, which is defined as, “a partner feels that they are not benefitting in the same way that their close other is.”

In addition to the four categories previously developed by Baxter that were found in this study, a new category emerged: lack of personal connection. It is obvious that face-to-face behaviors could not be interpreted in this way. This category included any explicit acknowledgement that the behavior was interpreted as anti-relationship in nature because the participant could not see the reactions or emotions that their partner was having due to social media being used, rather than face-to-face communication. This finding may be important for partners in romantic relationships to consider. For example, if partners are having important or serious conversations or interactions, they may want to do so face-to-face, rather than via social media, particularly if the subject matter is sensitive or emotion provoking. To avoid conflict, partners may choose to have such interactions face-to-face to assist in avoiding the undermining of commitment, trust, or comfort with dependence.

Another important finding from the current study was that seemingly, the same behaviors were interpreted in different ways. For example, adding or accepting someone as a friend was interpreted as lack of loyalty and fidelity by some participants, but as lack of supportiveness by others. This is likely due to the different attributions people made about the meaning behind the behavior, or thoughts about what the behavior might lead to. The expectations that people have about the intentions of a partner’s behaviors are likely based on both previous behaviors within the relationship, norms of behavior, and/or previous experiences that a person has had related to

the current situation (Baldwin, 1992; Baldwin 1995). When people are discussing their perceptions of social media behaviors that undermine relationships, they are often describing things that they expect to happen based on the behavior being described. For example, when a participant discussed her partner accepting a friend request of an ex-girlfriend on Instagram she explained that the reason it undermined her commitment was because she couldn't see what the girl was posting and she didn't think her partner needed to see whatever it was that the ex-girlfriend was posting. In sum, she was insinuating that the current behavior may lead to future infidelity behaviors. She had a schema for this script of behaviors and was expecting certain behaviors to follow. These findings are consistent with Hand's (2013) study, which found that participants were interpreting their partner's overall use of social media as ambiguous, causing them to make negative attributions about what their partner may have been doing. In the current study, perceived intentions of behaviors and what they might lead to were relevant to the attributions made by participants. The variations in attributions may have been due to individual differences such as personality styles, and scripts that participants had about how specific behaviors lead to other behaviors. Another explanation for the variations in attributions could be the stage of each relationship or the level of commitment that participants had toward their partner. For example, participants who have been in a relationship for a long period of time, may have more trust and commitment to the relationship and therefore did not interpret their partner's behaviors in negative ways as often. In addition, people who have been in a relationship for a short period of time may interpret their partner's behaviors in negative ways more often and have less trust and commitment to the relationship.

The current study also found that more than half of survey participants did not interpret social media behaviors as undermining commitment to their relationship. This could be due to

individual differences in attachment styles or personality types. For example, those with more secure attachment styles may not interpret social media behaviors in negative ways. In addition, it could be that those who are more agreeable do not interpret social media behaviors in negative ways. These individual differences that might be related to whether or not someone interprets social media behaviors in negative ways should be further explored.

Social Media and the Public Audience

A notable theme that emerged in the current study was the public audience that can oversee many of the communication behaviors enacted through social media. While some social media behaviors, such as private and direct messages, are forms of behavior that can be specified for only two people, most of the other behaviors, such as sharing, commenting, favoriting, and liking, are public. Many times during the interviews and survey, participants mentioned that their partner's behavior was hurtful or embarrassing because other people, i.e. the public audience, might interpret that behavior in a negative way. For example, liking third party's picture might be interpreted by the public audience as showing a display of affection toward the other. This finding was similar to Tokunaga's 2014 study, which found that the degree to which a behavior was public impacted whether or not a Facebook behavior impacted a relationship's expectations. The awareness of a public audience is not exclusive to social media behaviors. For example, in face-to-face communications, there may be times where a person feels hurt by their partner because their partner flirted with someone (i.e. lack of loyalty or fidelity) and it could be that the hurt might be intensified if their partner flirted with someone in front of their mutual friends. In another scenario, a private argument among partners might be hurtful, but it could be that the hurt would be intensified if an argument between partners occurred in front of a group of people. The public audience involved with most social media communications allows other

people outside of the relationship to offer their own interpretations of the behaviors that lack loyalty or fidelity, openness, similarity display, or supportiveness. Because this was a sample of young adults, and their frontal lobe has not yet fully developed, there may be developmental considerations related to a public audience. Similar to adolescents, the awareness of a public audience may have been more concern to participants in this study than it might be to adults who are older. Future studies might explore whether participants in their 20's and beyond are less concerned about a public nature of social media communication. In addition, while the public audience was not mentioned by all participants (survey n of 11 out of 108, interview n of 4 out of 48), partners may want to have such discussions about how they feel about both their own interpretations of such behaviors, and their level of comfort with such behaviors having a public audience. For example, some partners may find certain behaviors acceptable with an audience, however other behaviors not as acceptable. Having explicit discussions about acceptable behaviors could potentially prevent a person from feeling hurt by their partner, and thus lead to less undermining of commitment to the relationship.

