

# Online construction of romantic relationships on social media

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## Abstract

This study draws on Knapp's offline relationship development model to examine how people construct romantic relationships on social media, with particular attention to the role of affordances in this process. Based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 relational partners, we show that Knapp's five traditional stages of relationship construction merge online into three because of social media affordances, including *searchability*, *visibility*, *anonymity*, *persistence*, *storage*, and *editability*. These affordances allow users to search and obtain information about potential partners quickly, conveniently, and anonymously before, during, and after the first interaction. They also enable users to initiate or avoid romantic interactions relatively easily, present shared memories, build a sense of togetherness, and edit or erase online content about previous partners. The findings suggest that most participants perceived Facebook, more than Instagram, as a platform of choice for relationship construction. Addressing the interplay between social media affordances, online relational practices, and offline relationship dynamics, the study shows that offline and online spaces are highly interrelated in terms of interinfluence. Therefore, we argue that the merger of stages is not merely a technical rearrangement but an indication of the fundamental role that online practices play in people's offline realities, including romantic relationships.

## Keywords

Relationship construction, social media, affordances, Knapp, thematic analysis, photo-elicitation, Facebook, Instagram

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## Introduction

Romantic relationships comprise one of the most meaningful aspects of life and a primary source of personal fulfillment and well-being (Miller, 2018). As social media use is increasing steadily and reaching a new peak among adults in the United States and beyond (Bezeq, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2021), a growing body of knowledge addresses its role in the construction of romantic relationships, as illustrated by numerous books, edited collections, and systematic reviews dedicated to the topic (Chambers, 2013; Miguel, 2018; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2016; Punyanunt-Carter & Wrench, 2017; Rus & Tiemensma, 2017).

Many of these studies examine the role of social media across the relational lifespan (Brody et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2013, 2014) while others focus on specific stages to explore the ways people fall in love, maintain their relationships, or break up online (Brody et al., 2020; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Fox & Warber, 2013; Tong, 2013). A common theme among these studies is the application of offline relationship models to social media (Brody et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2013; LeFebvre et al., 2015; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021), often through a focus on the role of specific affordances (Frampton & Fox, 2018; LeFebvre et al., 2015; Tokunaga, 2011).

Scholarship addressing romantic relationships and social media is limited in two different senses. First, most of these studies focus on Facebook while giving Instagram very little attention (Lee et al., 2019; Manvelyan, 2016; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). This gap is particularly puzzling, as Instagram is the second most popular social media platform after Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2021). Instagram's unique visual culture makes it a potential space for the public construction of relationships (Fejes-Vékassy et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015). Second, most studies on the topic used quantitative methods to explore the interplay between online practices on social media and offline relationship dynamics (Brody et al., 2016, 2020; Fox & Anderegg, 2014; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Fox & Warber, 2013; Rus & Tiemensma, 2017; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021), *inter alia* by developing measures of online relational behavior (Dainton, 2013; McEwan et al., 2014). Only a few studies used a mixed-methods approach (Fejes-Vékassy et al., 2020; LeFebvre et al., 2015) and even fewer were purely qualitative (Fox et al., 2014; Frampton & Fox, 2018).

This study addresses these gaps by using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to examine romantic relationship construction on Facebook and Instagram. By applying DSLU stage model of offline relationship development to these platforms, we inquire into both the construction of romantic relationships in the age of social media, and the direct contribution of Facebook and Instagram's affordances to this process. More specifically, we ask (1) how relational partners who use social media to maintain their relationship progress through different stages, using Knapp's model as a reference point; and (2) which affordances are involved in the construction of relationships on Facebook and Instagram, and whether and how these platforms differ in their contribution to this process.

In an era when most relationships begin and develop online (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011), a nuanced look at their construction on social media may advance our knowledge regarding the ways new forms of interpersonal relations emerge and develop as well the

complex relations between offline and online contexts.

## Offline construction of romantic relationships: Knapp's model

The term “romantic relationship” refers to mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions between two partners, characterized by high levels of affiliation, affection, and intimacy (Collins et al., 2009; Frampton & Fox, 2018). Romantic relationships play a central role in people's lives, predominantly because they constitute a developmental anchor that contributes to their quality of life (Miller, 2018).

The literature on the subject focuses on three main aspects: First, construction of romantic relationships as an essential developmental task, mainly during the transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000); second, individuals' perception of romantic relationships as a significant source of happiness and well-being (Miller, 2018); and lastly, the stages of romantic relationship construction (Fox et al., 2013; Knapp, 1978).

