Abstract

This study utilizes Walther and Parks' (2002) warranting theory to explore the relationship between online system- and co-generated relational cues and the strength of offline romantic relational characteristics. Differences in respondents' ($N = 170$) relational characteristics were predicted based on their relationship statuses articulated on Facebook. Results indicate individuals who display their relationship status on Facebook are more dependent in their relationship (i.e., more satisfied, committed, invested, and with lower perceived relational alternatives) and used Facebook more. In other words, individuals in relationships that are 'Facebook official' report being in more committed, stronger relationships than non-Facebook official counterparts. Findings are discussed with respect to the relationships among social media, relational attributes, and warranting theory.

Keywords: Facebook, investment model, relationship maintenance, online self-disclosure, warranting theory

Making it Facebook Official: The Warranting Value of Online Relationship Status Disclosures

on Relational Characteristics

1.1 Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) are multi-faceted tools for maintaining contact with old friends, establishing new relationships, keeping up with current events, and displaying individuality. SNSs like Facebook and Twitter are heavily used as means of identity displays, affording users opportunities to display facets of their selves to cross-sections of their relational networks, helping to foster others' perceptions of the individual user (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012). Although computer-mediated communication (CMC) channels were historically heralded as rife for identity trials (i.e., displaying typically-hidden facets of one's identity due to perceived stigma or lack of social acceptability) and selective disclosure of limited parts of one's identity (Turkle, 1995), SNSs generally seem to evoke faithful displays of users' personal characteristics (Back et al., 2010; Van Dijck, 2013). Increasingly within the study of self-presentation and interaction, scholarship has focused on the presentation and conduct of romantic relationships within SNSs.

Recent work has explored relational formation, maintenance, and termination as they manifest in and are influenced by social media (cf. Tong, Kashian, & Walther, in press). Among the glut of cues and information available via SNSs, some work has recently focused on (among other things), the act of going 'Facebook official,' or publically displaying one's romantic relational status to her or his social network via system affordances (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012; Toma & Choi, 2015). This prior work has primarily viewed going Facebook official as an antecedent to other facets of a romantic relationship, able to predict one's relational characteristics. In this research, we contrarily suggest these relational displays are better-

conceptualized as effects, occurring as reflections of present relational attributes rather than heralds of past traits. The present study uses warranting theory to conceptualize and empirically assess the validity of using a small cue, such as the public display of a romantic relationship on Facebook, on the current state of an individual's relationship.

1.2 Romantic Relationships and SNSs

Prior research has explored the interactions between romantic relationships and Facebook use. Exploring between-partner relational attributes and Facebook use among 58 couples, Papp et al. (2012) found that dating partners reported similar amounts of Facebook activity and were likely to interdependently publically disclose relational statuses (i.e., if one partner disclosed, the other was likely to do so as well). Moreover, Papp and colleagues reported that online disclosures of relational status were predictive of offline characteristics, and that online behaviors such as disagreements contributed to the function of the intimate relationships. Subsequently, Toma and Choi (2015) looked at six Facebook behaviors (relationship listing, dyadic photographs, participant-initiated wall posts, partner-initiated wall posts, joint affiliations, and mutual friends) as predictors of relationship commitment, which is statistically predictive of relationship longevity. Both of these studies are interesting in that they utilize online actions to predict relational characteristics. However, we suggest the directionality of these conclusions may not be reflective of actual relationship and online/offline patterns.

Individuals typically closely guard the state of their romantic relationship among their social networks (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Historically there have been socially accepted ways to publicly demonstrate one's connection to a romantic partner. For example, Rogers and Havens (1960) explain university students in the late 1950s would 'pin' an ad in the campus newspaper declaring with whom they were 'going steady,' only after the relationship had passed

a substantive and critical threshold. Such 'pinning' denoted the magnitude and seriousness of

the relationship. Today, individuals—particularly young adults—anachronistically practice

'pinning' their relationship by posting a status to popular SNSs that publicize relationship

characteristics (Bryant, Marmo, & Ramirez, 2011). Given prior offline practices, it seems less

likely individuals engage in the modern practice of going 'Facebook official' (i.e., altering their

Facebook profile to publically assert their relational pairing) as a means of increasing relational

commitment, as indeed some individuals are in romantic relationships yet do not update their

Facebook profile accordingly. It seems more naturalistic and likely that, rather than an

antecedent to relational commitment, making one's relationship official on Facebook may be a

cue displayed *post hoc* and only after the relationship and its characteristics have passed a

threshold level. In other words, an individual may go Facebook official online only after she or

he perceives herself/himself satisfied with and committed to the relationship offline. Given this

postulation that the online self reflects, rather than predicts, the actual state of an individual's

offline self, warranting theory can serve an effective lens through which to explore the process.