Contributions to the Literature

The present study contributes to the literature by providing further evidence that behaviors enacted through social media can be interpreted as undermining relationships. It offers a more complete list of behaviors as well as the frequencies with which they occur. Furthermore, this study identified that behaviors can be interpreted as undermining relationships across multiple forms of social media, including Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, and Twitter. This study concludes that jealousy is not the only reaction to social media behaviors, but other issues of lack of infidelity, support, openness, and similarity display can also be based on partners' social media behaviors. The findings here suggest answers to important questions about social

media's role in romantic relationships. Most importantly, that CMC through social media does impact relationships in a manner similar to face-to-face communications. This study contributed by explaining that behaviors enacted by participants' partners can be interpreted as negative, and therefore undermine commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence to a romantic relationship.

Future Research and Limitations

Because the current study was exploratory in nature, there are many avenues of research that can be continued. This study involved a small convenience sample of college students that were mostly Caucasian and heterosexual and therefore is limited in generalizability. Future studies should be more diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, sexual preferences, and include larger samples. In addition, because the researcher is female, the interviews were only conducted with female participants, however it would be interesting to expand the understanding of male participants as well. Another limitation of the current study was that only one partner within a relationship was interviewed. Future studies might interview both partners within a relationship and determine if there are parallel interpretations of behaviors. Finally, researchers might assess different stages of relationships. While the current study assessed those in committed relationships, there could be differences in interpretations of behaviors based on interviews about new relationships, married relationships, post-break up relationships – as previously studied by Baxter (1986), and other types of romantic relationships.

Another important contribution of this study that could be addressed in future research concerns the multitude of interpretations of specific social media behaviors. As previously mentioned, particular behaviors, such as adding or accepting a friend request, were often interpreted in different ways by different people, such as lack of loyalty and fidelity and lack of supportiveness. This bears on the question of why did some participants interpret and have

specific attributions about these behaviors in one way rather than another? Future research should explore this concept. One interesting area of exploration might include assessing participants' attachment styles (Ainsworth, 1967). One hypothesis might be that attributions made about social media behaviors are related to a person's attachment style. For example, it could be that certain interpretations are more related to those with anxious attachment style, such as lack of loyalty and fidelity. Another contribution to these attributions might be specific personality traits. Future research could measure personality to determine whether or not a relationship exists between traits and particular interpretations and attributions of a partner's behavior. For example, it could be that specific interpretations are related to neuroticism, such as lack of supportiveness. Future research might involve an experimental paradigm which would include standardized hypothetical scenarios of social media behaviors given to participants. The interpretations of these paradigms could then be compared to measures of attachment style and personality traits to determine any relationships.

The current study used interdependence theory's transformation of motivation process as a theoretical framework to understand commitment, trust and comfort with dependence in romantic relationships, however the concepts of commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence were not specifically measured. Now that the current study has identified a more exhaustive list of behaviors and how they might be interpreted, future research may further explore how these interpretations of behaviors impact each concept specifically by using validated scales. This could help to identify the extent to which these concepts are related to such interpretations of behaviors. For example, it could be that behaviors interpreted as lack of fidelity and loyalty are related to decreases in trust, while behaviors interpreted as lack of supportiveness are related to decreases in commitment. Future research might involve a

paradigm similar to what was previously recommended above. This paradigm, again, might include standardized hypothetical scenarios given to participants. The impact that particular paradigms have on commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence could be measured, as well as the relationship between these three factors and the likelihood of a particular interpretation. For example, it could be that behaviors that are interpreted as lack of loyalty and fidelity undermine trust more so than comfort with dependence. Further assessment of the association between these concepts and the interpretations of behaviors should be continued.

The relationship between the social media behaviors and face-to-face behaviors might be another area for exploration. We know that prosocial behaviors enacted face-to-face are correlated with online prosocial behaviors (Wright & Li, 2011), however it would be interesting to explore if the same relationship occurs in behaviors interpreted as anti-relationship in nature. So, were participants' partners enacting face-to-face behaviors that were consistent with those online behaviors? This could be determined by asking participants about behaviors their partner enacted face-to-face that negatively impacted their commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence.

The most important next step for future research is to identify explanations for what might be causing differences in the interpretations of behaviors. As previously discussed, this can be through studies of attachment styles, personality traits, and further exploring the factors of trust, commitment and comfort with dependence. Understanding the factors that influence people's attributions regarding the causes of problematic communication behaviors could contribute to the overall understanding of romantic relationships and the role which social media plays in them. Furthermore, understanding the relationships between such concepts can provide

a guide for the prevention of negative interpretations within relationships, and help promote the increase in pro-social interpretations of communication behaviors.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Are you 18 years or older?

- Yes
- No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Are you currently in an exclusive committed romantic relationship? (married or unmarried)

- Yes
- No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

How long have you been in your current relationship?

Do you currently use social media? (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

- Yes
- No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To Please answer the following questions...

Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (select all that apply).