Over the past 50 years, numerous stage models have been developed to demonstrate how relationships progress linearly through distinct stages, from first interaction to bonding to relationship dissolution (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2010; Levinger, 1980; Murstein, 1970; Rollie & Duck, 2006; Sprecher et al., 2008). The rationale behind these models corresponds with relational trajectories approaches, aimed at illuminating the dynamic evolution of committed relationships (Surra & Hughes, 1997) by focusing on meaningful transitions or “turning points” such as marriage (Dailey et al., 2013; Elder, 1985). Surra and Hughes (1997) distinguished between two types of relational commitment characterizing different trajectories: relationship-driven commitment refers to an ideal bond based on love, desire, healthy interdependence, and positive perception of the relationship; event-driven commitment refers to external, relatively utilitarian motives that prevent partners from ending the relationship (e.g., financial constraints). The first type of commitment was associated with higher levels of satisfaction and trust and fewer conflicts, and can be rationalized by the social penetration theory. This theory explains relationship development and progression through gradual, open, and intimate personal communication. It suggests that relationships develop in an orderly and relatively predictable manner as individuals self-disclose their thoughts, feelings, and desires, thus creating a positive and intimate atmosphere between the partners (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Knapp (1978) proposed a relational development model consisting of five stages of “coming together” and five stages of “coming apart.” This model presents relationship construction as a dual staircase, with relationship development ascending, descending, and stabilizing. According to this model, romantic relationships progress through five separate stages: *Initiating* refers to the first interaction between two individuals. It involves first impressions and includes handshakes, introductions, and topic proposals for initiating the first conversation. At the *experimenting* stage, individuals seek additional information to help them judge the potential partner's suitability. The *intensifying* stage involves an increase in self-disclosure as the commitment to the relationship begins and intensifies gradually. At the *integrating* stage, the couple displays a sense of shared public identity and refers to itself as “we.” At the last stage of *bonding*, couples publicly proclaim

their relationship, often via an official union (e.g., marriage or a civil partnership) (Knapp et al., 2014). In Knapp's (1978) model, the relationship progresses linearly and positively from the moment of acquaintance to the bonding stage.

During the construction of a romantic relationship, partners are keen to exhibit it to others, for instance, by wearing the partner's jacket (as a way of hinting at the tie between them) or sporting their wedding bands (Fox et al., 2013). In other words, public display of the relational dynamics is constitutive to the construction of romantic relationships. As social media is designed (and utilized) to allow publicity, this paper asks how Knapp's offline stages of relational development are realized online in these platforms. By doing so, it follows a growing body of knowledge that applies offline romantic relationship models to social media. For example, Fox et al. (2013) explored Facebook's role in Knapp's (1978) five-stage model, with particular attention to the implications of publicly declaring "in a relationship." LeFebvre and her colleagues (2015) extended Rollie and Duck's (2006) model of offline relationship dissolution to online environments, and showed that Facebook's affordances allow relational partners to amplify and alter different aspects of offline relationship dissolution. Similarly, Brody et al. (2016) applied Knapp and Vangelisti's (2010) stage model to online behaviors, suggesting that these behaviors are associated with relationships' quality and adjustment. Sharabi and Hopkins (2021) applied the investment model to Instagram to better understand relationship maintenance and attention to alternatives by couples using a highly visual platform. Overall, these studies demonstrated the interrelations between relational activity on social media and offline relationship dynamics, as reflected in traditional models.

## **Construction of romantic relationships on social media**

In recent years, social media has provided relational partners with new tools and opportunities to construct their romantic relationships and communicate them to others, predominantly by enabling couples to post publicly about their commitment (Papacharissi, 2018). Recent data expose the significant role that social media plays in romantic relationships, showing that most social media users (81%) report that they often see others posting about their relationships, and nearly half (48%) of those in a committed relationship report that they have ever posted about their own relationships. Moreover, third of the romantic partners on social media say that the platform is important in showing how much they care about their partners, and this number is rising to nearly half (48%) among younger users aged 18–29 (Vogels & Anderson, 2020).

