
Social Signaling on Facebook After Relationship Dissolution

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Abstract

People must make complicated decisions about how to present themselves online after a relationship breakup or divorce. We present preliminary results from a survey-based study examining relationship dissolution disclosure practices on Facebook. In this work, we find that people use both conventional and assessment signals to convey a positive self-presentation to their networks after this difficult life event.

Author Keywords

Social signaling theory; social media; relationship breakups; divorce; Facebook.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

After a relationship breakup or divorce, people make difficult decisions about how to disclose the fact that they are no longer in that relationship, and how to represent their newly-single identity. In this paper, we show several ways that people employ signals to present their identity in a desired way to their networks.

Donath identified two different types of signals: conventional signals and assessment signals [1]. Conventional signals involve traits that are possible to fabricate by replicating the norms enacted by those who do possess the trait. These are not reliable and are open to deception because a person does not need to actually possess the trait being signaled [1]. Assessment signals are associated with traits that are costly to fabricate. Thus, these signals are more reliable than conventional signals because a person must actually possess the trait being signaled [1]. We give examples of each in the context of relationship dissolution.

Methods

We developed an online survey aimed at people who had recently (within the last year) experienced the breakup or divorce of a relationship or marriage lasting six months or longer. The survey was open to Facebook users in the U.S. who were 18 or older. It included 13 free-form open-ended questions that were qualitatively analyzed using open coding by the authors. More details about the survey and data analysis will be presented in our future work.

Posting Happy Content When Sad: Conventional Signals

While most participants decreased their Facebook activity after the breakup, a substantial minority increased posting content. For some, this was a way to signal an image of happiness, contentment, or being "okay" despite the breakup. One participant talked about their increase in positive Facebook content:

"I would say that I posted more pictures intended to showcase the good things going on in my life. Even

though I was no longer friends online with my ex, we share many mutual friends and I wanted them to see that I was doing okay."

For this person, posting photos that signaled happiness was a way to signal to their network that they were "doing okay." Research suggests people often refrain from sharing difficult or negative experiences on Facebook [4,5]. In general, people are often reluctant to share negative emotions due to self-presentation concerns [2]. Breakups and divorce are socially stigmatized, and posting happy content may be a way to distance oneself from this stigma.

Many participants wanted to disclose their breakup, but did not due to fear of embarrassment. One participant stated:

"I really struggled with [disclosing my breakup on Facebook]. I really wanted to make it public, but I had just posted a bunch of really sappy 'I love you' anniversary things right before we broke up, and the idea of publicly breaking up made me feel foolish."

In this sense, not disclosing a breakup allows people to implicitly signal happiness and "okay"-ness by avoiding the explicit communication of a negative life event. "Okay"-ness, one instance of what has been referred to as "positivity bias" [4], is, it could be argued, default on Facebook. Thus, not disclosing a negative life event could signal that one is "okay."

Posting positive content that conveys that one is doing alright despite a breakup, or not disclosing one's breakup to continue signaling default "okay"-ness, is an example of a conventional signal [1]. "Okay"-ness is a

trait that is not necessarily possessed, but is easy to fabricate at least on the surface level, and is the norm on Facebook [4]. While disproportionately posting positive content or not posting negative content could be considered a type of deception by omission, we resist claiming that these people are problematically deceiving their networks. More accurately, they are doing what they need to do to get by during a difficult time. Perhaps they are consciously or unconsciously practicing “fake it till you make it.” Why exactly people practice certain behaviors or enact certain performances is a subject for future inquiry.

Moving and Breaking Up: Assessment Signals with Conventional Signals

Lampe et al. discussed location-based SNS profile content as assessment signals; one’s hometown or where one currently lives are attributes that can be verified by others, and thus are costly to fabricate [3]. Similarly, in our data, moving was frequently mentioned as part of a status update in which people announced their breakup, such as in this participant’s status update:

“My birthday is in one week; I’ve decided to definitely move back to the Pacific NW¹ as this year’s present to myself. Parts of Austin have been great and I appreciate my friends here, but the relationship that brought me here ended three months ago, and I have a lot pulling me home. I’m excited to move on to the next chapter and return to my roots!”

Moving to another city is an assessment signal; a person would not typically say that they are moving and then not actually move, because their physical presence in a

particular location would give them away. However, in the context of breakup disclosures, this signal is more complicated. By combining a status update about a breakup with one about moving, people were able to put a positive spin on their breakup announcement, thus signaling “okay”-ness in a similar way to those who posted positive content as mentioned earlier. In the announcement above, while moving “back to the Pacific NW” is verifiable, “I’m excited to move on to the next chapter” is not, and the latter is thus a conventional signal. However, by combining assessment signals and conventional signals in one status update, participants were able to lend credibility to the conventional signals in their status and effectively signal to their networks that they were, in fact, “okay.”

Discussion and Conclusion

In this work, we analyzed relationship breakup disclosure decisions on Facebook and showed the ways that social signaling is used by many to convey a positive self-image during a difficult time. Facebook is a unique platform because the presentation of one’s “real” identity and the presence of a social network that maps onto one’s offline social network allows signals to be easily verified [3]. Thus, we would expect that people would find it necessary to be “honest” on Facebook. However, because positive content is considered customary on Facebook, people often employ social signaling to be less than honest about their struggles. While there is nothing inherently wrong with presenting a misleadingly positive image online, this hinders the ability to receive social support from one’s network during a difficult time, and is thus an important area for further study.

¹ Participants’ location details were changed to preserve privacy.

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