	You	Your Partner
Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Twitter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instagram	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Snapchat	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The next set of questions will ask you about different types of behaviors on social media. As you answer these questions, please think back on your relationship with you current partner. Specifically, please think about times when your partner may have done something via social media that hurt your relationship- i.e. reduced your commitment, trust, or comfort with dependence on your partner. "Commitment" means the expectation that you intend to persist in the relationship. "Trust" means the ability to to have faith in your partner to act in a way that would not cause you harm. Finally, "comfort with dependence" means your own positive reaction to depending on your partner.

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (select all that apply). Facebook - Your Partner Is Selected

The first questions are about Facebook. Has your partner ever done the following:

	Yes	No
"Liked" someone's picture, status, or post on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Posted a picture on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shared an article or post on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Updated his/her status on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sent a private message on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sent or accepted a friend request from someone on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Used the "poking" function on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Commented on someone's picture, status, or post on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sent or accepted a game request on Facebook that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (se... Facebook - Your Partner Is Selected

Please elaborate on one of the above Facebook behaviors in which you selected "yes." What was it about the behavior that influenced your feelings about the relationship?

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (select all that apply). Twitter - Your Partner Is Selected

The next questions are about Twitter. Has your partner ever done the following:

	Yes	No
"Tweeted" or "retweeted" something or someone that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Been "tweeted" or "retweeted" by someone that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Favorited" someone's tweet that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Had his/her tweet "favorited" by anyone that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Posted a picture on Twitter that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Direct messaged someone on Twitter that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Followed" someone or been "followed" by someone on Twitter that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (se... Twitter - Your Partner Is Selected

Please elaborate on one of the above Twitter behaviors in which you selected "yes." What was it about the behavior that influenced your feelings about the relationship?

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (select all that apply). Twitter - Your Partner Is Selected

The next questions are about Instagram. Has your partner ever done the following:

	Yes	No
Posted a picture on Instagram that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Favorited" a picture on Instagram that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Commented on a picture on Instagram that negatively impacted hurt your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Direct messaged anyone on Instagram that negatively impacted hurt your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
"Followed" someone or been "followed" by someone on Instagram that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (se... Instagram - Your Partner Is Selected

Please elaborate on one of the above Instagram behaviors in which you selected "yes." What was it about the behavior that influenced your feelings about the relationship?

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (se... Snapchat - Your Partner Is Selected

The next questions are about Snapchat. Has your partner ever done the following:

	Yes	No
Sent a picture on Snapchat that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sent a "text" on Snapchat that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Posted a "story" on Snapchat that negatively impacted your relationship?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Answer If Please indicate which social media platforms you and your partner currently have accounts for (se... Snapchat - Your Partner Is Selected

Please elaborate on one of the above Snapchat behaviors in which you selected "yes." What was it about the behavior that influenced your feelings about the relationship? Please answer the following questions about yourself.

What is your sex?

- Male
- Female
- Other

What year were you born?

Which group do you most identify with?

- Caucasian
- Asian
- African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Multiracial
- Other _____

Thank you for participating in the survey. Based on your answers to the current survey, you may qualify for a follow-up interview. Would you be willing to participate in the follow-up interview?

- Yes
- No

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Please indicate the best method of contact for the follow-up interview.

- Phone Number _____
- Email _____

APPENDIX B
Interview Script

-Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. Do I have your permission to audio record the interview?

-Great, thank you. The main focus of the interview will be your current relationship and any other relationships that you were in for at least one month in the past two years. There are both positive and negative aspects to relationships, however the focus of this interview will be to gain a better understanding about the negative behaviors that we know occur. Some of the things we discuss may be difficult to talk about, however I realize they are not a reflection of your relationship as a whole. This is a safe environment, where the feeling that you express about these negative behaviors are not being judged and you should feel comfortable to express them openly.

-Are you currently in a committed relationship?

- How long have you been in this relationship?

-What is your partner's gender?

-What is your current partner's initials? I will refer to him/her by these initials for the remainder of this interview.

-Commitment, trust, and comfort with dependence are all necessary part of romantic relationships. Commitment has been referred to as the expectation that you intend to persist in the relationship. Trust has been referred to as the ability to to have faith in your partner to act in a way that would not cause you harm. Finally, comfort with dependence has been referred to as your own reaction to depending on your partner. Often in relationships there are times where our partner may do or say something that undermines our commitment, trust and comfort with dependence. Social media is one medium through which couples communicate, including through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and others. I want you to think back on your

past relationship with _____. Were there specific behaviors that _____ did via social media that hurt you?

-What was it about the behavior that bothered you? (ONLY ASK IF WAS NOT SPECIFIED)

-Now let's go back, within the past 2 years, were you in a committed relationship for at least one month with anybody else?

-How long were you in this relationship?

-What are the initials of this previous partner? I will refer to him/her by these initials for the remainder of this interview.

-Thinking again about how your partner may have communicated in such a way to undermine your commitment, comfort with dependence, and trust, were there specific behaviors that _____ did via social media that hurt you?

-What was it about the behavior that bothered you? (ONLY ASK IF WAS NOT SPECIFIED)

Demographics

-What is your age?

-Which gender do you identify as?

-Which ethnicity do you identify as?

What is your current Enrollment Status?

-What is your sexual orientation?

-Which ethnicity does your partner identify as?

-What is your partner's sexual orientation?

-Are you and your partner married?