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## **Making it 'Facebook Official': Reflecting on romantic relationships through sustained Facebook use**

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### **Abstract**

For the past twelve years, Facebook has played a significant role in mediating the lives of its users. Disclosures on the site go on to serve as intimate, co-constructed life records, albeit with unique and always-evolving affordances. The ways in which romantic relationships are mediated on the site are complex and contested: What is the significance of articulating a romantic relationship on Facebook? Why do some choose to make socially and culturally critical moments like the beginning and ends of relationships visible on Facebook, whereas others (perhaps within the same relationship) do not? How do these practices change over time? When is it time to go 'Facebook official'?

In this paper we draw on qualitative research with Facebook users in their twenties in Australia and the UK who have been using the site for five or more years. Interviews with participants revealed

that romantic relationships were central to many of their growing up narratives, and in this paper we draw out examples to discuss four kinds of (non-exclusive) practices: 1) overt relationship status disclosures, mediated through the 'relationship status' affordance of the site; 2) implied relationship disclosures, mediated through an increase in images and tags featuring romantic partners; 3) the intended absence of relationship visibility; and 4) later-erased or revised relationship disclosures. We also critique the ways in which Facebook might work to produce normative 'relationship traces', privileging neat linearity, monogamy, and obfuscating (perhaps usefully, perhaps not) the messy complexity of romantic relationships.

**Keywords:** Facebook, relationships, romance, sexuality, social media.

## **Introduction**

Established in 2004, Facebook has become the most widely used and adopted form of digital social media, now with some 1.49 billion active monthly users (as of June 30, 2015, according to Facebook.com 'newsroom stats'). Over more than a decade, its use has been integrated into the everyday lives of many of its users (boyd, 2014), who each day scroll through news feeds filled with updates from friends, links to elsewhere on the web, videos, advertising, and dialogue, algorithmically sorted and revised. Beyond the logic and immediacy of the news feed (Bucher, 2012), through its everyday use Facebook has also come to serve as an archive of life narratives and key moments, as disclosures are recorded and stored by default. For instance, Sauter (2013: 13) talks about 'folding and unfolding' selves through 'self-writing' on Facebook, where users 'inscribe themselves' on the site. Even banal and mundane disclosures figure into this self-writing, as Facebook regularly invites disclosures through a logic of sharing that, as Kennedy (2015: 8) explains, operates on the basis that sharing implies 'community-fostering practices and altruistic "neighbourly" values, emphasizing the notion that relationships are stabilized through participation'.

Romantic relationships occupy a particularly central place in individual life narratives, alongside employment, education, and family (Thomson et al., 2002). Thus, Facebook invites users to display their 'relationship status' on the site, and even link their profiles to their partner's profile,

reflecting a social order that privileges monogamous, long-term couplings. At the top of the user's profile (in the early-2016 iteration), the order of biographical information is as follows: current employment, education, current town/city of residence, relationship status and link to partner's profile if provided, hometown, and birthday. Relationship statuses that can be listed on Facebook include single, in a relationship, engaged, married, in a civil partnership, in a domestic partnership, in an open relationship, it's complicated, separated, divorced, and widowed. Users can fill in this information or not. Thus, relationship status is folded into the performance of what Giddens (1991) described as the reflexive project of self, as it manifests through the Facebook profile (Robards 2014).

Because of the quasi-public but controlled nature of Facebook (Livingstone, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2014b; boyd, 2014), deciding when to go 'Facebook official' with a partner can be a hotly contested issue. For some it might happen early on in the dating ritual, whereas others may never explicitly disclose their relationship status. Others still may 'shadow' a relationship, indicating its existence through image and location tags, or posting images and links to their partner's (or anticipated partner's) wall. At the other end of a romantic relationship, when it ends, Facebook disclosures can also be contested. As we will explain, given the relative longevity of the site, practices around going 'Facebook official' or not have also changed over time, which is made clear when users reflect on their Facebook Timelines over years of use.

In this article, we draw on qualitative research undertaken with Facebook users in their twenties in Australia and the UK who have been using the site for five or more years. Interviews with participants included them scrolling back through their profiles/Timelines with us to consider how critical moments, like the beginning and end of relationships, anniversaries, and so on, are documented on the site. It is our argument that Facebook can act as an archive of at least a partial relationship narrative, subject to revision and later erasure. We discuss here the significance of Facebook in mediating life narratives, where romantic relationships are often central, and the role Facebook plays as a memory text. More specifically, what we wish to do here is reflect upon how romantic relationships are mediated through Facebook and the various ways in which these

relationships are played out on the site over a sustained period of time. The notion of sustained use is important to our forthcoming discussions in which we explore how relationships are documented on Facebook. Scrolling back through profiles with our participants revealed often quite complex relationship narratives written over a period of time. It also revealed how the nature of these disclosures changed over that time, reflecting participants' maturing social media literacy, and how the documenting of relationships on the site represented a broader context of 'growing up'.

