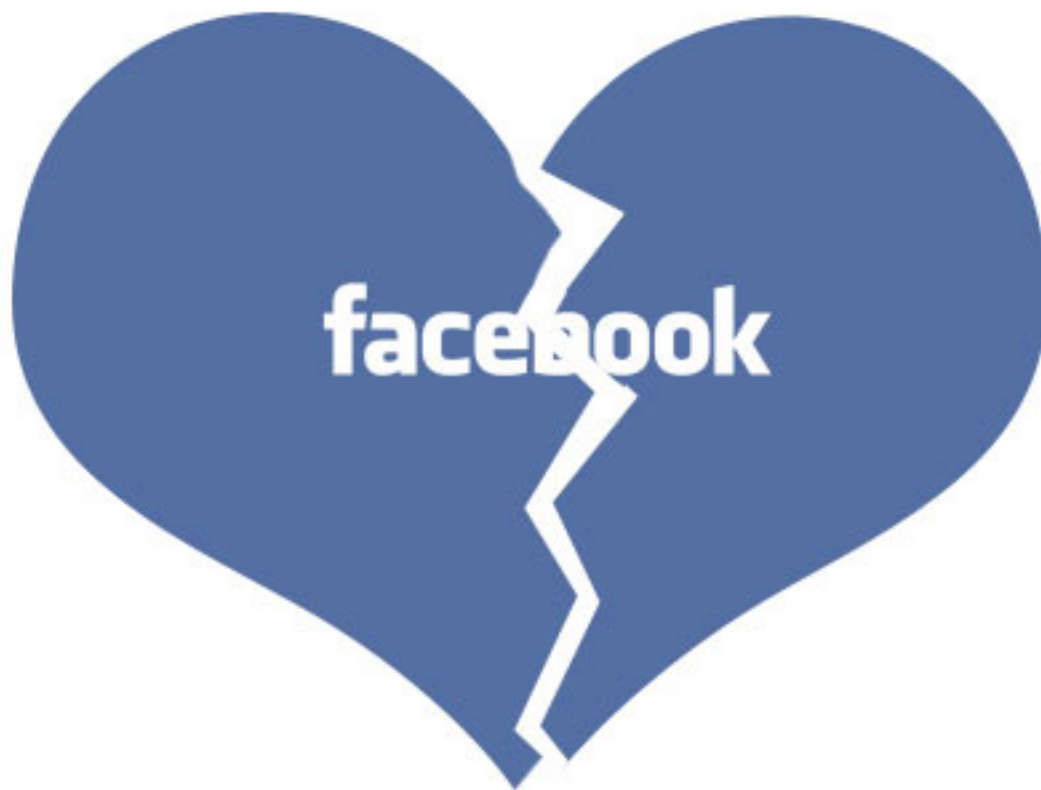


The Curated Couple:
Romantic Representation on Facebook



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1. Introduction



Y U No Guy has been bestowed with 'God Tier' status on Memegenerator.net for articulating some of society's most pressing questions. In this instance, he inquires as to why Facebook couples seem intent on projecting their relationships throughout Mark Zuckerberg's empire rather than keeping them private – a curious trend that shows no sign of abating. One response to this pensive query might be that users are simply embracing the newfound representative potential afforded by social network sites. Unlike mass media, which have traditionally thrust romantic representations upon the relatively passive consumer, social media actively encourage the 'prosumer' to depict his or her own intimate ties. As such, offline romance is increasingly taking form inside the blue boundaries of Facebook, with updates, tags, posts and likes all serving to publicise private affinities. Perhaps the site is being used as a tool of rebellion against the idealised intimacy that has been driven down our throats for so long. Then again, perhaps we are in fact so besotted with the historical narrative of romance that we want to boast it as inextricably woven within the fabric of our own lives. As always, Y U No Guy's question is as complex as it is crucial. But this does not mean it is unanswerable, and British pop music may provide a surprisingly good starting point for unravelling the mystery.

In the year 2000, previously obscure London quartet Coldplay achieved instant international stardom courtesy of their hit single 'Yellow'. A melancholy ode to vocalist Chris Martin's unrequited love, the song stormed top forty charts the world over as it tugged at our collective heartstrings. But not all bestowed praise upon this overnight sensation. In *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, Chuck Klosterman playfully bemoans the very existence of the band and their iconic tune, taking particular aim at the somewhat mawkish flavour of Martin's lugubrious lyrics:

'For you I bleed myself dry,' sang their blockhead vocalist, brilliantly informing us that the stars in the sky are, in fact, yellow. How am I going to compete with that shit? That sleepy-eyed bozo isn't even making sense. He's just pouring fabricated emotions over four gloomy guitar chords, and it ends up sounding like love (2003: 3).

In the eyes of Klosterman, melodramatic artists of the Coldplay ilk delude us into believing that 'fake love' should be a part of ordinary living. We measure our actual relationships against this fictional benchmark and, unsurprisingly, find they come up short every time.

