

Social Media Boundaries in Indian Marital Relationships: Exploring the Dynamics of Blocking and Unfriending Spouses on Facebook

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Abstract

Internet addiction, as noted by K. S. Young (2009), affects individuals who spend extended periods using the internet for socialization and sharing personal details. This addiction can lead to a lack of presentation in romantic relationships, childcare, family, friendship, and work. Online friends can become secret romantic partners due to the anonymity provided by the medium. Additionally, online affairs may negatively impact marriage quality, as dependents emotionally and socially draw from their marriage and romantic life to continue their online affairs. This study investigates blocking and unfriending behaviours on Facebook in marital relationships, focusing on privacy and boundaries management through in-depth interviews of married couples N=20. Factors like trust issues, conflicts, privacy concerns, and boundary regulation influence these behaviours. Understanding social media's role in shaping intimate connections can help develop healthy digital interactions.

Keywords: Social media, Marital Relationships, Blocking, Unfriending, Surveillance, intimacy.

Introduction

The high visibility and persistence of content on Facebook make it easier for users to locate posts through both the News Feed and users' profiles. However, these affordances led many participants to "think twice" before sharing content (Vitak & Kim, 2014). Self-disclosures on Facebook are associated with network members in multiple ways (e.g., tagging, mentions, comments), and these connections sometimes led to increased concerns related to self-presentation and privacy (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014). Facebook's most recent profile overhaul places the persistence and visibility affordances of the site at the forefront by simplifying the process of searching and moving through a user's profile, as well as giving users the ability to highlight or minimize individual pieces of content. For a user with disclosure goals related to identity clarification or creating a personal record, these developments are likely to be welcome, but they also introduce several risks (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). The most common reasons why adults get unfriended on Facebook are related to inappropriate topics, such as posting about different beliefs, criticism, and threatening others. Posting too frequently about unimportant topics is also a common reason for unfriending (Aziz et al., 2022).

The impact of Social Media on intimate relationships

Prolonged usage creates a dependency on the medium similarly, individuals who are using Facebook for a long time get addicted to it. The constant use makes the users post their social, personal and work information which may create privacy issues for them (Lee, Cheung, & Thadani, 2012).

Excessive use of Facebook and other social media creates psychological difficulties which negatively affect the quality of romantic relationships and marriage life (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

K. S. Young (2009) says that an individual's internet addiction is like drug and alcohol addiction. The addiction level can affect their personal, professional life resulting in failure in the workplace and dissatisfaction in marriage life leading to separation of the couple (Quittner, 1997). Individuals who are using the internet for a longer period use it to socialize, especially meeting new people through these mediums fancy them to share their personal details online (K. S. Young, 2009). Dependents on the Internet lack presentation in romantic relationships, childcare, relationship with family and extended family members, friendship, escape from day-to-day work such as laundry grocery shopping etc. (K. S. Young, 2009). Internet addiction mostly affects romantic relationships, as the new online friend or friend can turn into a secret romantic partner. The possibility of turning online friends into romantic partners is that they are excited at the initial interactions and the medium supports anonymity which allows the users to open their secrets and get a place or person to vent out their emotions. Online affairs may affect the quality of the marriage, as the dependents emotionally and socially draw from their marriage and romantic life to continue their online affair (K. S. Young, 2009).

American psychologists introduced a term called Facebook Addiction Disorder which is similar to an Internet addiction disorder. Loneliness and depression are the major psychological problems that induce addiction towards the internet and social networking sites. Addiction plays as an escapism from real-world problems and lives in the virtual world (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Loneliness may be the cause of prolonged Internet usage, individuals isolate themselves to continue their online interaction (J. Kim, R. Larose & W. Peng, 2009). Anonymity serves as a big tool for individuals who are uncomfortable in face-to-face interactions, find online or social media less risky to express their emotions.

Social support is very essential for the psychological wellbeing of any individual. Researchers found out that social support providing an emotional and concrete support moderated psychological health among individuals who are in a terrible marriage life and widowers. Individuals who receive high social support have a better psychological wellbeing which reduces marital stress among spouses (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Individuals with better psychological health tend to have less stress and experience a happy married life. (Hewitt et al., 2010; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The support given by a spouse in marital relationship cannot be replaced by any other individuals, though the individual receives social support, support given by spouse provides good psychological health (Coyne and DeLongis, 1986).