We divide this article into four main parts. First, we undertake a brief review of the literature that covers romantic relationships as mediated on Facebook; second, we introduce our own 'Facebook Timelines' project in more detail, describing our methodology; third, we outline our findings through eight key participant case studies, along four types of relationship practices on Facebook. These (non-exclusive) types include: overt relationship disclosures, implied relationship disclosures, the intended absence of relationship visibility, and later-erased or revised relationship disclosures. Finally, in reflecting upon the everyday uses of Facebook in the context of relationships from participants from a range of sexually diverse backgrounds, we critique the ways in which Facebook might work to produce normative 'relationship traces', privileging neat linearity, monogamy, and obfuscating (perhaps usefully, perhaps not) the messy complexity of romantic relationships.

### **Background: Romantic relationships on Facebook**

Social network sites play a key role in understanding contemporary relationships. Sites such as Facebook have become key portals through which users communicate with their friends, maintain or intensify existing relationships or begin new ones. Ellison et al. (2007: 1144) argue that the affordances of Facebook 'constitute a rich site for researchers because of its capacity to 'bridge on and offline connections'. Facebook is a platform through which social bonds can be made in an instant and its 'logic of sharing' (Kennedy, 2015) encourages forming and maintaining connections with friends, family and acquaintances. In the context of romantic relationships, Facebook is a site through which we learn the relationship status of our 'friends' (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2008) as the site has 'centralised' much of the romantic information we learn about people captured through

changing status updates, posting images of a couple together and so on (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011; Ito et al, 2010). Baym (2010) argues that users' disclosures of this type of information is crucial for 'maintain[ing] ongoing relationships and turning strangers into relational partners because it is a necessary part of getting to know each other and building trust' (Baym 2010). Consequently, the site becomes central to relationship 'impression management' as the connections between users are displayed (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011: 512).

Papacharissi and Gibson suggest 'SNSs cultivate practices that prompt users to be more public with their information by default. While it is possible for users to edit these settings, the code that belies the structure of the network makes it easier to share than to hide information' (2011: 77). In this respect, Facebook has been written about as a site of 'intimacy' (Livingstone 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lambert, 2015). Hinton and Hjorth (2013) argue that 'intimacy is a crucial concept for understanding social and mobile media, which make various intimate relationships "available" in new ways through different technological forms' (in Lambert, 2015:2). They argue for what they describe as the 'intimacy turn' in people's use of social media more broadly and how intimacy on sites like Facebook 'can be used to understand some of the erosions between public and private spaces'; (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013: 3) or as others have described it, how intimacy plays out in the context of 'networked publics' (boyd, 2007; 2010; 2014) and 'context collapse' (Vitak, 2012).

Yang et al. (2014), who studied college students use of different technologies to conduct relationships, argue that an intimacy 'hierarchy' existed for their participants whereby different platforms for communicating with a romantic partner were used at different stages from 'initiation to intimacy' (18). For them, Facebook very much featured in the early part of a relationship, at the initiation and 'getting to know each other' stage. This resonates with Livingstone's earlier work in which she suggests 'teenagers must and do disclose personal information in order to sustain intimacy, but they wish to be in control of how they manage this disclosure' (2008: 405).

Livingstone draws on the work of Giddens (1991: 94) who argues, 'intimacy is the other face of privacy'. Both Yang et al. (2014) and Livingstone (2008) demonstrate young people's strategies for engaging in different types of intimacy and to recognise when interactions need to be pulled from

different 'networked publics' (boyd 2014) like Facebook into more private, potentially more ephemeral spaces.

Our discussions in this article refer to the ways in which romantic relationships are mediated on Facebook. Focusing on sustained narratives of romantic relationships on the site reveals the 'working out' young people do before posting about a crucial moment in their relationship history. As our data demonstrates, our participants often spoke of developing, in their own words, more 'mature' approaches to their disclosures on Facebook as they used the site for longer periods of time and as they themselves got older. While scrolling back, participants often identified language, emoticons and images that they felt represented their younger, 'less mature' selves and what they deemed as sometimes embarrassing representations of an earlier relationship. 'Intimacy' becomes more significant in the context of growing up too as participants talked about the appropriateness of Facebook for certain types of communication, with close friends and partners, for example. Yang et al. (2014: 5) refer to this as 'layers of electronic intimacy' whereby as a relationship becomes more intimate, the platform for intimate exchanges shifts from quasi-public disclosures to Facebook messenger, and eventually moving off the site to texting, speaking on the phone and in person.