Despite writing with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, Klosterman's take on Coldplay is emblematic of a broader societal concern. For decades, academics, philosophers, psychologists and the like have observed an intricate and potentially harmful interplay between mass media and romance, whereby we are perpetually subjected to idealistic representations of how being in love is *supposed* to feel. In seeking to attain the unattainable, we place undue pressure on our relationships and thus preclude the possibility of falling in love with any acumen of normalcy. There can be no 'normal' if everybody is twisted by the same forces simultaneously.

Of course, such twisting forces can be found well beyond the confines of the music industry. Contemporary culture is in fact saturated with what might be called the 'myth' of romance, an elaborate illusion fraught with danger. Take popular Western cinema, for example, which testifies to both

the historic and present-day pervasion of fantastical relationships. Writing on the politics of Hollywood romance, Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake (1992) contend that *the* thematically dominant strain of American narrative cinema is not only that the sexes are complimentary but that such harmony is figured nowhere more perfectly than in romantic love.

For the most part, the romance in question lives happily ever after. All barriers to intimacy are eventually overcome and the newly united couple can finally lock lips just before the end credits roll and the curtains close. They did it. They found true love. Of course, such predictably saccharine sentiment is partly derivative of an underlying social desire for perfect romance and the promise of happiness it entails. But by resolving romantic tension in the ephemeral realms of music and cinema, mass media only serves to perpetuate romantic insecurity in the unpredictable drama that is life. As Tania Modelski explains, illusions of romance “inevitably increase the reader’s own psychic conflicts ... [just as] certain tranquilizers taken to reduce anxiety are, though temporarily helpful, ultimately anxiety producing” (1982: 57).

But if traditional forms of media are bombarding us with fake love, do social media finally afford an opportunity to represent the real? There is little doubt that such platforms have radically transfigured the one-to-many paradigm once central to transmissive technology, giving rise to a new breed of communicative possibilities. Present-day prosumers are granted unprecedented freedom in broadcasting fragments of their own lives, sharing everything from the frivolous to the fundamental with an audience of hundreds, if not thousands. The same can be said of the virtual ‘us’: the romantic relationships we cast online. No longer limited to mass media outlets, representations of romance are now projected by the ‘many’, perennially pervading our streams and feeds. This is no more evident than in the case of Facebook, where the emblem of the relationship status is increasingly serving to substantiate offline intimacies.

So what to make of those little pink hearts that populate our profiles? If the gatekeepers and architects of Facebook indeed wield great social and

organizational power, it is important we adopt a critical lens to examine the ways in which the platform can mediate our relationships. To this end, the central question of this paper can be formulated as follows: In what ways and to what extent is romance represented on Facebook?

Within the highly immersive realm of social media, questions of representation are closely connected to notions of 'real' and 'virtual'. As such, this paper will first outline the ongoing convergence of online and offline identity, which ostensibly lends a false sense of 'realness' to Facebook romance. The variety of ways in which Facebook's interface facilitates romantic conception will then be addressed, focussing specifically on the simplification, definition and validation of the relationship. Finally, the tendency for users to curate an 'ideal us' within the constraints of the system will be considered, before a critical conclusion is drawn.

2. Background

Early Interplay: Technology and Identity

The contemporary cornucopia of web-based phenomena is such that we often take our digital depictions of romance for granted. There was a time, however, in which the updating of a relationship status and tagging of a schmaltzy photo were foreign practices to even the most savvy of internet explorers; a time in which the mere concept of an online us was quite simply non-existent. First published in 1984, Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self* explores the early interplay between computer-based technology and human identity, taking particular interest in the vast potential for certain software to shape psychological development. For Turkle, the objective computer that does things *for* us is unavoidably coterminous with the subjective computer that does things *to* us, exerting considerable influence over our very nature as human beings. The computer is also described as being evocative in the sense of being a powerful 'projective medium' with great potential to represent both ourselves and our relations (Turkle 1984).

While the archaic apparatus discussed in her book may have depreciated over time, the relevance of Turkle's seminal theory has aged with grace. Indeed, the subsequent development and proliferation of the internet has spawned a new world of possibilities for identity construction, radically transforming the dynamic of our screen-based interactions. Unlike the second self of the 1980s, which was largely informed by one-on-one communication between person and machine, the internet-fuelled second self was and is constructed through an intricate network of social relations. As Turkle herself explains, "Increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well" (1999: 643).

The relative anonymity of early online behaviour qualified ideas of cyberspace as an egalitarian playground for identity exploration, with inhabitants constructing not merely their 'virtual' personae but also fragments of their 'real' selves. For Lisa Nakamura, this was an age of 'identity tourism'; an age of limitless potential for web-based representation:

On the internet, nobody knows that you're a dog; it is possible to 'computer crossdress' and represent yourself as a different gender, age, race, etc. The technology of the internet offers its participants unprecedented possibilities for communicating with each other in real time, and for controlling the conditions of their own self-representations in ways impossible in face to face interaction (1995: 1).