Over the past decade, numerous studies have examined how offline relationship dynamics manifest in online environments, mainly social media. Some of these studies explored how social media is used across the relational lifespan (Brody et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2013, 2014) and others focused on particular stages, from relationship initiation to its termination (Brody et al., 2020; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Fox & Warber, 2013; Tong, 2013). Particular attention was given to the ways partners use Facebook for various purposes in different stages of the relationship: to publicly declare their commitment (Fox & Warber, 2013), maintain and nurture their relationship over time (Dainton, 2013; Tong,

2013), manage relational dissolution (LeFebvre et al., 2015), and reduce uncertainty during and after breakups (Fox & Andereg, 2014; Tong, 2013).

The ability to shape romantic relationships through social media depends upon a platform's affordances. The concept of affordances stems from ecological psychology and inquiries about how individuals perceive objects in their environment—what they are and what potential uses they afford (Gibson, 2014). Numerous communication scholars have used an affordance-based approach to study the relationship between people and technology (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010; Pearce & Vitak, 2016). In this approach, affordances are not merely properties of people or artifacts but are constituted in relationships between people and the materiality of the things with which they come into contact (Evans et al., 2017; Meredith, 2017; Yeshua-Katz & Hård af Segerstad, 2020). Boyd (2010) suggested four general affordances that shape mediated environments: *Persistence* refers to the durability of online expressions and content; *Visibility* refers to the potential audience who can bear witness; *Spreadability* is the possible ease to share content; and *Searchability* is the ability to find relevant content (for an exhaustive list of affordances used in communication research, see Fox & McEwan, 2017).

Several scholars have discussed Facebook's role in romantic relationships by highlighting the actual contribution of specific affordances. For example, Tokunaga (2011) claimed that *accessibility* of personal information, *multimediation* (convergence of pictures, videos, and text into a single medium), and *recordability* (archives of content) encourage interpersonal surveillance of and by relational partners on social media. LeFebvre and her colleagues (2015) have shown that Facebook's unique affordances can help partners adjust to breakups by allowing them to reinforce and alter different aspects of relationship termination. Frampton and Fox (2018) have demonstrated how *persistence*, *association*, and *visibility* can promote romantic jealousy and highlight threats to relationships.

Relational activity on Facebook has many documented benefits. Studies suggest that changing status to "in a relationship," posting joint pictures of the couple, exchanging messages on each other's walls, accumulating shared friends, and belonging to shared groups and events are associated with a stronger commitment to the relationship and with its longevity (Emery et al., 2014, 2015; Toma & Choi, 2015). More generally, social media use may be beneficial for relationship development (Fox & Andereg, 2014) and for successful coping with relational dissolution (LeFebvre et al., 2015). However, several other studies pointed out social media's dark side in different stages of the relationship (see Rus & Tiemensma, 2017). For example, it was found that romantic partners often struggle to maintain privacy and independence on social media to the extent that it triggers romantic conflict (Fox et al., 2014), and that social media affordances often encourage jealousy between partners (Frampton & Fox, 2018). Other studies pointed out social media's role as potentially unhealthy enablers for online surveillance after relationship termination (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015). These studies on the dark side of social media generally contend that it can be a source of stress and turbulence for romantic partners (Fox, 2016).

Unlike Facebook, Instagram's role in romantic relationships has received little scholarly attention, generating limited and inconsistent results regarding the platform's

contribution to relationships (Lee et al., 2019; Manvelyan, 2016; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). However, scholars agree that Instagram's unique visual culture generates new user behavior and motivation, making it a potential new site for relationship display and maintenance (Fejes-Vékássy et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015). Visual platforms like Instagram offer the same affordances as text-based platforms, but they also provide unique features that encourage lower *anonymity*, increased *presence*, and advanced, semi-professional tools for *editing* and *modifying* pictures (e.g., standardized filters) to enhance their aesthetics (Schreiber, 2017; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). Therefore, these platforms allow users to choose more easily between presenting their real selves or an idealized image of themselves (see Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). Importantly, Instagram allows users to follow each other but not to friend others or create friend lists (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018).

Today, users upload more pictures on social media than ever before: more than 150 million photos are uploaded daily to Instagram and 350 million to Facebook (Hutchinson, 2016; Omnicore, 2021). Consequently, scholars have analyzed the use of visual imagery in social media platforms (e.g., Hurley, 2019; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010), showing that posting romantic pictures are deemed equivalent to offline affective expressions (e.g., holding hands or kissing) and aimed at displaying happy relationships to a wide audience (Mod, 2010). Accordingly, these photos commonly display physical contact such as sitting on the lap of the other or hugging (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010). Therefore, users may conceal their romantic status if they believe that it could produce a negative impression or that a public declaration would impair the relationship (Emery et al., 2014).