A factor that can be quite important when moving across these different 'layers of digital intimacy' is that of drama and the question: what sort of drama might be created by the action about to be performed? We borrow here from Marwick and boyd's (2014a: 1187) use of drama as an 'emergent concept describing performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media'. For Marwick and boyd's participants, Facebook was a key space through which drama was compounded and mobilised with drama regularly moving in and out of Facebook between other domains (for example, school) (1188). Their participants spoke of Facebook as making events more dramatic if they are shared on the site as those dramatic events are 'deliberately written into being' (1195). For them, the concept varies in gravity with drama being played out on the site for fun when bored and when acting up to peers through to more serious examples of conflict and aggression. Often the boundaries between

'conflict, jokes, hurt and entertainment' can be blurred (11). While Marwick and boyd were focussed on drama between teens in the US, we believe this concept has wider purchase and resonates with the experiences our own participants described when discussing the role of Facebook in mediating their romantic relationships. As we draw out below, the drama that can unfold from a post on Facebook is mediated in various ways on the site. For a number of our participants, whether a disclosure may or may not create or avert drama provides a judgment on whether something should or shouldn't be posted. References to 'drama' or 'being dramatic' as voiced in interviews were also used as a way of emphasising 'growing up' or maturing on the site.

The work of Erving Goffman (1959) is frequently used to explore the notion of performance on social network sites (Pinch 2010; Hogan 2010) and his work maps neatly onto the context of romantic relationships on Facebook. Text, images, links and so on provide a constant flow of activity brought forth by posting on the site. In this respect, Facebook is a platform on which drama is mobilised and deemed more or less 'dramatic' depending on the content of the post, who is doing the posting, and the context of the users' profile within which that post occurs. For Goffman, everyday life is itself a drama that is unfolding constantly. Facebook provides an ideal 'space' in which to be 'in the presence of others'; to have an audience to receive and respond to news posted on the site. Going 'Facebook Official' enables users to make their relationship visible to their own 'networked public', share their joy or loss with others and even ultimately to validate their relationship status.

Giddens (1991) has argued that one of the core characteristics of the 'ideal-typical' form of the 'pure relationship' in late modernity is the declining significance of external validation. He claims that institutions like marriage are no longer 'anchored in external conditions of social or economic life', but have instead become centred on the 'emotional satisfaction... derived from close contact with another' (Giddens 1991: 89). While the division of labour and economic necessity may not be as central to late modern relationships (although, Giddens himself acknowledges this is not true for all socioeconomic groups), it is still clear that the performance of romantic relationships continues to be significant. Continuing debates about marriage equality (especially in Australia most recently)

point to the enduring significance of making relationships visible and celebrating them with friends and family. While we are not suggesting that going 'Facebook Official' might be in the same realm of socio-cultural significance as a wedding, there are interesting parallels in terms of the performativity of the act and the ways in which naming the tie might work to cement it.

Going 'Facebook Official' (or not) might seem pithy and banal for some. And yet, for anyone who has ever 'gone Facebook Official' with a partner, there is an undeniable sense of significance to it. As our participants explain, this sense of significance may be accompanied by drama, anxiety, elation, dread, or any number of other complicating emotions, but the recurrent theme appears to be around significance. As our discussion below demonstrates, Facebook has become a key platform through which relationships are played out, and made visible.

### **Methodology: The Facebook Timelines project**

This paper draws on the Facebook Timelines project conducted with 23 Facebook users in their twenties (average age: 22.1) who had been using Facebook for more than five years. We were interested in this particular demographic because their Facebook use in their teens and twenties would likely coincide with the experience of 'critical' (Thomson et al. 2002) or 'fateful' (Giddens 1991) moments around growing independence (financial, familial, in terms of mobility, and so on) and key milestones like graduation(s) and legislated rites of passage around voting, drinking, driving, and so on.