The idea of 'tourism' is particularly important in this context, implying a certain ease and fluidity with which one can negotiate online worlds for the purposes of exploration, experience or curiosity. Unrestrained by the boundaries of the physical body, initial internet inhabitants were portrayed as cycling through a surfeit of selves and, in doing so, challenging traditional conceptions of identity as singular and static.

The Merging Selves

Today, the internet continues to house great potential for both individual and relationship representation. What has changed, however, is the idea of 'computer crossdressing'. Rather than conceptualizing the online realm as an alternative universe for self-transformation, Web 2.0 has reconfigured cyberspace less in terms of displacement but rather re-placement, with the 'virtual' identities we cast increasingly merging with those of the 'real' world (Rogers 2012). Of course, social media have played a crucial role in shaping such development, building on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 to foster the expression of offline identity (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). This is no more demonstrable than in the case of Facebook, where we are coerced into recreating our most prominent offline identity markers.

In stark contrast to Nakamura's identity tourist, the social network citizen is expected to perform Facebook gender, race and age in a way that reliably reflects the 'real', dramatically removing the veil of anonymity once synonymous with online activity. Just as crucially, the ubiquity of Facebook Connect, whereby users can access third-party sites using their Facebook identity, ensures any resultant representations are diffused throughout the web. Even Facebook scripture points to a conceptual harmonisation of the online and offline self, with the 'Principles' page stressing cultivation of a 'more open and transparent world' and Zuckerberg himself having been quoted as saying that "having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity" (as cited in Helft 2011: para 3). For many Facebookers, it appears the second self has become almost indistinguishable from the first, our profiles serving as public declarations of who we *are*.

Representing the Relation

While early cyberspace was touted as an immersive environment in which to communicate with strangers, the appeal of Facebook rests largely on its promise to articulate existing ties. Indeed, following a pioneering study of social network sites in general, danah boyd and Judith Donath (2004)

contend that 'public displays of connection' constitute an integral facet of the platforms themselves.

In terms of intimate relationship representation, the online realm of Facebook is ostensibly being used to both reveal and project offline romance. Freshly formed couples can update their profiles accordingly, while affectionate timeline posts, tagged photos and mutual check-ins signify the livelihood of the relation to friends and family. But herein lies a great danger of the medium. If notions of online and offline identity have indeed become almost indistinguishable, then the Facebook representation of romance is all too easily mistaken for the 'real'. This stands in contrast to the traditional Western representation of romance, which is generally situated at a playful, winking distance from 'reality'. We may rejoice when Harry finally professes his love for Sally, but not without losing sight of the fact that Billy Crystal is merely acting alongside Meg Ryan, just as we may be touched by Coldplay's emotional sentiment, yet acknowledge all the while that it only exists within the margins of a three-minute pop song. In other words, a wilful suspension of disbelief is temporarily required to appreciate the adoration. This may not prevent us from pursuing an unrealistic love, but at least the quixotic qualities of such emotion are recognised at a deeper level.

For the Facebook romance it appears no such distinction is drawn. Whether we like it or not, online activity is increasingly influencing our conception of offline romance, as Huffington Post contributor Holly Sidwell elucidates:

I know, it's stupid. It's Facebook. But the reality is that Facebook has become a part of relationships, like it or not. A place of declaration or rejection. Yes, we've attached meaning to it. Sorry, but it's the truth. It's just the way it is. Deal with it (2011: para. 3).

But how are we to 'deal with' a social media platform the so intransigently establishes the frame of identity a romance will take? While the relationships to which we are exposed in our news feeds may not quite echo the quintessential qualities of those found elsewhere in the media, their hyper-

realistic appearance promotes them as a more reasonable yardstick against which to measure our own romances. This has serious implications when both the restrictive interface of the system and egocentric drive of the user are taken into account, as will be discussed.

3. Identity Through Interface

Restricted Spaces

French postmodernist Jean Baudrillard (1987) argues that 'symbolic virtuality' has replaced 'immediate reality' in hyperreal spaces, impeding our ability to interact with any semblance of directness. Submerged beneath the symbols of communication, we lose control of the representations we wish to convey and thus limit our ability to be in true communion with others. Baudrillard's theory is critically informed by the notion of 'interstitial' space, the transmissive medium through which all communication occurs. The institutional comprises an absolutely indispensable component of social interaction and thus an absolutely indispensable component of our understanding of what it means to be human. In traditional verbal dialogue it is the very air that allows us to speak and hear. Yet, for Baudrillard, the ceaseless stream of discourse, or 'promiscuity', that dominates new-age communication may spell the death knell of this transient space:

[T]he promiscuity which reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, an endless harassment, an extermination of interstitial space (1987: 24).