Given Instagram's focus on visual materials, the growing popularity of photo-sharing among social media users, and the increasing importance that relational partners ascribe to the visual aspect, we assume that couples use social media, and Instagram in particular, to visually construct their romantic relationships by publicizing it to new audiences (see Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

We focus specifically on Knapp's model because its richness has made it "a foundational theory in interpersonal communication" (Fox et al., 2013, p. 773) beyond its contribution to relationships. Therefore, it is particularly apposite for addressing relational dynamics on social media platforms, which themselves have become a space for interpersonal communication (Carr & Hayes, 2015). By doing so, we follow several other studies that previously applied Knapp's model to social media (e.g., Brody et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2013).

## Method

This study examines how emerging adults construct their romantic relationships on Facebook and Instagram—the leading social media platforms in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021) and Israel (Bezeq, 2020). More specifically, we ask how Knapp's five-stage offline model manifests on Facebook and Instagram and how these platforms' affordances enable or constrain the construction of romantic relationships online.

### *Procedure and sampling*

The study included 30 student participants, 15 men and 15 women, aged 21–30 (see [Appendix 1](#) for participants' background). All participants were partners in heterosexual romantic relationships for at least 6 months and defined themselves as active on Facebook or Instagram daily. We recruited them by publishing posts in Facebook student groups and online forums of large classes at an Israeli university, inviting students to participate in the study. All participants were Jewish Israeli, cisgender, and heterosexual.

We conducted ten in-depth semi-structured couple interviews and ten in-depth semi-structured personal interviews, assuming that these distinct forms may provide different observations (e.g., couple dynamics vs. personal reflections). In-depth semi-structured interviews provide researchers with detailed information about specific experiences or topics while allowing interviewees to construct their narratives by responding to open-ended questions. Acknowledging relational partners' tendency to idealize their relationships on social media by engaging in excessive displays of affection ([Seidman et al., 2019](#)), and considering interviewees' social desirability bias ([Lindlof & Taylor, 2002](#)), we began the interviews with nondirective questions to create an open and intimate atmosphere. Nondirective questions allow researchers greater flexibility, as they constantly change and adapt the questions to generate a bias-free environment in which both sides feel comfortable asking, responding, and commenting about different issues ([Lindlof & Taylor, 2002](#); [Longhurst, 2010](#)). The first individual interview was conducted by the first and the second authors together, and the first couple interview was conducted by the first and the third authors together to establish common ground for the coding process. The remainder of the interviews were conducted by the first author alone until saturation was reached, namely, new codes and categories no longer emerged during the analysis ([Braun et al., 2018](#)). The interviews were conducted during the second half of 2019 and referred to participants' relationship and social media experiences in the past 5 years (although earlier experiences were also mentioned). The interviews lasted between 60 and 140 mins (mean = 93) and took place either on the university campus in a private office or in interviewees' homes to ensure their convenience. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews included a photo-elicitation interview technique ([Birnbaum, 2013](#); [Collier, 1957](#)). Before the interviews, we requested the participants to forward five Facebook/Instagram post screenshots that they deemed meaningful and significant in the context of their relationship. During the interview, we invited them to share their interpretation of texts and pictures they posted. This technique helped stimulate the subjects' participation in the interview, facilitate recollection of events, and gain relevant insights into their online behavior dynamics.

### *Corpus and data analysis*

The research corpus included 20 interview transcripts and 100 screenshots forwarded to us as part of the photo-elicitation technique (five screenshots for each individual/couple).

Transcripts were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis, using Atlas.ti8 software.

Thematic analysis (TA) is an umbrella term referring to different approaches aimed at identifying, organizing, and classifying insights into patterns ("themes") across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Braun et al. (2018) distinguish reflexive thematic analysis from two other types of thematic analysis: "coding reliability" and "codebook." Reflexive TA is conceptualized as a fully qualitative approach in which "coding is an organic and open iterative process" not relying on a codebook or coding frame (p. 6). It differs from "coding reliability" TA, which is partially qualitative, fairly positivist, and pursues quantitative values of reliability and replicability. It also differs from codebook TA, in which themes are determined in advance of full analysis based on a relatively fixed coding scheme.