Interviews took place in 2014 and 2015. Participants were from Liverpool in the UK, and Launceston in Australia. The collaboration between the authors emerged through other publishing projects that brought together their expertise in aspects of mediated youth cultures (for example see Bennett and Robards 2014; Lincoln & Robards 2014, Lincoln & Robards 2016). In this respect, the sites were chosen because they are our home towns and despite the distance, our data reveals little diversity in use based on geographic location. While our sample was relatively small, efforts were made to recruit a diverse group of participants in regards to sex, sexuality, and educational level, through a process of selective snowballing. The primary method of data collection was semi-

structured in-depth interviews, lasting anywhere from one hour to three hours, involving 'scrolling back' through Facebook Timelines with our participants. The participants themselves were in control of the computer (smartphone/tablet) during the scroll back, but were invited to narrate and reflect on what they were seeing for the voice recording. Recordings were transcribed and coded thematically, to reveal themes for analysis. The Facebook Timeline represents an immensely personal and sometimes confronting record of a person's life (Author 2014). With this in mind, we recruited our participants as co-analysts with whom we would 'scrollback' through their Timelines. As we the researchers looked on, participants navigated their way through their own profiles, narrating and analysing their own digital traces as year upon year of their Timeline was opened up exposing more and more about their lives as they (and their friends) had documented it. This process has revealed much about the ways in which young people are using Facebook as an archive of everyday life.

### **Disclosing, shadowing, hiding, and revising relationships on Facebook**

The 'relationship status' on Facebook is a point of messiness and complication for many of our participants, yet their engagement, disengagement, and revisions of this status play a crucial role in their growing up narratives, both explicitly on the site and in the spoken narratives elicited in interview scenarios that run alongside the digitally mediated narratives. Like the formalisation of friendship experienced when users decide whether or not to send or accept a friend request on the site (Author 2010), the act of naming a tie on Facebook can bring that relationship into stark and sometimes awkward focus.

In the following sections we demonstrate how our participants communicate their romantic relationships on the site. Our discussion draws out various 'performances of connection' (Lambert, 2015), that we describe here through four types of relationship disclosures (and non-disclosures), ranging from the explicit, to the implied or 'shadowed' relationships, through to the more actively hidden and later-erased. We use the term 'shadowed' or 'shadowing' here to describe those disclosures that hint at or refer to something in an implied rather than an explicit way, as we will explain further below.

What these four non-exclusive, overlapping and temporally situated types of relationship disclosures highlight is the extent to which Facebook serves as a key site through which relationships are mediated and how public declarations on the site can impact on relationships in other realms. Our participants used a variety of mechanisms for ‘marking out’ romantic relationships on Facebook, for example through changing their relationship status, uploading ‘couple selfies’, using emojis to reflect how they feel for a person, and so on. In the following section we unpack these four types of relationship disclosure/non-disclosure practices through case studies from our Facebook Timelines study.

*Type 1 – Overt relationship disclosure practices: It’s ‘Facebook Official’*

For Mitch, a 20-year-old Australian, studying full-time and working in his family business, his relationship with his girlfriend of four years was an important part of his identity, and his Facebook profile reflected that. He and his girlfriend went ‘Facebook Official’ early on in their relationship, embodying a linear, heterosexual, monogamous, ‘high school sweetheart’ coupling. When we were scrolling through his profile, Mitch’s girlfriend occupied a central place on his Timeline, and almost all of his profile pictures over the past four years included her:

So that’s my girlfriend there.... we were friends... it was a week after that picture was taken we started going out... Yeah, so this would have been just after we started going out in early 2012. And she tends to feature in my pictures from now on.

Mitch and his girlfriend even had ‘matching’ profile pictures, taken at the same events or on the same day. While we were looking through his profile pictures, Mitch explained that he had gone back to delete some old profile pictures from before he met his girlfriend. These pictures no longer ‘reflect[ed]’ who he had become. He explained that the ones he had deleted were edited with effects, filters, and other photoshop manipulations, and represented (for him) a more childish past. He now saw himself differently, and his girlfriend, as featured in the majority of his more recent profile pictures, was central to that.

Louis, aged 20 from the UK, was a full time student in his second year of study. He started to use Facebook in 2008 and his profile had, until recently been primarily centered around his interests in music from posting videos of new bands he had discovered to using his profile as a 'commercial space' to promote his own bands. It had a 'professional' feel to it and as Louis said 'I want the page to look good, I want it to represent how seriously I want to take music as a profession'. In March 2015, Louis met Emma. While up until this point Louis' profile had been dominated by music-related content, in April 2015, he and Emma made the decision to make their relationship 'Facebook Official', at which point they both disclosed that they were 'in a relationship' with each other on the site. Louis received 75 'likes' and 57 comments for this post, the most he had received for anything he had posted on Facebook. Louis explained that this was because for him, it was a critical moment in his life as it was the first time he had updated his profile to 'in a relationship' and he hoped that all the 'likes' and comments were indications of his friends' happiness for him in his new relationship.