Through the lens of Baudrillard's theory, online spaces can be seen to facilitate socialisation yet also pose unique problems for managing our relationships. Indeed, it appears that, when afforded full freedom, the increasingly omnipresent social media interstitial has potential to restrict the intricate forms of online intimacy we may wish to cultivate (Butera 2010). If the space in which we interact is overwhelmed with communicative symbols, the resultant representations become detached from that which they purportedly represent. This has important implications for broader

conceptions of romance, for referring and relating to a relationship in a certain way unquestionably influences its state of being.

Of course, no space is entirely free of restrictions. Regardless of whether we are immersed in the futuristic realms of Starcraft or lost in the technologically void expanses of the Kalahari Desert, a profusion of forces necessarily diminish the flexibility of our identity performance. Such forces are particularly prominent within social media spaces, however, where the technical barriers of the site exert great influence on self-presentation. Social media systems also have sovereignty over the ultimate display of our online personae, which tends to rest on aesthetic and design decisions. So while we may have some freedom to represent our relationships and indeed ourselves, it only exists insofar as it fits within the parameters that are shaped and set by the given platform interface. In other words, significant control over one's own representation is ceded to social media through the very act of participation.

As part of an ambitious attempt to define the social network site, Jenny Sundén describes the profile page as a unique space in which we “type ourselves into being” (2003: 3). To a certain extent, this can be seen as true of Facebook. The social networking service permits us to describe our religious beliefs and political views in specified fields, while the ‘About Me’ section accommodates any additional information that we would like to make public. But while the representative potential afforded by the platform should not be understated, it is important that the composition of this ‘being’ we ‘type ourselves into’ is properly understood. Like all social media, the content of a Facebook profile is primarily informed by the rules and restrictions of the interface within which it is created. As such, the identity we curate within the perimeters of the platform is inexorably bound to the underlying structures of the platform itself. Facebook provides the skeleton and we fill in the meat.

Simplifying Romance

In the case of the relationship status, our selection of 'meat' is extremely limited. We may use any combination of words to describe our religion, our political stance and, indeed, ourselves, yet our romantic bonds (or lack thereof) only find expression in one of ten pre-determined categories: single, in a relationship, engaged, married, it's complicated, in an open relationship, widowed, separated, divorced or blank. To represent a relationship via the status function is to label it according to Facebook language and thus conform to the rudimentary formulations of the system. But as irreducibly intricate sentient beings, can our romantic connections really squeeze within the confines of a ticked box? Offline romance certainly suggests not, having traditionally taken countless overlapping forms – from 'booty call' to 'celibate partner' to 'legally significant other'. In seeking to exhaustively and immutably categorise what is essentially uncategorisable, it appears Facebook is also simplifying notions of romance, one of the most congenitally complex of human phenomena.

The inseparability of language and perception is such that the limited communicative symbols afforded by Facebook permeate the boundaries of the platform and infiltrate the physical world. In addressing both the legitimacy and impact of gender definition in social media spaces, Andrew McNicol emphasises the potentially far reaching consequences of restrictive system design:

The extent to which a Facebook profile serves as a person's main professional and social contact point correlates with the level of importance this profile plays in influencing their public perception. The recognition of this phenomenon prompts us to internalize the content of our social media profiles, to an extent corresponding to the perceived importance we attribute to them. The limitations on identity performance enforced by these systems have the power to influence how we understand ourselves – and everyone else using the system. Whether it be through limited options for representative fields, requirements of

user information declaration, or the choices made regarding how to display user information to others, even the smallest of design decisions within our collectively adopted social media systems can have major ramifications for framing social communication and for how individual users and the community as a whole exist (2013: 201).

Following McNicol's reasoning, Facebook users run the risk of subconsciously absorbing the limited romantic representations of the system and using them as something of a lens through which to perceive offline existence. It is not so much life imitating art as life imitating interface, whereby we see the world through Facebook goggles. The very adoption of the term 'Facebook Official' into popular parlance underlines this point. To go Facebook Official is to define an offline romance via the relationship status, linking two profiles in what might be considered the social media equivalent of holy matrimony. According to Urban Dictionary's blunt definition it is 'how you know shit's real'.¹ But should a restrictive virtual emblem really serve to confirm 'reality'? Just as mass media have simplified notions of ideal romance such that they comply with traditional Western norms of beauty, monogamy, heterosexuality and the like, it appears Facebook has simplified notions of romance in general. Even the most complicated of relationships, by virtue of their very complicatedness, can be defined with the swift click of a button: this user is now in an 'it's complicated' with that user. Ironically enough, it's an incredibly simple process.

Of course, the simplified representation of relationship identity is easily justified. As users, we generally want to curate our Facebook profiles with as little hassle as possible, leaving more time for the social aspect of social media. Categories breed cleanliness and consistency, the importance of which could be easily explained by any one of the hundred million ex-Myspace inhabitants who have since jumped ship to Facebook. Indeed, to empower profile owners with free rein in defining their romantic affiliations

¹ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=facebook+official>

² <http://gizmodo.com/5688388/its-not-official-until-its-facebook-official>

is to welcome a plague of ridiculous, offensive and nonsensical constructs – an undesirable outcome for both the platform and the majority of its users. Big data is another important consideration, and it seems likely that most advertisers would prefer targeting those ‘in a relationship’ than those ‘in a totes awkward teenage love triangle’. But issues arise through the very process of simplification and it is important to address both the personal and social consequences of design decisions that so stringently determine the form a romantic relationship can take.