1.3 Warranting and Social Network Sites

1.3.1 Warranting theory

Walther and Parks (2002) re-introduced the concept of warranting theory to computer-

mediated communication (CMC) from Stone's (1996) original explication of the concept.

Warranting theory examines this connection between a person's actual self and their idealized

presentation afforded by media online through the use of warranting cues (DeAndrea, 2014).

Walther and Parks (2002) explain that while previous work has considered the physical and

online self as two separate identities; in contrast, warranting theory conceptualizes information

that evidences an individual's online self and physical self as a continuum of association. In

short, online information increases impression-formation value as it can be linked to the target person in the physical world. Parks (2011) advanced three boundary conditions of warranting theory: "First, the source must make an identity claim and, second, a third party must comment on that claim in a way that others can observe. And finally, it must be possible for observers to compare the claim and comment in practical and meaningful ways" (pp. 559-560).

Warranting *value* refers to the legitimacy and validity of information about a person in a CMC context as it relates to offline characteristics (Walther, 2011). Contrary to Parks' second boundary condition, Gibbs et al. (2011) noted more implicit means can be used to increase the warranting-value of a claim beyond explicit third party statements, which are not always made in online environments. The mere ability of third parties to verify an identity claim increases the claim's warranting value, even if the opportunity is not used (Hayes & Carr, 2015).

Though the greatest warranted value is derived from other-generated content, self-generated content still demonstrates value in outside evaluation of SNS profiles, as information gains warranting value if it can be verified by the person's network (Walther, 2011; Walther & Parks, 2002). Specifically, Walther (2011) argues individuals are less likely to alter their self-presentation when the receiver of the message has the ability to corroborate information either through access to the sender's social network or through other means that hold the individual accountable for misrepresentations. Thus, one's relational status should serve as a high-warrant cue in social network sites, strongly connecting one's online identity display to offline attributes.

1.3.2 Warranting relational status

Individuals who post pictures containing a relational partner to social media report both greater satisfaction and relational commitment (Saslow, Muise, Impett, & Dubin, 2013; Toma & Choi, 2015), perhaps as these photos are presented in a forum publically-accessible to a broad

cross-section of both relational partners' social networks. Likewise, when individuals post that they are "in a relationship" on Facebook, they are making a verifiable public commitment to that information and (in turn) that relationship. Though public commitment can increase one's own self-perceptions (Bem, 1972; Gonzales & Hancock, 2009), public commitment to one's self— either attributes or status—additionally serves as a high-warrant cue in social media. Individuals are able to make identity claims that can be vetted by others in these innately interactive channels (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009).

The relational status in many SNSs is system-generated categories and is vetted by third parties (i.e., romantic relationship partners) who may validate or refute the display of a relational status. Moreover, should others know the relationship to be real, they can legitimate the claim either through agreement or not refuting it; or should others know the relationship to be fake or overstated, they can publically contest the claim and presentation. On Facebook, an individual's relationship status is limited to several pre-populated categorical options (e.g., single, in a relationship, engaged) and can be displayed with detailed information (e.g., tagging a relational partner to provide greater corporeally anchored credibility). Thus, we conceptualize a SNS relationship status as a cue high in warranting value. Given the dynamics of relational characteristics, the high-warrant cue of a SNS relational status should warrant both relational commitment as well as its antecedents.