When talking with Louis about why he and Emma had decided to make their relationship official on the site, it became clear that Facebook played an important 'behind the scenes' role in their relationship, using 'Facebook Official' as a marker of how serious they were about each other. Louis explained: '[we] were in a relationship a month before we updated our Facebook profiles. I think the reason we took this long to do this was, partially, to test how serious our relationship was going to be - we didn't feel like seeing how we would work as a couple and then possibly having a falling out, changing the information on Facebook twice in a short space of time'. Going 'Facebook Official' too early in a relationship brought with it the risk of unnecessary drama and perhaps pressure for the new couple. Once they had made the decision to go 'Facebook Official', their relationship was fore fronted on Louis' profile that began to feature photographs of them together, at their University prom and so on. Louis also changed his cover photo to an image of him and Emma. Like Mitch (20), being in a relationship was an important part of Louis' identity that he wanted represented on the site as a sign of 'progress in my life' and while his profile had not become dominated

by images of him with his girlfriend, they certainly played a key role in it with new images regularly being added either by Louis or Emma in amongst a continuing flow of music –related posts.

### *Type 2 – Implied and ‘shadowed’ relationship disclosures*

Tina was 22 and from the UK. Her relationship with her girlfriend, Bec, as represented on Facebook was complicated. Tina had broken up with Bec around 6 months before she was interviewed, however, they were still ‘friends’ on the site despite having no other contact (via phone, text or in person). According to Tina, de-friending her ex-girlfriend was not really an option: ‘all hell would break loose... she likes drama and it would end up being an argument’. Tina’s relationship with Bec as it was mediated through Facebook had always been complicated because they each projected their relationship with each other in quite different ways. Tina would tag Bec in photographs posted on her profile page so they would appear on Bec’s profile. Bec, on the other hand, did not. Tina had updated her status to ‘in a relationship’ and had named Bec. Again, Bec had done neither.

Tina and Bec were living out their relationship in two different ‘modes’ of exposure and disclosure on Facebook. For Tina, their relationship was performed in explicit terms. For her girlfriend, posts only hinted at or ‘shadowed’ their relationship. We use the term ‘shadow’ here to describe a form of disclosure that is implied or indirect. For example, like ‘sub-tweeting’ or ‘vague-bookings’, a post can suggest or hint at a meaning that can be deciphered by some but not by others, or perhaps is written for one person in particular. Unlike ‘vague-bookings’, however, the objective here is not necessarily to seek attention, but rather to avoid being explicitly and overtly performative. The subtlety of a ‘shadow post’ seemed much more appealing for our participants. The post needs no obvious definable features such as a person’s name, but leaves enough of a reference for it to be understood by its intended audience. As we see in the example of Tina below, shadowing is also a form of protection. As her relationship ends she is able to ‘take shelter’ on Facebook using the site to reflect an image of the relationship as still alive until she feels ready to deal with the reality of no longer being with her partner.

In discussing how the end of romantic relationships play out on Facebook, Tina articulated how, in her own words, a series of 'fading out' stages were performed on the site. In the first stage, the relationship status is hidden so that nobody can see it. Hiding the status represents a sort of suspension of the relationship, leaving time for personal reflection on the end of the relationship before going 'Facebook Official' with the breakup. Next, and while the status is hidden, Tina described how she removed Bec's name from the 'in a relationship' status, breaking the tie between accounts. Once this was done, Tina made visible 'in a relationship' (without Bec's name) once again. This meant that Tina was not obviously stating their breakup on Facebook; rather her profile was edited subtly, over a period of time so that eventually the status could be removed altogether without attention being drawn to it. Meanwhile, outside of Facebook the relationship had already ended with close friends aware of the 'real' relationship status.

What we see here is how a relationship status is managed in quite complex ways that do not always marry up to what is happening in the relationship outside of the site. Being able to perform 'in a relationship' on Facebook even though she was no longer in one, helped Tina to come to terms with the break up, with the eventual removal of the 'in a relationship' status signifying a point at which she felt reconciled with her single self. The Facebook status temporally served as a bridge through which her relationship status could remain connected to her ex-girlfriend, when actually the relationship had come to an end. Facebook was used to mediate the relationship in a way that was useful to Tina, serving as a therapeutic tool to help her to come to terms with the split.

Mark was a 22-year-old Australian DJ, student, and LGBTIQ activist. Mark was a trans man in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend, and was largely open about his relationship on Facebook. His girlfriend, however, was part of a relatively conservative family who did not approve of her relationship with Mark. Thus, like Tina (22, UK), Mark had to negotiate a sometimes uncomfortable duality with the way he disclosed his relationship with his girlfriend, and also how those disclosures were rendered visible (or not) on his girlfriend's own profile. Mark would post images of romantic dinners, with descriptions like 'date night with my girl', and hashtags like #girlfriend, #love, and #mygirl. His girlfriend, however, would rarely be visible in these images, and never tagged. These

posts 'shadowed' their relationship, making it visible but not explicit. In the images where Mark's girlfriend was pictured – a selfie of the pair kissing, for instance – those images were not linked to his girlfriend's profile. Thus, like Tina and her girlfriend, while Mark's relationship was front-and-centre on his own profile, it was mostly hidden for his girlfriend, producing two very different relationship performances.