Defining Romance

In offering a rigid set of relationship statuses, Facebook also serves to define what constitutes romance, implicitly projecting a number of ideological assumptions in the process. The interface allows users to identify themselves as ‘in an open relationship’, for example, but not ‘in various relationships’, thus precluding the representation of polyamorous practice. This is in spite of mounting evidence that, as human beings, we are in fact evolutionarily predisposed to maintain multifarious sexual partners. In *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*, Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá (2010) propose that modern societies have spawned from egalitarian hunter-gatherer tribes that shared sexual interaction in much the same way as property and paternity. Drawing evidence from a diverse range of sources, the groundbreaking publication considers standard narratives of evolutionary psychology to be overly influenced by a process of ‘Flintstonization’, whereby present-day beliefs are ascribed to earlier civilizations:

Just as the Flintstones were ‘the modern stone-aged family,’ contemporary scientific speculation concerning prehistoric human life is often distorted by assumptions that seem to make perfect sense. But these assumptions can lead us far from the path to truth ... [T]he generally accepted myth of the origins and nature of human sexuality is not merely factually flawed, but destructive, sustaining a false sense of what it means to be a human being (2010: 52).

From this perspective, it appears that contemporary notions of monogamy are largely social constructs and, therefore, that there is nothing intrinsically illegitimate about non-monogamous practice. Yet mass media has projected perfect romance as monogamous romance for eons, perpetually reinforcing a key tenet of fake love. Rather than dispelling this myth, Facebook may be in fact intensifying it, ensuring that romantic representations adhere to an arbitrary one-to-one paradigm. Just like the quintessential Hollywood narrative, the Facebook romance requires the 'couple', and not any other configuration of actors.

Validating Romance

In addition to defining relationships, it appears the symbolic Facebook relationship status is being used increasingly to validate relationships, serving as something of a digital commitment ring. The blogosphere certainly indicates as much, with a plenitude of prosumers ranting and raving and reflecting on the significance of online romantic representations. Adopting a comical yet telling prose, Brian Barrett argues:

You can show me all the legal documentation you want. You can line up the notary publics at the door. But unless I see it in a news feed item or a profile update, it's invalid.²

To make a relationship Facebook Official is to communicate a certain degree of seriousness and can thus represent an important step in the ongoing development of a couple. For 'Moo' of South Atlantis, the mere act of selecting a status has an important influence on romantic disposition:

I asked her: make it Facebook Official? And then it hit me. As someone who was single, it seemed so petty. But as someone who was actually in love, it was much more than that. It was some sort of public profession. It was like some sort of proclamation. I had a different angle on it. It wasn't just pressing a

² <http://gizmodo.com/5688388/its-not-official-until-its-facebook-official>

button. It was like some secret, only we both shared, now being public to the world. Everyone knows now. It was a strange feeling. I felt like I had some sort of obligation to stick around now, maybe not just due to love, but maybe because I wanted to keep my word and my promise.³

For some couples, it appears the relationship status almost serves to engender the existence of the relationship itself; that no romantic engagement is official until it is Facebook Official. Michael Underwood articulates this phenomenon in reflecting on the act of moving a romance online:

As my girlfriend said, a plus of making the relationship Facebook Official is that it makes it easier for us to assert the existence and make clear the presence of/commitment to a partner when we are apart ... [H]aving the explicit hypertextual links between our profiles is a digital representation of the social link and proof of existence/validity.⁴

Facebook users are not alone in ascribing offline value to the online representations of romance. The architects of the platform clearly also regard relationship status as a significant identity marker, as evidenced by its central display on the site. If we 'like' a musician, actor, writer, politician or sport star, such information will be buried amongst a plethora of other 'likes' in a distant corner of our timelines. If, however, we like a certain special someone and choose to update our profiles accordingly, such information is granted prime real estate on the screen, taking its place just below other important identifiers such as name and profile picture.

The user is still afforded some semblance of freedom when it comes to displaying the emblem of Facebook relationship status, which can be left

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/12/30/has-facebook-ruined-love/facebook-can-clarify-the-status-of-a-relationship>

⁴ <http://michaelrunderwood.com/2009/04/15/making-it-facebook-official/>

blank or selected but removed from public view. But such configurations give rise to their own raft of ramifications, as Kelli Greenberg illustrates:

When my boyfriend asked me if I wanted to put our relationship status on Facebook, I said no. I valued my privacy and I was afraid of what would happen if we broke up and everyone heard about it in their news feeds. This upset him; he thought I was unsure about our relationship and that I didn't want other guys knowing I was no longer available.⁵

If a relationship is formed offline yet we cannot see it in our news feed, does it really exist? As conceptions of Facebook and 'reality' continue to collide, it appears the decision to efface romantic bonds online is increasingly serving to undermine unplugged affinity.