1.4 Relational Investment and Characteristics

1.4.1 Investment model

Rusbult's (1980) investment model (IM) provides a theoretical grounding to understand factors associated with relational commitment—a foundational construct within romantic relationships. The IM succinctly describes the effect of relational commitment and variables of

dependence (i.e., satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size) as predictors of relational success across time (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1998). Overall investment, the central idea behind Rusbult's assertion, is the extent to which a person relies on his or her relationship to meet needs and attain desired outcomes. *Commitment* refers to one's intent to persist in a relationship involving feelings of attachment and long-term orientation towards involvement. Rusbult and others (e.g., Sprecher, 1998) define *satisfaction* as the ratio of positive to negative affect in a relationship. *Quality of alternatives* is the desirability of potential 'better' alternate relationships. Finally, *investment size* is the magnitude and importance of relationship resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end. Greater levels across antecedent factors indicate greater total relational investment.

1.4.2 Warranting investment

Displaying one's relational status publically via a SNS profile may warrant the outcome variable of the investment model: commitment. Disclosure of one' relationship status online has been associated with higher levels of relational commitment (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013; Toma & Choi, 2015). But an alternate perspective is that individuals with greater levels of relational commitment are more likely to disclose their relationship status via an SNS profile. Thus:

> *H1: Individuals who disclose their relationship status report higher levels of*
> *relational commitment than individuals who do not disclose their relationship*
> *status.*

Displaying one's relational status publically via a SNS profile may further warrant the criterion variables within the investment model: relational satisfaction, quality of perceived relational alternatives, and relational investment. First, Park et al. (2011) claim relationship

disclosure on Facebook has a positive link to relational satisfaction, so that individuals posting a relational status feel more satisfied with their current relationship. Second, individuals who disclose their relationship status on a SNS likely consider their relationship as better than peers' relationships (i.e., lower quality of alternatives), and those who do not divulge a relationship may leave themselves open to other dating partners through perceived availability. Third, public affirmation of a relational status (e.g., to a broad online audience that transcends social groups) indicates the individual's meaningful relational investment (Berger & Douglas, 1981; Rogers & Havens, 1960). Taken together, online relationship status disclosure is hypothesized to be indicative of the offline relationship functioning, as evidenced by the IM's relational maintenance behaviors (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). This should be demonstrated in several ways, consistent with the IM's antecedents. Specifically, it is expected that:

> *H2: Individuals who disclose their relationship status report higher levels of satisfaction than individuals who do not disclose their relationship status.*

> *H3: Individuals who disclose their relationship status report lower evaluation of quality of relational alternatives than individuals who do not disclose their relationship status.*

> *H4: Individuals who disclose their relationship status have higher levels of investment size than individuals who do not disclose their relationship status.*

1.4.3 Facebook use

In addition to relational antecedents as predicted by the IM, one's decision to disclose a relationship status via a particular SNS is likely governed, in part, by the individual's own usage of the social medium. The social information processing model (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987) posits that individuals' uses of a particular medium are influenced by both

objective and subjective affordances of the channel. Subjectively, individuals are likely to use the medium (i.e., post a relational status) based on their own perceptions of her or his relationship, consistent with the IM above. Objectively, individuals are likely to update their account and information on an SNS concurrent to their actual use of the SNS. Those that use a channel like Facebook or Twitter more regularly and intensely are more likely—via both norms of use and opportunities for updating—to update their profile fields, including relational status (Gibbs et al., 2011; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007). Therefore, in addition to relational effects, an individual's own use of a SNS should predict, in part, the public disclosure of one's relational status. Thus:

> H5: Individuals who disclose their relationship status are heavier uses of the
> social network site than individuals who do not disclose their relationship status.

1.4.4. Integrating relational display into the IM

Taken together, these hypotheses suggest public relational disclosure on a SNS can be integrated into Rusbult's (1980) IM as a visible artifact to a model whose elements have been primarily internalized. Although our intent is not to establish causation, it is most likely that public display of one's relational status can be conceptualized as an outcome of a highly-committed relationship (see Figure 1) and considering one's own use of the SNS tool. Thus, in addition to the individual relationships predicted above, we further hypothesize:

> H6: Relational status disclosure via a social network site can be predicted as an
> outcome of the investment model and one's medium use.