Reflexive TA has six phases. In the first phase, *familiarization with the data*, we searched for intriguing expressions and connections that might add depth to subsequent, more systematic coding, with particular attention to casual remarks that echo the research questions. In the second phase, we conducted a systematic coding by attaching explicit labels (codes) to different units and identifying initial meaning throughout the data set. Third, we constructed themes by merging similar codes into orderly arrays of meaning that reflect a particular part of the data set. In the next two phases, we tested the emerging themes against the research questions and refined them by providing explicit definitions and titles. An inductive-dominant approach (Armat et al., 2018) allowed us to use an open coding scheme characteristic to reflexive thematic analysis, and at the same time draw on Knapp's model as a guiding theoretical framework. Finally, the phase of report production aims to tell the complicated story of the data.

For example, in the first phase of *familiarization with the data*, participants' deletion of textual and visual material about previous partners was understood as a practice aimed at overcoming the past and strengthening the present relationship, evocative of Knapp's *intensifying* and *integrating* stages. Two other practices—posting dyadic photographs and uploading a joint profile picture—were also generally interpreted as a way to advance the relationship. In this first analytical phase, all three practices were intuitively associated together and linked to Knapp's stages of *intensifying* and/or *integrating*. In the next phase, we labeled the first practice (i.e., deletion of information about previous partners) as "moving forward" and the other two practices as "advancing the relationship." In the third phase, we grouped these codes (and several others) together to create the establishment stage, thus collapsing the distinction between Knapp's traditional stages of *intensifying* and *integrating*. Phases 2–5—in which we generated codes, constructed, reviewed, defined, and refined broader themes—resulted in a table detailing three model stages, specific online practices relevant to each stage, and the corresponding affordances allowing those practices (see Appendix 2). Codes were produced, ascribed to textual units, and grouped into themes by the first author; these steps were reviewed by the second and the third authors independently. Minor discrepancies were discussed and resolved by all authors until general agreement was reached (see also Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010).

## Findings

Our findings suggest that Knapp's (1978) five offline relational development stages merge into three online stages: exploring romantic possibilities, establishing a relationship, and relationship bonding. Quotes from the interviews appear throughout to demonstrate the essence of each stage.

### *Exploration of romantic possibilities: From offline to online*

This stage merges Knapp's first two offline stages—initiating and experimenting—demonstrating how social media functions as a single site in which both processes are interwoven. All participants explained that a preliminary offline interaction was necessary to form a romantic relationship. First, a meeting took place between the two partners in a non-romantic context (e.g., meeting with mutual friends), allowing them to learn each other's names. Users uploading identifying information on Facebook affords *searchability*, thereby allowing people to easily trace information about potential partners by searching their names on Facebook (boyd, 2010; Marwick & Ellison, 2012). *Visibility* of personal information on Facebook, defined as opportunities for public presentation through posts, comments, status updates, and pictures (Emery et al., 2015), enabled one of the partners to collect information and initiate the first interaction through Facebook's Messenger chat, sometimes preceded by a friend request.

Participants pointed to the importance of what they called “stalking,” in a positive sense, which refers to the practice of scanning potential partners' profiles to obtain relevant information: “Stalking, of course, stalking! It's classic! I was invested in stalking even before we became Facebook friends” (Maya). The stalking occurs before, during, and even after the initial interaction. It plays a vital role in relationship construction because it determines whether the first interaction will elicit a response and become reciprocal. Participants reported that stalking others' profiles helped them decide whether to get in touch or not. They described several “turn off” causes that could lead them to avoid or refuse interaction with potential partners, from having nude pictures posted on their profiles to sharing too much content. Most interviewees preferred a delicate balance between oversharing and lack of sharing. Oversharing can be “too many swimsuit pictures” (Tom) or “someone posting every second a picture of himself with a bottle of Gray Goose in hand and a girl here and there” (Dorin). In contrast, lack of sharing, as Omer described, refers to users who do not fill relevant information to the extent that others suspect they are bots.

Depending on users' privacy settings, Facebook allows to search and obtain extensive information about the potential partner, from friends' identities and level of education to hobbies and pictures posted over the years, and this was a valuable resource: “By looking at pictures you can see what kind of a person he is. [...] His behavior, his friends, where he hangs out [...]. In my opinion, through pictures the majority [of an impression] can be achieved” (Maya). Yoav further elaborated on the value of such information richness in romantic contexts, claiming that “Facebook is a dating application in the full sense of the word.”

The participants pointed out that Facebook is richer in social information about potential partners compared to Instagram, implying the importance of content *persistence* (content remains available for an extended period) characteristic of this social network site (Treem & Leonardi, 2013):

On Instagram, there's less information about myself because I don't have to share things. Facebook is more personal and richer in information. I feel like Facebook knows a lot more about me. I have more friends on Facebook, it has existed longer [than Instagram], and I experienced most of my life events with this account. On Instagram, no one has to know anything about you; no one sees who you are, how old you are, what your status is. It's easier to stay anonymous on Instagram (Anat).