Beyond the Relationship Status

Of course, the relationship status is just one of many ways in which Facebook's interface allows for romantic representation. We are not usually required to delve deep into the site to find photos, posts, comments, tags, likes and locations that broadcast the us, with such feature-specific statements serving to further articulate couple identity. For the most part, a greater range of expression is afforded with these tools. We can elucidate our enamoured hearts through any arrangement of characters in the status update, or have an adoring picture tell one thousand sappy words when we upload it to our timelines. We can enthusiastically comment on any aspect of a partner's online activity, or check ourselves into the most amorous of locations. Simply put, we can represent the narrative of our love through a number of streams. But these streams are still determined by the interface of the platform and, as such, do not actually flow so freely. The length of the status, the content of the photo, the positioning of the comment and the title of the location are all bound to the rules and restrictions that have been arbitrarily assigned by Zuckerberg and his minions, restricting and indeed

⁵ <http://www.northbynorthwestern.com/story/to-go-facebook-official-or-not-to-go-facebook-offi/>

simplifying the resultant representations. This is not to suggest that the physical world is free of any such limitation, but rather that the extent of the constraint imposed by Facebook greatly exceeds what we have traditionally experienced.

Offline Impact

If moving our relationships online means binding our romantic conceptions, definitions and validations to the underlying structures of the 'blue book', questions then arise as to whether this necessarily diminishes experiences of offline intimacy. Whether or not Facebook's simplified representations of the us are detrimental to relationship health has been the subject of increasing debate, with opinion divided as to the psychological impact of the most pervasive social network. Couples therapist Gretchen Kelmer notes that the process through which romances are formed has become more abstruse and unpredictable in recent decades, proposing that Facebook presents an opportunity to disentangle such ties:

Would-be couples face the difficult task of defining their relationships and communicating expectations without the benefit of clear, sequential steps or widely accepted conventions of courtship. As social scientists observe the passing of 'going steady', exchanging class rings and other old-school emblems of commitment, it could be argued that Facebook offers today's couples a valuable tool for replacing ambiguity with clarity (2012: 1).

While acknowledging that Facebook has both positive and negative implications for relationships, Kelmer argues that simplified public representations of romance may be effective in reducing uncertainty and misunderstanding between partners. From this perspective, the restrictive interface of the platform can be seen as beneficially simplifying an unnecessarily complex social construct.

Conversely, psychological research carried out by Rachel Elphinston (2011) indicates that heightened exposure to Facebook is concomitant with heightened potential for the platform to in fact *complicate* relationships. Having carefully examined the continuities between online romantic representation and offline emotion, Elphinston speculates that the propensity for Facebook to disrupt personal lives and interpersonal relationships may lead to mutual dissatisfaction:

Because of the interpersonal nature of Facebook, individuals highly involved with this form of social networking are likely to be people whose romantic relationships are also important to them. Hence, the tendency for Facebook to impinge on people's lives, together with the infinite number of available third-party threats, encourages the experience of jealous thoughts and engagement in surveillance behaviors, resulting in dissatisfying romantic relationships (2011: 634).

Adopting a similar outlook, author Demetria Lucas (2012) contends that Facebook romance is so intrinsically serpentine that partners are better off un-friending each other entirely. Research from the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers certainly provides support for this stance, with twenty per cent of divorces now found to involve Facebook and eighty per cent of divorce lawyers having reported a spike in the number of cases that rely on social media to substantiate claims (Adams 2011). But regardless of the *direction* of the net impact Facebook has on romance, its *significance* is almost beyond question.

4. Curation Within Constraints

User Tendencies

While the host of restrictive features embedded within Facebook may serve to simplify, define and validate our notions of romance, we are certainly still afforded some liberty in depicting the us. Indeed, operating within the arbitrary constraints of the system, users are not only permitted but in fact

encouraged to broadcast a unique and personal representation of themselves and their relationships. In the face of this relative freedom of expression, the question turns to precisely how our intimate ties are cast on the site. Does the most dominant of social media services facilitate a more authentic representation of romance than that inherent to mass media? Are we any better at representing the 'real'?

While very little research has yet been carried out on the ways in which relationship identity is represented through Facebook, there is a large body of literature concerning the representation of the self. This provides a useful starting point for understanding the various forms that romance may take. Psychiatrist Elias Aboujaoude (2011) argues that we all house a 'fitter-for-survival' version of the self at the back of our minds that is unrestrained by the raft of physical and psychological inhibitions common to everyday life. Traditionally, this idealized identity has been what drives us towards self-betterment through hard work and perseverance. It is what motivates the shy to socialise, inspires the unfit to exercise and encourages the uneducated to learn. Within the immersive world of Facebook, however, Aboujaoude believes that users are promised a "shortcut to that difficult-to-attain-model – one that goes through ... software of dissimulation to painlessly and efficiently turn them into someone else that they perceive as much better than themselves" (2011: 75). In effect, a wildly airbrushed identity is never more than a few mouse clicks away.