2 Method

2.1 Respondents

Respondents ($N = 170$; 120 women) to an online survey were drawn from a large

Southwestern university, were enrolled in an undergraduate communication course, and received

[extra] course credit for participating, commensurate with classroom policies. Given their heavy

social media use and relational changes during this life stage (Davis & Oathout, 1987; Ellison,

Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Paul & Brier, 2001), college students represent an ideal population to

assess individuals' use of social media affordances and related relational characteristics. The

average age of respondents was 20.16 ($SD = 2.11$) years. To participate, individuals were

required to currently be in a romantic relationship and have an active Facebook account. The

simple majority of respondents ($n = 93$) in this sample shared their actual relationship status via

Facebook, while $n = 77$ did not share their status. Although all respondents were involved in a

long-term romantic relationship at the time of the study ($M_{years} = 2.56$, $SD_{years} = 1.49$), the length

of relationship was not correlated with most study variables (see Table 1), and thus was not

included in further analysis.

2.2 Measures

Respondents' relational and personal characteristics were assessed using several

established scales and demographic items, including questions regarding the duration of their

current relationship, when they posted a formal relational status on Facebook, and whether their

relational partner was tagged in their Facebook relational status. Several scales from Rusbult et

al. (1998) assessed respondents' relational characteristics, using Likert-type items to which

respondents indicated their agreement on a scale of 1 ("Do not agree at all") to 9 ("Agree

completely"), with higher values indicating greater degrees of the perceptions being assessed.

Following the suggestion of Rusbult et al. (1998), and given the breadth of scope of relationships

among diverse variables under consideration, only the global items for each scale were used,

omitting the facet items. *Relational commitment* was assessed using 7 items, including "I want our relationship to last for a very long time," and demonstrated good reliability (α = .88). *Quality of perceived relational alternatives* was assessed using 5 items, including "If I weren't dating my partner, I would do fine—I would find another person to date," was reverse coded so that greater response values indicated lower quality of alternatives, and demonstrated high reliability (α = .89). *Relational investment size* was assessed using 5 items, including "I put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if my relationship were to end," and demonstrated acceptable reliability (α = .82).

Satisfaction was measured using Funk and Rogge's (2007) 33-item Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; α = .92), which measures overall satisfaction with the relationship. Items ask participants to rank their agreement with statements regarding relationship satisfaction along a 6-point scale for 25 Likert-type items, seven semantic differentials, and one 7-point (unweighted) Likert-type item. Items include: "In general, how often do you think things between you and your partner are going well?" and "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?"

Facebook use was assessed with Ellison et al.'s (2007) Facebook Intensity Scale (FBI), which measures an individual's frequency and use of the popular SNS. The 8-item scale assesses an individual's emotional connection to and use of Facebook with items such as, "I would be sorry if Facebook shutdown," and, "In the past week, on average, approximately how many minutes per day have you spent on Facebook." The FBI has been validated and used in several studies (e.g., Papp et al., 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009) to assess Facebook use, and demonstrated acceptable reliability in the present study, α = .83.

3 Analysis

Given the large number of dependent variables in the current study, multicollinearity tests were employed to ensure variables were measuring separate factors. All variance inflation factors (VIF) values were less than 3.0 indicating that multicollinearity was not present. To initially test H1-H4, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine hypothesized differences between those who chose to disclose (*n* = 93) were compared to those who did not (*n* = 77).

3.1 Between-group Differences

H1, which predicts a higher level of commitment is demonstrated by those who post their status online, was supported. Respondents who posted their relationship status demonstrated higher levels of commitment (*M* = 7.91, *SD* = 1.33) than respondents who did not share their relationship status on Facebook (*M* = 6.19, *SD* = 1.73), $t(168) = 7.33$, $p < .001$, Cohen's *d* = 1.13. H2, which predicts satisfaction is greater for those who post their relationship status online, was also supported. An independent sample *t*-test revealed that respondents who posted their relationship online reported greater relational satisfaction (*M* = 5.40, *SD* = .68) than those who did not share their relational status, (*M* = 4.53, *SD* = .92), $t(168) = 6.88$, $p < .001$, Cohen's *d* = 1.06. H3 predicts fewer quality of alternatives for those who display their relationship status when compared to those who are not Facebook official. As hypothesized, respondents who shared their relationship status online reported significantly weaker quality of alternatives (*M* = 6.43, *SD* = 1.88) than those who did not share their relationship status on Facebook (*M* = 4.95, *SD* = 1.83), $t(168) = 5.17$, $p < .001$, Cohen's *d* = 0.80, supporting H3. Finally, H4 predicted higher levels of investment reported by those who post their relationship status online than those who do not. An independent t-test revealed that those posting their relationship status reported more relational investment (*M* = 7.03, *SD* = 1.43) than did those not sharing their relationship