### *Type 3 – The intended absence of relationship traces*

As we have explained, there is a certain significance and resonance to the declaration of a relationships on Facebook for many. However, changing a status from 'single' to 'in a relationship' and then, often, back again is not straight-forward. To reiterate of one of Facebook's original status suggestions, 'it's complicated', and there are varying degrees of complication as we have started to unpack above. This complexity and the associated drama intensifies as we consider our final two types of relationship disclosures/non-disclosures: the intended absence of relationship traces, and the termination or erasure of those traces.

Nathan (27, from the UK), a social media manager and sports fan, primarily used Facebook to document his frequent trips to sporting events, mostly football all over the world. Nathan used Facebook as a sort of 'travel log', although one driven by images rather than text. As a social media manager, his use of Facebook was particularly interesting because he was managing multiple profiles in his professional life, including the profiles of upcoming sports people as well as his own. In this respect, he would often find himself working each day with multiple profiles open; updating and switching between them constantly.

Since joining Facebook in 2006, when he first started university, Nathan had never really made personal or self-reflexive comments on his profile page. He rarely posted a status update or photos in which he featured. The few photos that did exist that he could be seen in were mostly posted by other people who had tagged him in them, again reiterating the significance of others in co-performing identity through the affordance of the tag. Nathan recalled one occasion when tagging

had created some tension between him and his then girlfriend with whom he was having a long distance relationship.

As a very private person, Nathan had chosen not to display a relationship status on his profile when he was with his girlfriend. She, on the other hand did. Like our examples with Mark and Tina above, where relationship disclosures often only played out through 'shadow posts', in this scenario Nathan's girlfriend was the one seeking to name up and make their relationship explicit, not Nathan. Despite several trips and experiences together, Nathan chose not post any photographs of them together, continuing his relative anonymity on the site. Here, Nathan was not even 'shadowing' their relationship, preferring instead to keep it intentionally invisible. Nathan explained that this was because the 'self' he presented on the site was as that of a sports fan maintaining a fairly professional, anonymised profile. However, these efforts to present a very particular self on the site became compromised when his then girlfriend tagged him in small number of photographs of them together.

In one instance, Nathan recalled being tagged in a photograph, which he subsequently un-tagged. His girlfriend then 're-tagged' the photo, only for Nathan to un-tag it again. The repeated un-tagging by Nathan was not well received by his girlfriend: 'she shouted at me, yeah, I do remember her shouting at me'. Nathan explained that for his girlfriend, this was a signifier of how he felt about their relationship (embarrassed, secretive and so on) while she wanted to share their relationship openly. Nathan's decision to leave the image tagged eventually was simply to 'stop an argument', despite his persistence in creating a 'depersonalised' profile. This example also represents the mediating role that Facebook can play in relationships, to the point at which the relationship itself can seemingly be made meaningful or meaningless by what is disclosed (or not) on the site.

Robert was a 25-year-old medical doctor in Australia. Robert identified as gay, and explained this was difficult for him as he had conservative parents from Hong Kong. Robert was out to his parents as bisexual, which for him was intended as an intermediary step that he did not progress from after he met disapproval from his parents. When scrolling back through his Timeline, Robert

was able to pinpoint when he had come out to his parents (as bisexual) and how this corresponded with a difficult time in his life, directly after the end of his first relationship with a man. The breakup and then coming out to his parents was difficult for Robert, but after working through this period it also marked the beginning of a new 'chapter' in his life where he became less of a 'hermit': 'For the next two-ish years... I was in the party scene'. This led to Robert entering into other relationships. While Robert was 'out' on Facebook (interested in: men), and at the time of our interview had been in a serious relationship for the previous year, this relationship was not visible on Facebook, either explicitly or implicitly. He was very conscious of not articulating or even hinting at or 'shadowing' his relationship with his partner, out of concern for how his conservative family might view this. Whereas for Nathan and his girlfriend, the intended absence of a relationship trace on Facebook was a point of tension and drama, for Robert and his boyfriend, the intended absence of a relationship trace was part of an accepted survival strategy.