Given our inherent propensity for self-improvement, it seems Facebook is being used to produce vastly enhanced copies of the self. Herein lies another important implication for the merging of online and offline identities, for if we consider our genetic selves as virtually indistinguishable from our Facebook profiles, we begin believing the misrepresentation. For Aboujaoude, this constitutes one of the greatest dangers of the internet in general, which "encourages dreams of health, wealth and happiness ... [but] also feeds self-distortion and delusion, the ability to enhance or perfect oneself online simply by grossly misrepresenting one's identity or at least aspects of that identity" (2011: 80). Perhaps concerns of the economic bubble created by the Facebook IPO should pale in comparison to those of the personal bubbles

created by the Facebook user, which warp a real sense of self and diminish genuine social interaction.

The Narcissistic Self

Recent academic discussion of our distorted online representations has been coterminous with the notion of narcissism. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the narcissistic self possesses a simultaneous need for admiration and absence of empathy, all whilst clinging to an illusionary sense of entitlement. Clinical testing of narcissistic personality disorder has indicated a widespread Western increase in the condition since the year 2000, with psychologists citing social media as one possible factor (Grossman 2010). In a well known study conducted by University of Georgia professors Laura Buffardi and Keith Campbell (2008), a sample of Facebook users were made to complete narcissistic personality self-reports before having their profiles coded for both objective and subjective content features. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who scored highest in the narcissistic self-report also generally boasted the most narcissistic profiles, leading the researchers to conclude that Facebook provides the perfect forum for narcissistic behaviour. No longer content with simply staring into the mirror, the new-age narcissist can construct an even more appealing reflection of the self through uploading the perfect photos, checking-in to the perfect places and tagging the perfect people. Coining the term 'digital narcissism' for such activity, author Andrew Keen argues that social media does not function as a truly social platform but rather a propagandistic platform for the self:

This infinite desire for personal attention is driving the hottest part of the new Internet economy—social-networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo. As shrines for the cult of self-broadcasting, these sites have become tabula rasas of our individual desires and identities. They claim to be all about 'social networking' with others, but in reality they exist so that we can advertise ourselves: everything from our favorite books and movies, to photos from our summer vacations, to

'testimonials' praising our more winsome qualities or recapping our latest drunken exploits (2007: 7).

Behind the social veil of social media, Keen (2012) believes not only that we have fallen in love with ourselves but that it is a particularly tragic love story; a vicious circle whereby the more we project perfection the emptier we feel, and the emptier we feel the more we are compelled to project perfection. In this sense, Facebook can be seen as little more than a vehicle for self-presentation. Not unlike the advertising kingpins of Madison Avenue, the common folk of Facebook can cut and paste and twist the self such that it appears in the best possible light, before merchandising the end product as if it were a sleek new sports car.

Changing Norms of Online Expression

Influential French philosopher René Girard contends that essentially all human behaviour is learned and that all learning rests on imitation. In imitating our role models, we not only adopt aspects of their outer personae but also aspects of their internal inclination, striving for the same goals in the hope that they will engender enhanced levels of existence: "If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being (Girard 1987: 7). Desire is thus seen as triangular, involving a desired object, a person who desires it, and a model figure upon which the desire is based. Following this logic, narcissism breeds narcissism. The greater the prevalence of egotistic individuals in one's social circle, the greater the likelihood of such behavioural traits being imitated. Indeed, this was perhaps the most striking implication of Buffardi and Campbell's study, with the researchers concluding that "because narcissists have more social contacts on Facebook than non-narcissists, the average user will experience a social network that over-represents the narcissist. [This] raises the possibility that – because of elevated exposure to narcissistic individuals and self-promotion – norms of expression on social networking sites will be pulled in the direction of greater self-promotion" (2008: 1311). Just as a young Greek youth by the name of Narcissus become infatuated with his own reflection in a pool

of water, it appears we have become infatuated with our own representation in the realm of Facebook, meticulously curating the quixotic image of our very existence.

The Narcissistic Us

Central to the theoretical model of narcissism is the importance of intimate relationships in regulating self-esteem and self-concept positivity (Campbell 1999). While narcissists may not actually seek out interpersonal warmth or affinity, they are highly skilled at boasting such qualities of their romantic ties in order to exude an air of success. Projections of romance can thus serve to consolidate the perfect perception of the self, offering the ultimate tool for egoic inflation. Of course, if Facebook is connected to narcissistic behaviour, which is itself connected to idealized romantic representations, then the relationships we cast online must generally lean towards the haughty end of the spectrum. Aboujaoude certainly feels this is the case, arguing that “if John and Jane Doe represent the nondescript all-too-real everyman and everywoman, e-John and e-Jane are their mythologised, full-of-life online versions” (2011: 75).