status on Facebook ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.62$), t (168) = 5.81, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.90$, supporting

H4.

H5 predicts differences in the intensity of Facebook between those who post their

relationship status online and those who do not. Consistent with the hypothesis, respondents

who shared their relationship status on Facebook reported higher Facebook intensity ($M = 3.96$,

$SD = .77$) than those who did not share their relationship status on Facebook ($M = 3.54$, $SD=$

0.82), t (168) = 3.44 $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .53$, supporting H5. Taken together, the results of H1-

5 support the hypothesized differences in relational characteristics of individuals in a romantic

relationship who post and do not post their relational status publically on Facebook. Table 1

presents additional descriptive data and bivariate correlations among these variables.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

3.2 Structural Equation

Beyond between-group differences, this research further hypothesized the structural

relationship among study variables. A structural equation model (SEM) was developed based on

hypothesized relationships and tested using the AMOS (v. 22.0) statistical package. The model

demonstrated excellent fit (see Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008) with the data, $\chi^2(4) = 5.08$, p

= .28, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .039 (90% CI: .00-.13), explaining 26% of the variance in whether

respondents publically posted their relational status on Facebook. As depicted in Figure 1, the

overall model was significant, and standardized estimates were significant for all hypothesized

relationships save three: between relational alternatives and commitment, relational alternatives

and relational display.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

4 Discussion

This research examined the value of Facebook relationship status disclosure as an indicator of relational characteristics through the lens of warranting theory. Though relationship statuses on SNSs are user-generated, these statuses are articulated and displayed in a social setting, supporting such disclosures as cues high in warranting value. It was therefore predicted these online relational status displays would serve as significant online artifacts warranting offline relational characteristics per Rusbult's (1980) IM: commitment (H1), satisfaction (H2) perceived quality of alternatives (H3), investment size in the relationship (H4). Additionally, disclosure was predicted to be partially guided by an individual Facebook use (H5), per the social information processing model (Fulk et al., 1987). Finally, it was predicted that one's decision to publically disclose her or his relational status could be modeled so as to be predicted by these relational characteristics and Facebook use (H6). Through a survey of college students (who are both veracious Facebook users and at a life stage marked by volatile relational change), quantitative analysis of survey responses supported all hypotheses, and thus online relational status displays as significant indicators of offline relationship characteristics. These findings are discussed with respect to both relational characteristics and warranting theory.

4.1 Implications for Relationships and SNSs

In initial and important implication of these findings is that they conceptualize and support the role of an individual's decision to publically disclose their relationship via a SNS as an outcome, rather than a predictor, of relational characteristics. Previous work (e.g., Papp et al., 2012; Toma & Choi, 2015) has considered relationship status disclosure as an antecedent to relational commitment, assuming individuals post a relationship status whereby their relational commitment increases. Given that slightly less than half of our sample of those involved in a long-term romantic relationship ($M_{years} = 2.56$, $SD_{years} = 1.49$) did not disclose their relationship

status, it seems going Facebook official may be an important, but not sufficient, predictor of relational commitment.

Taking a different perspective, we articulate relationship status disclosure is an outcome—not an antecedent—to relational characteristics, whereby individuals only disclose their relationship status via a SNS upon their relational characteristics attaining a threshold level. The support both of between-group differences and the overall hypothesized model supports this view, and helps address why individuals in a romantic relationship may have chosen [not] to disclose their relationship status via Facebook. Thus, going Facebook official seems to warrant one's relational characteristics, in that those who disclosed online they were in a relationship reported greater relational satisfaction, relational investment, and relational commitment offline, in addition to reporting lower perceptions of the quality of relational alternatives. Taken together, this perspective serves as a more parsimonious explanation regarding the role of going Facebook official as a modern day version of 'pinning' (Rogers & Havens, 1960), reflecting rather than affecting current levels of one's relational characteristics.