#### *Type 4 – When it's no longer Facebook Official: Erasure and revision*

Ending a relationship that has been articulated and recorded on Facebook can be a significant undertaking. As Light and Cassidy (2014) explain, disconnecting *with* Facebook is an important part of how the site operates, and how users manage their presence through the site: blocking, de-friending, unfollowing, hiding. Despite a focus in the literature on how Facebook works to connect users, disconnection (especially when it comes to the separation of romantic partners) must also figure into our understandings of the site, as Light and Cassidy (2014) argue. In terms of relationships, whereas Tina (22, UK) did not de-friend her girlfriend on Facebook after they broke up, other participants saw de-friending as an important and sometimes even necessary act after the end of a relationship. Mary, a 27-year-old Australian finance worker, was one of them. Scrolling back through Mary's Facebook Timeline, a comment from an ex-boyfriend caught her attention:

Mary: That's my ex-boyfriend... wishing us a Merry Christmas. That's funny to see.

Int.: How so? Is that weird?

Mary: Yeah, it's kind of weird because I guess I don't really remember those days very much anymore. A lot of it's blocked out... Most of the photos have been deleted.

Int.: You did that?

Mary: Yeah, [current boyfriend] wasn't happy with seeing those kind of things... I did get caught out the other day. He found a picture of us on there so that was awkward.

Int.: You deleted a lot of that stuff after you started seeing [current boyfriend]?

Mary: Yeah.

Mary went on to explain that her relationship with her ex-boyfriend of four years had ended poorly. Scrolling through posts from during this time, she recalled sleeping on her father's couch, and generally going through a difficult time. Because so much of their relationship had been mediated on Facebook, Mary considered deleting her account and starting over in order to get away from those memories ('It was a four year relationship so pretty much everything on there was based on that part of my life'), but did not want to erase the rest of her life as mediated on the site in the process. She also recalled being 'sick of people' and wanting to be 'left alone' during the break-up, and habitually accessing Facebook only exacerbated that, so she deactivated her account for several weeks. This aligns with Tina's (22, UK) experience of her break-up with her girlfriend, where she gradually 'faded out' the relationship tie over a month, in order to avoid unsolicited sympathetic contact from friends.

After Mary started seeing her current boyfriend, and it became clear that he was uncomfortable with the images of her and her ex together on her Timeline, she scrolled back to erase these images, removing these traces of her previous relationship. Even at the time of our interview, several years into her relationship with her current boyfriend, she remarked that she had been 'caught out' recently, with her current boyfriend finding a picture of Mary with her ex still on Facebook in an old album. That Mary's current boyfriend was scrolling back through old photos of her reveals something about how users of the site interact with and return to the digital traces of the people in their lives. In this way, for Mary's boyfriend, Facebook wasn't just a way to 'get to know her' at the beginning of her relationship, as we described earlier. Rather, there is some kind of interplay here with an archived version of Mary. To enrol Hogan's (2010) metaphor of the identity 'exhibition' (over the more widely used 'performance', in line with Goffman's (1959)

dramaturgical framework), Mary's boyfriend is returning to previous elements of her digital trace to wander this enduring exhibition. It's unclear if Mary's boyfriend was 'checking up on her' or reminiscing or simply scrolling idly through his partner's profile, but that he resurfaced this image with Mary, and that she deleted it, points to the ongoing significance of Facebook in mediating relationships even long after they have ended.

Ali (23), a student from the UK, was adamant that he would avoid going 'Facebook Official' in the future after a rather turbulent 5 year relationship with an ex-girlfriend in which 'every problem we had you could source back to [Facebook].' He explained: 'it was small things to big things, so I was really good friends with a girl at school, really close but it was completely platonic, but if she would even like a status of mine I'd get it in the neck for a week from my girlfriend'. There were a number of instances where Ali's girlfriend appeared to be very jealous and would use Facebook to 'check who I was talking to, what I was doing, where I was, all these things.' These problems persisted even when his girlfriend moved overseas. When they got back together for a final time, they took the decision *not* to be friends on the site acknowledging that Facebook had been so damaging to their relationship up to this point. Thus, they attempted a 'Facebook Free' relationship, which meant they had no access to each other's profiles. However, the relationship ended, and even though they were not friends on the site, Ali's ex-girlfriend circumnavigated this by using her mother's profile (who Ali was friends with) to find out if he was with another girl and what he had been up to. In this respect, even though they were no longer 'Facebook Official', in a relationship or friends on the site, his girlfriend found 'a way in' to continue monitoring his life. To return to Light and Cassidy's (2014) enrolment of 'disconnection' as a necessary component of social life as applied to Facebook, in Ali's case disconnection here (from his ex-girlfriend) was subverted. His attempts to inscribe some boundaries around this relationship – even after it ended – seem to have failed, given the relative invisibility that Facebook's design can afford to audiences.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have explored romantic relationships in the growing up narratives of young people in their twenties on Facebook. We have described four non-exclusive and overlapping types of

relationship disclosures on the site, that are temporally situated, changing over time and subject to revision. We set these types of disclosures out through case studies centred on our participants, to better understand the complexity of relationship articulation, maintenance, and termination when mediated (or not) through Facebook. We have emphasised the notion of sustained use in this discussion because this focus has enabled us to explore the narratives of our participants as they have been disclosed over a period of five years or more on the site. In this respect, we have been able to explore how romantic relationships have been documented on Facebook, unpacking how and why these narratives have changed over time, within the wider context of 'growing up' on the site.