After defining and validating their relationship courtesy of Facebook’s convenient drop-down list, the e-Doe’s proceed to curate an ideal love. Sappy status updates, cloying comments and passion-filled profile pictures serve as common tools for representing perfection, while, unsurprisingly, postings to the tune of ‘I had a serious fight with my girlfriend today and have been crying hysterically in the foetal position for the past three hours’ do not feature as prominently. No longer content sharing slides of a romantic retreat with a select few ‘lucky’ individuals, the contemporary couple appears intent on beaming their bond throughout the social network. Then there is the literal merging of two profiles into one, the shared account that quite literally bestows the relation with its own distinct identity. For narcissists seeking to showcase a quintessential romance, Facebook evidently presents a panoply of possibilities.

The Pressure of Perfection

Representations of the ideal us impact both ends of the Facebook transaction. For the curated couple, there exists a relentless pressure to maintain near-perfection online, with a constant stream of real-time updates ostensibly required to reaffirm affinity. While pre-Facebook partners could save their best mutual face for the public arena and then settle into a more comfortable persona at home, the digital age affords no such luxury. Indeed, the dramatic rise of Zuckerberg's corporation has been concomitant with the dramatic blurring of traditional notions of privacy, whereby even the seemingly secluded confines of the bedroom can function as a public space. Home-cooked dinners are Instagrammed, television-watching habits are status updated, and if the cat crawls into a cute position on your boyfriend's lap, you had better upload a photo pronto. In other words, the home is simply not as private as it used to be. Once in the public eye, it appears the relationship has a certain unspoken expectation to fulfil, whereby its idealised identity must be tended to through feature-specific statements that convey affection.

In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild introduces the concept of 'emotional labour', an arduous form of emotion regulation that enkindles "bodily and facial displays compliant with social requirements" (1983: 7). Hochschild argues that enforced public displays of positive emotion within the workplace can estrange employees from their own feelings, which come to belong more to the organisation than the individual. Given the subsequent penetration of social media services, however, it appears the 'social requirements' inherent to emotion management have transcended the professional sphere. To preserve the ideal image, the Facebook us needs to gleam with ardour around the clock, placing undue strain on the offline relationship. Ironically enough, it appears the strenuous process of projecting perfect love can in fact detach partners from their authentic emotions.

Believing the Myth

Of course, for every broadcaster of idealised Facebook romance there is a somewhat deluded audience, an entourage of onlookers who suspend their disbelief and thus erroneously equate the representation with the reality. As Aboujaoude explains, “people are inclined to accept online lies about others if the lies give them the illusion of approaching a perfect ideal they want to own or to be with” (2011: 82). But is it actually possible for us to ‘own’ or ‘be with’ this ideal? Writing more than two millennia before Zuckerberg was even born, Plato contends that non-material abstract ‘forms’ comprise the most fundamental layer of reality, with material objects and events serving as inferior replications of their perfect versions (Jowett 1946). While the ideal form can be conceived intellectually, it is, by virtue of its very idealness, forever beyond our grasp in the physical world. The delicate snowflake that falls from the sky, for example, is an evanescent and imperfect reflection of the eternal ideal, just as the tree upon which it lands is inevitably misshapen when measured against the absolute standard of tree-ness. We are not ideal either. Our hair doesn’t sit the right way, our knowledge is limited and our relationships are messy. Simply put, nobody’s perfect. But this is okay according to Aboujaoude, who argues that the “best human life should strive to understand and emulate [perfect forms], accepting all along that it will never completely achieve them (2011: 76). The problem with Facebook representations of romance lies in our inability to ‘accept all along’ that they are unachievable. If our ‘friends’ boast perfect intimacies within the online realm, we are inclined to believe that such adoration is the offline norm. In other words, we evaluate aspects of our romantic ties based on unrealistic misrepresentations, with Facebook functioning much like a Coldplay love ballad.

5. Conclusion

Rather than *representing* real relationships, it seems Facebook may actually provide a platform for *constructing* the ideal romance. Somewhat ironically, this construct bears a striking resemblance to the romance that has figured so prominently in mass media for eons; with rosy depictions of love and

happiness never more than a brief scroll away. Beneath the false pretence of user-empowerment, it would appear that the most dominant of social media services actually further propagates the pre-existing myth of romance. Indeed, the restrictive interface of the site ensures representation is geared towards traditional and simplified norms, while the narcissistic user tendencies ensure any resultant constructs are highly idealised. In this sense, the Facebook us might be seen as no less artificial than a Hugh Grant character and any female lead he has ever acted alongside. Unlike Grant's filmography, however, the online representation of romance exudes such a powerful illusion of 'realness' that it might be more readily strived towards, leading to greater offline unfulfilment. Perhaps this goes some way towards answering Y U No Guy's contemplative question, though, in short, the most appropriate response might be 'it's complicated'.

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