Additionally, this analysis provides implications for relational characteristics, both online and offline. Our results support the overall investment model (Rusbult, 1980), indicating that individuals who disclose their relationship status via Facebook demonstrate greater relational satisfaction, relational commitment, and investment size, with lower perceived quality of alternatives, than those not disclosing their relationship status via Facebook. Our large effect sizes show that commitment alone accounts for a high level of this variance, as seen in Hypothesis 1. The implication of this large effect is magnified with the knowledge that lower commitment is a meaningful indicator of stay-or-leave decisions in a relationship (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Rusbult et al., 1998). Le and Agnew's (2003) meta-analysis of

commitment demonstrates commitment accounts for 47% of the variance in decisions of individuals to stay or leave a relationship. Based on our results, individuals are more committed if they have disclosed their relationship status, signaling greater likelihood for relationship persistence, or alternately that those intending a relationship to persist are more likely to disclose their relationship status on Facebook. In this way, our data are consistent with Toma and Choi's (2015) recent work regarding relational longevity; but explicating a different process.

Finally, the significant SEM suggests novel processes and applications of Rusbult's (1980) IM as relationships increasingly are manifest and conducted, at least in part, online. Generally, results support and extend the IM online, as relational satisfaction and investment positively predicted relational commitment—and consequently whether an individual disclosed her/his relational status via Facebook—consistent with the IM. However, two unexpected findings were that (1) perceived relational alternatives did not predict commitment (as per the IM) or going Facebook official, and that (2) commitment did not directly predict going Facebook official. For the former, although differences in the perceived quality of relational alternatives were identified in between-group analyses (H3); but these differences became nonsignificant upon controlling for other antecedents and allowing for the covariance of the IM (H6). It may be that Facebook is just not a venue wherein individuals actively seek out or consider relational alternatives, which was only identified in the superordinate SEM analysis. This explanation would be consistent with prior work (Ellison et al., 2007) that has acknowledged Facebook is primarily used to maintain social relationships, not to establish or foster new connections, as would be needed for a relational alternative. Finally, commitment did not directly predict whether an individual made her/his relationship Facebook official, suggesting that merely disclosing a relational status does not infer the expectation of relational longevity (i.e.,

commitment), particularly as suggested in other studies (Papp et al., 2012; Saslow et al., 2013; Toma & Choi, 2015). Rather than directly implying relational commitment, an individual's Facebook disclosure of a relationship is predicted by the antescedent relational characteristics predicted by the IM, suggesting going Facebook official may be enough to indicate the relationship is going well; but insufficient as a single cue to guide expectations about the commitment or longevity of the relationship itself. As discussed in the limitations (see Section 4.4), this finding may, however, be an artifact of the college population that was surveyed and the relative uniqueness of their relationships.

4.2 Implications for warranting theory

Our findings have further implications for warranting theory, which espouses online representations of identity have a connection to offline identity (Walther, 2011; Walther & Parks, 2002), further supporting the predictability of offline characteristics from online identity claims. Whereas early CMC work suggested individuals online would not portray themselves as they would offline (e.g., Turkle, 1995), the present findings support subsequent refutations of this position in finding that individuals generally present themselves faithfully online (e.g., Back et al., 2010; Van Dijck, 2013), at least within SNSs, and perhaps even more faithfully than they present themselves offline. Within our data, slightly less than half of respondents in a romantic relationship ($n = 77$, 45%) did not display their relational status via Facebook and reported lower levels of relational characteristics. Recalling that respondents reported being in their relationship for about two-and-a-half years, it is unlikely that individuals in a long-term relationship would explicate lower levels of relational commitment, satisfaction, and other characteristics face-to-face to close friends or their significant other. Thus, that an individual's online profile—even obliquely—is a stronger reflection of her or his actual feelings rather than presumed offline

characteristics reinforces the strength of warranting theory and online information for self-presentation. Moreover, unlike prior research into warranting which has used primarily manipulated stimuli in experiments (e.g., Carr & Stefaniak, 2012; Walther et al., 2009), the present findings used surveys to support warranting theory and effects *in situ*.