Though the practice of stalking allows *anonymity* (users' identities remain unrevealed, see Mao & DeAndrea, 2019), participants sometimes exposed themselves during experimentation, as Dorin revealed: "When we were just starting dating, he accidentally liked an old profile picture, and I was like, 'Whoa, somebody's stalking me through my profile.'"

The quotes above suggest that *visibility*, *persistence*, *searchability*, and *anonymity* are central to this stage because they allow users to obtain extensive social information about potential partners, mostly through anonymous stalking, and then decide whether to interact. On social media, Knapp's offline stages of *initiating* and *experimenting* merge into a single stage because specific affordances allow potential partners to initiate and experiment at the same time, on the same site, sometimes through a single online practice. These online practices, such as stalking, challenge the traditional dichotomy between previously discrete actions (e.g., stalking helps people decide whether to get in touch and simultaneously acquire intimate information about the potential partner). During this unified stage of exploration, potential partners decide whether to proceed to the next stage of relationship establishment.

### *Online establishment of the relationship: From acquaintances to a couple*

The establishment stage merges Knapp's offline stages of *intensifying* and *integrating*. During this stage, the romantic relationship evolves, achieves balance, and becomes public. We identified five standard practices in this stage, whereby partners tag each other, like each other's posts, upload their pictures as a couple, erase data about previous partners, and update their profile pictures to a shared one.

**Tagging.** This practice is particularly important in terms of relationship publicity because those who tag their partners in Facebook posts expose their names to a vast network of users. Out of 20 couples, 13 reported that recurrent tagging on Facebook led friends to discover they were in a relationship. Facebook's *reach*—the ability to reach many people with a single click (boyd, 2010)—helped couples disseminate their romantic relationships rapidly and efficiently. The introduction of the relationship to a wide audience is essential to its online construction.

*Liking.* All participants depicted liking each other's posts as a practice in which both partners are expected to take part; as Omer put it: "A sort of unwritten agreement." Nadav Told us: "Of course, I like everything she posts and the opposite," and Mali added that she "couldn't imagine such a scenario [in which the partner would not like content she posted]." Participants explained that they valued and expected likes from their partners because likes suggest to others that they have a good relationship while confirming to themselves that their partners have seen the post and endorsed it. In other words, likes were essential for the relationship construction, both in terms of the partners' interpersonal dynamics and public display.

*Sharing pictures.* Participants perceived uploading their photographs as a couple as a way of declaring, even celebrating their romantic tie. They posted pictures together documenting important events, from vacations to other people's weddings, to display shared achievements or mutual support. Several participants had nuanced observations about posting photographs, claiming, for example, that pictures showing togetherness abroad attest to a more serious bond than photos from trips in Israel because "a trip abroad indicates a higher level of a romantic relationship, representing a greater commitment. You have to rely on your partner a little more" (Lia'v). They also explained that bringing a partner along to weddings should be documented and shared on Facebook because it indicates a serious relationship, as weddings expose people to another layer in their partners' offline worlds (i.e., family and friends).

Photos displaying mutual achievements or support contribute to establishing the relationship because they allow the couple to present themselves as having a shared public identity and declare that one's success is also the partner's success. For instance, a partner who posted a picture of the couple advocating LGBT marriage explained that: "If her friends see that she is a supporter, then they know that I am too and vice versa, so it's sort of a status update, to let you know that we support this cause together!" (Peled). Most participants noted that Facebook's ability to preserve memories of their past activities (i.e., *persistence*) encouraged them to upload content, knowing that Facebook would bring it up year after year. Nurit divulged:

We suddenly realized that we hadn't posted for a while, and Facebook does post past events as memories, and then I thought: 'What is going to be a memory next year? We have to post now!' I see how pleasant it is to recall such things...so this reminds me that we have to upload a little more.

As the quotes above suggest, the participants published numerous photos on Facebook to exhibit their new relationships, inform people about the state of their relationships, present joint achievements, and preserve memories. Importantly, couples explained that the absence of such practices calls into question the status of their relationships, leading others to scan their profiles to determine whether they are still a couple, as Michal explained:

I suddenly realized that one of my friends hadn't posted a picture with her boyfriend for a while, so I looked at the reactions to see if they were still together. I checked to see if he had commented or liked. If he had, then everything is okay. If he hadn't, I knew that I needed to nose around a little more.