Marriage and long-term romantic relationships are built upon love, sexual desire, mutual respect, intimate communication, better understanding, childcare and financial commitments. When any of these are not given by the spouse, the other spouse is forced to have an impression that the relationship is failing or incomplete, one spouse's level of satisfaction affects the other's satisfaction. (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Whisman, Uebelacker, & Weinstock, 2004).

Researchers found that individuals who are unhappy in romantic relationships and marriage life tend to use Facebook more than happy married couples. Lack of psychological support from spouse or romantic partner increases Facebook usage, it provides social support when they undergo social as well as psychological transitions (Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013).

The communication channel on Facebook such as status updates, photos, messenger, profile information etc. help users to find out similar and desirable persons and acquaintances and friends. Individuals whose spouses are diagnosed with depression are studied to find out the relational uncertainty among the couple. Though they are a married couple, they feel reluctant to talk or discuss certain issues with each other. Such issues can cause emotional and psychological stress leading to depression in certain cases. Uncertainty and lack of self-expression are seen in couples and researchers agree that there are some topics which the couple show unwillingness to discuss with each other. The changing lifestyle makes individuals work more than 12 hours a day. The increasing number of dual-

earner families distress negative consequences on the mental health of men and women (Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). Couples easily get dissatisfied when one of the spouses doesn't spend enough time with the other. Women, especially working women face difficulties in time management, they are in more demand for work as well as childcare and other domestic chores (Loscocco & Walzer, 2013). Women majorly feel or are made to feel responsible for the problems that arise between the couple. They are made to adjust themselves under certain circumstances for the sake of their better marriage life and their children's future (Beach et al., 2003). A culture like collectivism tolerates male domination in society and family, and women are seen as fewer dominant persons in a family. Women are taught to be submissive in such a culture, as the power status belongs to men (Bulanda, 2011).

Research problem

Indian marriages are majorly arranged by elders of the family. Romance and love in Indian marriages were impractical and dangerous (Desai, McCormick & Gaeddert, 1989). Thus, two major variables are taken into consideration Gender and choice of spouse selection (Arranged and Love) other variables are Self-disclosure, restriction, frustration and trust.

Women disclose more personal information with close friends than men, while men share intimate information and indulge in intimate relationships with online friends (P Sheldon, 2008). Facebook-related jealousy in romantic relationships leads to the surveillance of partners (Marshal.T., 2013; Marshal et al., 2009). Frequent Facebook usage leads to jealousy among romantic partners. Women are more jealous than men. According to Tonkunaga (2011), Facebook users had reported that their most frequently done activity online is checking their romantic partner's profile. Marshal et al., (2012) found out that the amount of time spent on Facebook is directly related to the amount of jealousy and relationship issues among couples. Utz and Beukeboom (2011) defined anxious jealousy as the fear that a partner may cheat them in their relationship, while possessive is defined as monitoring their partner's behaviour or being more possessive of them, even in the absence of real infidelity when a partner is wrongly accused of infidelity or an anxious partner constantly being possessive.

Surveillance reduces trust among partners, constant surveillance and negative feeling on a romantic partner will gradually reduce the trust and functionality between the partner leading to temporary or permanent breakup in the relationship (Tosun, 2012). Interpersonal surveillance through SNS is influenced by age, time spent by the individual on their partner's profiles, integration of SNS into daily routines and internet self-efficacy (Tokunaga, 2010).

Possessive and anxious partners indulge in Facebook surveillance to get information about their spouse which in turn increases the amount of time spent on Facebook and a higher degree of jealousy (Muisse et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2012). Trust in romantic relationships is reduced due to high Facebook usage.

Research design

An interview schedule for in-depth interview is also done to get more information from the selected sample. Those who have shown interest in participating in in-depth interview has been asked questions regarding privacy issues in Facebook, Self -disclosure, relationship difficulties among married couple.

The method used to select sample for this research is Purposive sampling method. The samples are given a brief introduction regarding the research and topics they must answer, once they are comfortable and willing to answer, they were given a structured questionnaire. In-depth interviews were conducted to get a depth information from the couple and married people using Facebook. The participants were selected from the survey respondents who have showed their acceptance to participate in In-depth interview. Two couple, eight men and eight women whose partners/spouse use Facebook were interviewed.