As our discussions have demonstrated, Facebook is a central point for our participants through which relationships are played out. For many, the site has come to play a crucial role in mediating the many stages of a relationship from beginning to end. We argue that going 'Facebook Official' might offer a sense of legitimacy to a relationship for some, but getting to this point is often fraught with complexities and influenced by the ways the relationship is lived out both on and outside of the site. For the young queer people in our study, seen through the examples of Tina (22), Mark (22) and Robert (25), the ways in which queer relationships are performed, made visible, and named on Facebook can be contentious, especially for individuals with conservative family members. In other instances, for example with Tina (22) and Nathan (27), variances in how relationships are disclosed on Facebook within couples can hint at what Goffman (1959) might describe as 'back stage' juggling acts, complicated by drama, miscommunications, and power imbalances that have always caused tension in romantic and couplings.

Our use of 4 types of relationship disclosures go some way to unraveling these complexities and to understand the role Facebook plays in contemporary relationships. Crucially, we have sought to highlight the ways in which Facebook privileges neat linearity and monogamy in relationships, and how disclosures of intimacies to networked publics are navigated by users as part of everyday life. We have made use of Marwick and boyd's (2014) concept of 'drama', a term that emerged from many of the discussions we had with our participants about disclosing their relationships on

Facebook. Facebook is a site on which drama is constantly mobilised and thus our participants talked about the various ways in which drama was avoided, averted, created, embraced and manipulated on the site. We have also utilized Light and Cassidy's (2014) application of 'disconnection' as 'social lubricant' on Facebook to illustrate how disconnecting from Facebook features in the 'fading out' or ending of a relationship, or erasing a past relationship when a new one begins. Use of this term has also enabled us to illustrate how 'disconnecting' from Facebook can be subverted by users finding (relatively easy) alternative ways to access a profile even if 'de-friending' has 'officially' taken place.

It is also clear that in many ways, Facebook troubles the complexity and messiness of these relationships simply by asking for them to be named, making them visible in different ways, and by privileging specific kinds of normative relationships. Consider Mary's (22, Australia) experience of going 'Facebook Official':

Interviewer: Do you remember whether you and [current boyfriend] were Facebook Official in that there was a relationship status update?

Mary: Not for ages.

Interviewer: Not for ages?

Mary: Like seven or eight months. We were seeing each other but just, I don't know. There were a lot of ups and downs. He's kind of the same as me on Facebook. He doesn't like going on there too much...

The 'ups and downs' that Mary is referring to here are difficult to articulate on Facebook. The performative dimension of going 'Facebook Official' is anchored to a linear and uncomplicated narrative about romantic relationships with a heteronormative progression from dating to engagement to marriage to having children at its core. While Facebook provides opportunities for separation and ending relationships, drawing attention to these ruptures appears at odds with the overall 'positive' forms of disclosure that Facebook appears to foster, at least for our participants. Further, during the early stages of a relationship, as Mary (27) explained above, going 'Facebook

Official' can be very awkward. Thus, for some of our own participants, it became easier to ignore going 'Facebook Official' altogether, as they avoided it early on and then it seemed inappropriate after a year or so when the relationship had already become serious.

Others like Louis (20, UK) and his new partner Emma considered carefully when it was the right time to go 'Facebook Official'. When they did make it official, not only did this formalize their relationship and make it public to their 'friends', it also served as a (highly visible) marker of the progress Louis was making in his life: a critical moment in his growing up narrative as documented on the site.

What our discussions illustrate then, is that Facebook is a key platform upon which contemporary relationships are performed, mediated and formalised. Making a relationship 'Facebook Official' is anything but straightforward: it is imbued with drama, complications, tensions and emotions. At the same time, naming and making visible relationship ties on Facebook has clearly entered into a popular, normative understanding of how romantic relationships progress and are marked out by rites of passage, especially for young users. The long-term implications and conventions around going 'Facebook Official' (or not) remain to be seen, but as we have demonstrated in this study, attending to the increasingly longitudinal digital traces that constitute enduring digital media can reveal much about contemporary relationships and how they are remembered.

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