Additionally, these findings support prior challenges to Parks' (2011) three boundaries to warranting theory, specifically the boundary condition of third-party verification. Rather, consistent with prior assertions and findings (Gibbs et al., 2011; Hayes & Carr, 2015) that third-party verification, while beneficial, is not required for a claim to warrant one's offline identity. Rather, merely the ability of third-parties to verify a claim appears to be necessary, as in social media where individuals have the ability—but not the requirement—to validate or refute a message through the channels' masspersonal, interactive affordances (Carr & Hayes, 2015). In this way, our research further support an extended boundary condition for warranting, by demonstrating some online disclosures—due to their network-verifiable nature—provide strong indicators of offline relationships without the prerequisite third party verification. Inherent in a Facebook relationship status is the verification of the individual who is tagged in the status For Xander to be identified as "in a relationship" with Anya, Anya must verify Xander's claim within the system. More than 90% of respondents surveyed who shared their actual relationship online did, in fact, 'tag' their partner in their status, publically connecting their profile to their significant other's. Individuals must agree to be tagged, which increases warranting value of the relational cue. By disclosing one's relationship status on an SNS like Facebook, offline relational satisfaction, commitment, and investment are accurately reflected.

4.3 Implications for Technology

Finally, our results account for technology use in understanding offline relationships, which are increasingly communicated and manifest online. Respondents who disclose their relationship status reported higher levels of Facebook use than individuals who do not disclose their relationship status, suggesting media use as a further element in understanding relational processes of social media users. Previous research (Gibbs et al., 2011; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, in press) suggests individuals who have more knowledge of the Internet and social media are more aware of the online social norms and rules for behavior. Within the present study, users' knowledge of the norms of disclosure on Facebook may inform their conscious control and knowledge of the implications of displaying their relational statuses. Individuals who use Facebook more should exert more control over their online persona, so their online persona more accurately reflects their offline persona: This expectation is supported in the data (H5).

4.4 Limitations and Future Research

The present research is not without limitations, namely sampling limitations, predictive ability, and warranting theory outcomes. First, though Facebook users are older with a mean age of 38 years old (Facebook, 2015), our sample was limited to college students. Broader populations may have Facebook usage habits and relational experiences different from than those characteristic of the undergraduate experience. Although college students tend to be predictive of future SNS trends (Ellison et al., 2007), future research should seek to replicate results across a larger population, particularly across relational situations by including married couples, those in open relationships, and as precursor of relational termination (e.g., Tong, 2013).

Second, the predictive ability of our study is limited. Counter to recent work (Papp et al., 2012; Toma & Choi, 2015), our study is predicated on the assumption that displaying one's relational status on Facebook reflective of—and therefore subsequent to—the individual

perceiving particular relational attributes explicated in Rusbult's (1980) IM. Although this order

of effects is supported by and consistent with research into public displays of relational status via

other channels (e.g., Rogers & Havens, 1960), and the *a priori* model was supported, our

analysis of cross-sectional data cannot conclusively indicate whether displaying a relationship

status via Facebook is an outcome of the qualities of the relationship or if the qualities of the

relationship are a consequence of status disclosure. Future work can employ longitudinal

analysis to track relationships as they develop, and in so doing further and firmly evidence a

causal path.

Finally, our research is limited by its grounding in warranting theory. As Walther and

Parks (2002) explain, "Warranting is potentially quite limited in CMC settings in which

individuals do not expect to meet outside of their virtual interaction" (p. 552). Because our

research assumes that future interactions with romantic relationship partners are implied by the

presentation of a romantic relationship in online statuses, we cannot address this dimension of

warranting theory. However, as DeAndrea (2014) clarifies, the presence of anticipated future

interaction adds to the warranting value of online claims. Further, we do not examine the

implications of Facebook friends' perceptions of this information, instead focusing on

information transmission processes of warranting theory (other studies have also taken this

approach, see Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2011). Walther and Parks (2002)

explain that face-to-face interaction promotes an obviously fully-warranted relationship, and

online relationships lack this implied verification. Warranting theory can be further bolstered by

future research examining the implications of anticipated future interaction on relationship status

disclosure on (and other affordances of) SNSs.