The questions were asked based on the understanding they have with their partner/spouse and their Facebook usage, trust and love between the partners, Friendship with online friends, misunderstandings between partners/spouse regarding Facebook use, disclosure, online friends. The participants were interviewed individually without the presence of the spouse. The interview had gone offline (Face-to-face) and online (video call and messenger). The mode of interview (offline or online) was selected by the participant's convenience and comfortability.

Data Analysis

According to the Mc Cracken (1988) the collected in-depth interview data were analyzed based on his 5-step analytic process. The researcher read the transcripts of the interview and made notations. No computer software was used in this procedure as the number of the sample interviewed is 20 (10 men & 10 women), four subject experts were also interviewed (2 Advocate & 2 Psychologist). Thus, in total 24 in-depth interviews were taken. Separate questions were asked for the respondents and subject expert.

In the step 1 analysis, the notations marked were the self-disclosure in Facebook, hours they spent in Facebook, the important topics they discuss with their spouse and online friends/activity, the emotions they come across using Facebook with or without their partners. Most of the questions asked in the interview were the extension of the survey questionnaire, for example do you trust your partner/spouse, has 5-point scale answers in the questionnaire, in the interview the participant has been asked to explain the elements of trust they show to their spouse.

Demographic Information of the Participants of the In-depth Interview

S.NO	Participant	Age	Years of marital relationship	Education	Occupation	Income (in lakhs)	No.of children	Family setup*	Marriage **
1.	M1	31	2	Arts	Private employee	4-5l	-	nuclear	A
2.	M2	30	3	Engineering	Business	2-3l	-	joint	A
3.	M3	37	8	Arts	Govt	6-7l	1	Nuclear	L
4.	M4	35	3	Arts	Private	6l	1	Nuclear	A
5.	M5	28	2	Engineering	Business	5l	-	Joint	L+A
6.	M6	27	1	Higher Secondary	Private	2l	-	LD	A
7.	M7	34	4	Professional	Private	7-8l	2	LD	A
8.	M8	30	5	Arts	IT	5l	1	Nuclear	A
9.	M9	27	1	Arts	IT	3l	-	Joint	L+A
10.	M10	35	3	Engineering	Private	4l	1	Nuclear	A
11.	F1	33	5	Professional	IT	5-6l	1	LD	L
12.	F2	28	2	Arts	Govt	5l	-	Joint	A
13.	F3	27	1	Arts	Homemaker	-	-	Nuclear	A
14.	F4	32	4	Engineering	Private	7l	-	LD	L
15.	F5	35	3	Engineering	Private	3l	1	Nuclear	A
16.	F6	29	6	Arts	Homemaker	-	2	Joint	A
17.	F7	32	2	Professional	Govt	7l	-	LD	A
18.	F8	25	1	Engineering	IT	4l	-	Nuclear	A

19	F9	29	2	Engineering	IT	31	-	Joint	L+A
20	F10	33	2	Arts	Govt	61	1	LD	A

***LD- Long-distance**

****A-Arranged Marriage, L- Love Marriage, L+A- Love and Arranged**

Extracting themes from the recorded interview and the testimonies of the participants.

Online Surveillance

Marriage or Romantic relationships are said to be built on trust and loyalty. Checking one other for extra-marital affairs and infidelity cannot make a successful relationship. Earlier it was woman's mental instinct or husband's mental instinct that made spouse's character a questionable one, unless they really had one. The growth of technology enhanced and enabled people used it to do surveillance in stealth mode.

Today people use Facebook to seek information about their partner through profile information, interests, posts they uploaded, posts they liked, comments etc. Participants answered that when they login into Facebook, they visit their partners' Facebook page to read their post updates (texts, pictures, video links etc.), comments for those posts, emoticons etc. Facebook enables them to explore their partner's history of updates and pictures, friends list, relationship status etc without the knowledge of their partner. Berger C & Calabrese R (1975) call this as a passive strategy of surveillance, knowing about the partner without their knowledge. Female partners in this study answered that they visit their partner's Facebook page to check on their present activity updates. Partners those who are living away from their spouse/partner check their current online activity through Messenger (online/offline), WhatsApp (Last seen/Online/Offline).

I usually see his Facebook to check whether he is in office or having lunch with his colleagues. He has the habit of sharing every moment in Facebook and Instagram. So, it's quite easy for me to keep an eye on him. I don't think it's wrong. (33, F10, Long distance Married Partner).