Facebook's ability to display content and reach a wide audience makes it easier for couples to establish their relationship as part of its broader online construction. However, their (imagined) audience's expectations encourage them to constantly share pictures to revalidate their public status as a couple. In other words, the ease that comes with Facebook's affordances also makes the online establishment a demanding work in which couples are continuously engaged.

*Erasing data about previous partners.* As Facebook offers high levels of *persistence* of information (boyd, 2010) and allows *editability* (the possibility to edit, modify or revise content already shared, see Treem & Leonardi, 2013), partners described an informal agreement to exclude past episodes featuring their ex-partners from the narrative they tell via Facebook. This practice involves users eliminating all references to their former partners by erasing textual and visual content about them from their Facebook accounts. As Yoram put it: "I just felt that this period should no longer be public." Mali asked her partner to erase pictures that included his ex-girlfriend: "What I had in mind was that I don't want other people looking at his profile to see his ex, so I asked him to take it down, and so he did." Michal agreed: "Suddenly seeing a picture of him kissing the ex seems disrespectful to me. Those pictures should be deleted." This practice of deleting online "evidence" regarding ex-partners aims to produce a particular image of the relationship to be displayed online as part of the relationship construction.

*Updating a profile picture.* Several participants reported that they had changed their profile pictures during the establishment stage because it indicated a steady relationship and signaled that their partners are no longer single. They emphasized that changing their profile pictures back or deleting other joint photos (with their partners) can be concealed easily in a future breakup. Those who did not change their profile pictures explained that they wanted to keep maintaining a separate online identity: "I want to feel that I'm a strong and independent woman even on Facebook. I feel that my profile picture defines who I am, but I don't want my relationship to define who I am" (Mali).

The five practices detailed above suggest that social media users invest considerable time and efforts to exhibit a stable relationship and togetherness through mutual tagging, liking, picture sharing, and deletion of past information. The ability to manipulate online content strategically allows couples to undergo Knapp's (1978) offline stages of *intensifying* and *integrating* simultaneously, thereby establishing their relationship by displaying a sense of shared public identity outwardly.

### *Relationship bonding: From a couple to a family*

This stage refers to the next phase in which relationships progress and become formal and families born. The bonding is manifested in four primary practices: Posting photos documenting the couples moving in together, posting photos announcing engagement or weddings, changing the relationship status, and displaying a “family.”

*Moving in together.* Couples often use Facebook to declare that they are looking for a house, both as a practical means and as a symbolic statement about their relationship, directed at a wide Facebook audience. As Yoram put it: “It is also kind of a statement that we have already moved in together, so we post it on Facebook to update those who do not know.” Miri further elaborated on the symbolic aspect, claiming that “if this [posting a picture of their move] had been merely practical, you would only post one picture. But it was emotional, and we wanted everyone to know, so we uploaded several pictures.” Most couples posted a picture of themselves in their new home after moving in together to mark their new relationship status. Orly explained it: “For me, this is a new stage in the relationship. We set a timer [on the camera] and rushed to the couch to take a photo in our new house.”

*Sharing engagement photos.* Participants described sharing engagement and wedding photos as the most meaningful step. These photos usually display the couple wearing a big smile with the rings shining on their fingers. As the interviewees reported, these posts attracted a large number of likes, reactions, and comments from their online environment, simply because “people get very emotional about pictures of marriage proposals on Facebook” (Na’ama).

*Updating relationship status.* Most participants did not change their relationship status to “in a relationship” before their marriage because it felt like an overstatement that may cause embarrassment in a future breakup. Several participants thought it was too dramatic and others, mostly females, thought it was simply childish. Yotam explained that “changing to ‘in a relationship’ seems mundane. Many people change their status too often, which feels like a lack of commitment.” Tom spoke of other people’s expectations from those who change their statuses to share the reasons for breaking up every time an “in a relationship” status changes: “Let’s take my brother as an example – every time he changes his status back to ‘single,’ it draws lots of reactions and questions.” Another participant explained that changing the relationship status is “sort of screaming the relationship too loud.”

Those who updated their relationship status were mostly motivated to do so by Facebook itself. Others sought to avoid being approached by users looking for romantic relations, as Lily commented: “It [changing one’s status] is mainly against various flirty guys. Not harassers, just people who tried to begin a romantic relationship. I changed it after someone sent me a message and flirted with me.”