4.5 Conclusion

This study examined the warranting value of disclosing a relationship status on a SNS, specifically Facebook. Informed by Walther and Parks' (2002) warranting theory and drawing on Rusbult's (1980) investment model, we found that individuals who disclosed their relationship on Facebook were more satisfied, committed, saw lower quality of alternatives, and were more invested than individuals who did not disclose their relationship status, in addition to reporting more intense Facebook use. Our findings support warranting theory and extend the theory to the presentation of relational statuses and characteristics. Moreover, because the online presentation of the relationship is intrinsically connected to offline relational characteristics, an individual's choice to display a relational status in an interactive medium that transcends different social networks serves as a high-value warranting cue to offline relational status by nature of willingness to publically commit to that relationship online. Going Facebook official online therefore has implications for the value the relationship status has in both physical and the cyber world. If relationship partners choose not to share their relationship status, it may speak to strife within their relationship and their willingness to leave options open (see Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). While this research does not examine the causal links, it does provide insight into the act of online relationship status disclosure as an online cue to one's offline relationship, supporting and advancing warranting theory and our understanding of the offline-online presentation of self.

Table 1. Descriptives and bivariate correlation matrix of study variables.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relational status shared	.58		-						
2. Satisfaction	7.65	1.60	.45‡	-					
3. Quality Alternatives	5.72	2.00	.34‡	.45‡	-				
4. Investment	6.44	1.66	.41‡	.52‡	.48‡	-			
5. Commitment	6.26	1.21	.31‡	.61‡	.39‡	.59‡	-		
6. Facebook Intensity			.20†	.06	.06	.16*	.08	-	
7. Duration of Relationship (in years)	2.56	1.49	.16*	.05	.07	.22†	.07	-.09	-
8. Gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male)	1.69		-.04	.08	.11	-.05	.02	.14	-.09

p < .05, †*p* < .01, ‡*p* < .001

Figure 1. Structural equation model with standardized coefficients.
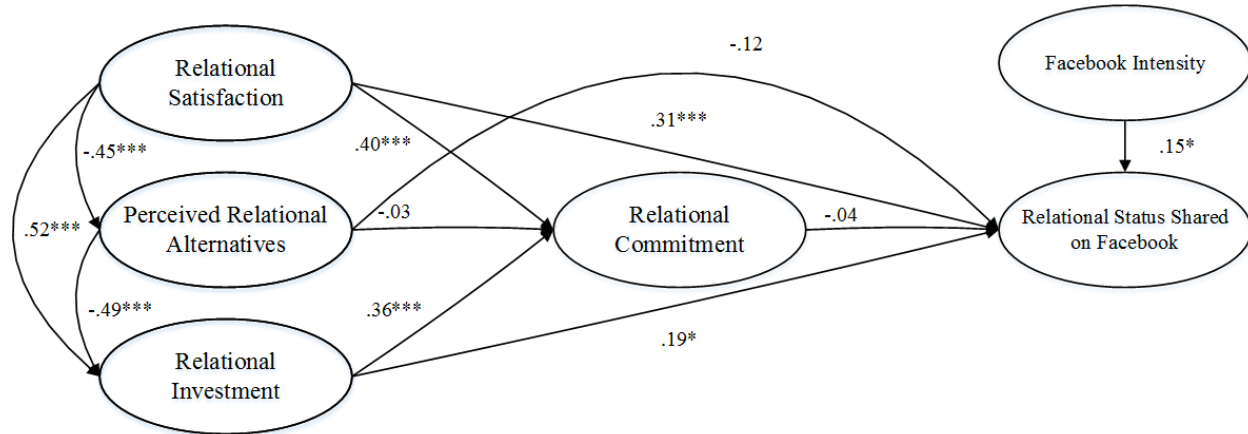
*p < .05, ***p < .001

$\chi^2(4) = 5.08$, $p = .28$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .039 (90% CI: .00-.13)

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