When partners live apart due to work or family situations, they tend to miss each other deliberately. They use technology to get rid of the distance between them. Partners living together answered that they visit their partners' profiles frequently. The couple who was into arranged marital relationships expressed that they show a keen interest in checking their partner's profile to get to know about them, posts that had been updated before their marital relationship, pictures and profile pictures. They also check the number of opposite-gender users in their partners' friends lists.

Surveillance doesn't end with checking updates, friends list or keeping a tab on the partner, the true face partner surveillance ends in dilemmas such as checking for infidelity and extra-marital affairs. Research on Facebook and other social networking sites related to infidelity in marriage relationships say that emotional bonding or commitment between online members is felt to be a threat for the spouse. Anxiety plays an important role in attachment style among partners which can induce online surveillance, early experiences in relationships negatively affect trust. Previous research say that surveillance can negatively affect the romance and intimacy between partners though it doesn't involve any infidelity in relationships (Tokunaga, 2011; Gershon, 2011). A statistic in UK divorce site found that over 20% of the divorce cases mentioned Facebook, while AAML (2010) found that prolonged use of Facebook can create conflicts among partners leading to divorce. Anxious individuals do more surveillance on spouses to check on any relationship alternative.

"I checked him when he proposed. To know what type of person, his interests, and our similarities. Now I rarely check his page as I know of him more personally Facebook checking seems to be not necessary for me".

Social networking sites enable us to get a lot of information about a person from his profile. Name, date of birth, mobile number, hometown, Education, work, places visited which are automatically tagged by geo-tagging facility in mobile devices, friends in their list and many other information they provided. The information might be public or semi-public (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Research by Joinson (2008) said that after adding a known person (offline friend, Family member, extended family member, colleague etc.) or an unknown person (stranger but attractive enough to add as an online friend) individuals do surveillance more often. Several researchers found out that college students do surveillance on their romantic partners, ex-romantic partner, friends and acquaintances (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Stern & Taylor, 2007; Lampe et al., 2006; Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez, & Schuler, 2008).

Social Relationship maintenance

Most of the studies on Facebook usage revealed that the medium is used to create and maintain relationships. It influences interpersonal communication among individuals of similar interests (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2009). Brayant & Marmo (2009) found the strategies of relationship maintenance on Facebook, which are accepting/adding a person to their friend list, joint activities such as liking other's statuses, poking, private messages, monitoring etc. The relationship is structured via the emotional support received and given among the partners. The behaviours that demonstrate better relationships are expressing love, support, congratulating each other, sharing condolences. Individuals in Facebook and other SNS use different types of communication such as textual updates, pictures, public and semi-public messages and private messages. Online friendship thickens by more and frequent communication, tagging in posts, comments and sending private messages (Sosik & Bazarova, 2014). Relationship formation and maintenance in online environment involves similar interest, acquaintances from offline environment.

Female participants answered that they add new friends of similar likes and interests, acquaintances from workplace, meetings, and Professional bodies in Facebook. Male participants find Facebook as a tool to communicate and self-represent them, maintaining contacts with old and new friends. When it comes to partners' mutual relationship maintenance through Facebook, the initial part of Facebook activity is updating their Relationship status in Facebook profile information. They tag their partner's Facebook profile ID in Dyadic pictures, Profile pictures, sharing relationship relevant information through texts, pictures and emoticons. Exhibiting the strength and depth of their relationship in Facebook makes them to feel comfortable about the relationship among friends and family. The quality time spent by the partners with their family had been decreased due to increased Facebook usage. Couples who participated in this study agreed that they spent less time with their partner such as Face-to-Face conversation; rather they share more time in Facebook with their partner. Long-distant married couples said to spent more time in Facebook to get in touch with their spouse.

We used to go out for movies, malls together. But I always felt that we never spent time together without Facebook, WhatsApp and other apps. Posting our pictures responding to the comments posted in our pictures eats up our quality time. (31, M1).

Constant use of Facebook among couple makes them to be distracted from domestic chores. Participants agreed that their Facebook usage made them to forget to retrieve family duties. Couple are in long-distant marriage they usually get occupied with Facebook friends and activities. The time spent in Facebook, creating social ties, online friendship produces negative impact on personal relationships especially marriage (Boyd, 2008; Lewis, 2009).

Blocking/Unfriending Spouse

Individuals' online behaviour can be like their offline behaviour in Romantic relationships. If a relationship is broken the concerned individuals tend to break up or seek legal action to permanently

part from other. (Tokunaga, 2011). Similar notion can be seen reflected in online environment among married individuals.

“My wife blocks me in Facebook whenever we have a big fight, I know her password but I never opened her id to unblock me” (30, M2).

Facebook enables its users to unfriend and block online members. If a user blocks anyone, they can't see the user's profile until unblocked and added as a friend. Blocking and unblocking can be done without many hassles. When conflicts arise among married couple they unfriend and block depending on the seriousness of the issue or the mood swing of the individual. Researchers say that immature people block others in online, they do this when they can able to handle any individual online (Boyd, 2007).

“He always brings in argument on my Facebook activity, if any opposite gender friends like, comments my post he would enquire about them. To stop our fight, I block him sometimes. I don't wish to deactivate my account, this is my only social connection” (35, F5).

Blocking a spouse temporarily makes the spouse feel being avoided. Some serious emotional outbreak can happen when individual get to know that they are blocked by their spouse. The blocked individual is pushed to feel avoided. Avoidance from spouse makes individual to be depressed followed by negativity in marriage satisfaction. Women feel more depressed when avoided by spouse then men (Tiikainen & Heikkinen, 2005).

“I haven't deleted any posts when my husband says to do so. We end-up with arguments on the content I share. I had a thought of unfriending him” (27, F3).

Couple during their initial period of marriage/romantic life, use Facebook to know about each other. Through the posts, pictures, posts liked by the individual express the ideology and perceptions they follow. A relationship therapist wrote in Psychology Today (online magazine), jealous individual monitors their spouse's Facebook and try to manipulate the content they share. The restriction made by spouse are sharing pictures, sending private messages to online friend, posting perceptions and ideologies on certain issues which the spouse doesn't approve. When the user updates a post on politics i.e. supporting a particular political party, the spouse who is the opposer of the party compel the user to remove it, if not the user gets constant emotional stress from spouse. Participants (M3, M6, M7, F8) say spouse restriction worsens their Facebook experience, they had thoughts of deactivating their Facebook account.

“Me and my wife have different ideology on certain issues, i.e. religion, Politics. When I post few things about the religion we belong and other religion my wife restricts me to do such in future. She had asked me to delete few posts of mine saying that they are against her (and her family) beliefs” (27, M9)

Indian constitution offers freedom of expression to its citizens, providing right to express one's ideas opinions in form of speech, writing etc. Some individuals having jealous and immature spouse experience control and restriction in expressing ideologies.

Discussions

Facebook intrusion and romantic jealousy may share some underlying similarities, such as negative thoughts about the partner and the relationship and associated conflict with relationship partners. Jealousy and comparing marriage life with online friends are another major problem among married couples. People share their happy and better perspective of life on Facebook. The individuals in their friends list see such activities through the newsfeed of Facebook page, observe the perspectives as their everyday marriage life. Obviously jealous feel arises when individual see others happy when his/her life has some difficulties. The problem can worsen itself when they try to follow and replicate

the same things they admired from their online friend. Inequality in work, family and economic status often makes others feel jealous. Similarly, an individual can be jealous of their married partner too. Salovey & Rodin (1986) explained the cause of jealousy are, when someone has everything, a large close life, better looking personality and the top rated is when they find out their lover is having an affair. Individual with emotional instability compare them with other, which is called as social comparison. It is possible that a person may block their spouse on Facebook due to relationship issues or conflicts that have spilled over into their online interactions. It is also possible that the person may want to limit their spouse's access to their personal information or posts on Facebook.

Conclusion

Facebook users often experience jealousy from their online friends, leading to negative experiences like lack of trust, frustration, and depression. Emotional involvement with online friends is considered the most unfaithful behavior among couples. A married couple living in long distances may experience higher Facebook use intensity, leading to feelings of loneliness and insecurity in their relationship. Social networking sites, particularly Facebook, can facilitate extra-marital affairs in a stealth mode. Women are more likely to end a relationship if their partner is in adultery, and women's increased earnings provide self-esteem and empowerment over marriage choices. Men experience pain and psychological distress on sexual infidelity, while women experience agony on emotional infidelity. They can play a major role in blocking/unfriending the spouse from their Facebook friends list. Relationship issues may lead to spouse blocking on Facebook, limiting access to personal information and posts, and potentially affecting online interactions.

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