All interviewees believed that marriages are a good enough reason to change their status on Facebook. Sophie explained: “Dating someone and getting married are different

in terms of commitment. Being ‘in a relationship’ could end tomorrow morning, but being married on Facebook wouldn’t change that easily, so why not?”

Participants explained that changing one’s status to married is a significant step indicating a deep bond and reflecting progress in constructing the relationship, much more than merely replacing a profile photo or declaring that one is in a relationship. Indeed, most couples who got married changed their status to “engaged” or “married” as a way of informing a vast network of people about their relationships. For several female participants, changing the relational status was supplemented by adding their partners’ last names to their Facebook names.

*Displaying the new “family”.* Many couples used Facebook to present their new “family” after adopting pets, considering it a significant step in their relationship construction. Yoram told us that “bringing a dog is significant” because “a dog is like a child in every respect...it wakes you up at night, [...and] you get up with it early in the morning.” Dorin explained why adopting a pet deserves a Facebook post:

For me, it is a step forward in the relationship, just like moving in together, you know, and we posted several pictures of our move. But this is more meaningful to us. Leon [the cat] is a more advanced stage in our relationship, and this is why it had to be on Facebook!

Many couples felt that posting pictures with pets increases their responsibility and commitment because it was a way of publicly presenting their new family to a wide audience, including family members, friends, colleagues, etc.: “It’s symbolism! The goal is to show everyone how much fun we have and make others realize that our relationship is serious, and this is our family!”

Several couples explained that their new family, or the becoming of their family, should be documented and celebrated on Facebook just like other special occasions because posting it on Facebook makes it part of their timelines, which reflect their life narratives. In other words, they used Facebook knowingly to store memories for the future. Mali told us that she tends to display important occasions on Facebook because she may forget those occasions that remained out of her Facebook timeline a few years from now.

## Concluding discussion

This study aimed to explore how social media affordances are involved in the construction of romantic relationships and trace the stages of this process in emerging adults’ lives. We examined relationship construction on Facebook and Instagram according to Knapp’s (1978) linear model of offline relational development.

Our findings suggest that on social media, Knapp’s (1978) five stages of relationship construction merge into three: Initiating and experimenting merge into *exploration*, intensifying and integrating into *establishment*, and the last stage remains *bonding* online. These mergers result from various affordances—including *searchability*, *visibility*, *anonymity*, *persistence*, *storage*, and *editability* (Baym & boyd, 2012; boyd, 2010; Evans

et al., 2017; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Treem & Leonardi, 2013)—that enable partners to search and obtain information about potential spouses quickly, conveniently, and anonymously before, during, and after the first romantic interaction. These affordances also allow partners to initiate or avoid romantic interactions relatively easier than offline interactions, present shared memories, build a sense of togetherness, and edit or erase online content about previous partners.

Our analysis points to a substantial difference between Facebook and Instagram regarding their roles in the online construction of romantic relationships. Participants perceived Facebook, more than Instagram, as a platform of choice for this purpose. Unlike Facebook, Instagram does not offer the possibility of creating friend lists, thus denying couples a shared, well-defined, and relatively fixed audience to which they can display their relationships. Accordingly, participants referred to Facebook's *scalability* (boyd, 2010) as an important feature enabling them to share meaningful relational events (e.g., engagement) with a wide yet relatively familiar audience of friends, family, and acquaintances, as opposed to Instagram's relatively unknown audience. They also highlighted Facebook's Timeline as a useful means for displaying the road traveled from the first picture as a couple to significant moments of union. Therefore, couples used Facebook to display different aspects of their relationships, whereas Instagram was used predominantly to present content artistically, *inter alia*, because Instagram's most prominent affordances derive from its emphasis on enhancing aesthetics rather than documenting users' mundane realities (Schreiber, 2017). This finding corresponds with previous studies, which reported on limited and relatively inconsistent results regarding Instagram's contribution to relationships (Lee et al., 2019; Manvelyan, 2016; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). These studies have shown, for example, that Facebook use, but not Instagram use, was positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Manvelyan, 2016; Saslow et al., 2012).

Our findings also illuminate the complex relationship between offline and online contexts. This study does not underestimate the importance of offline relational practices in the age of social media or imply that they are necessarily converted to online spaces. Alternatively, it suggests that *each* of Knapp's offline stages has *some* facets that manifest online, and that these online manifestations can shape the relational dynamics as a whole, including the offline practices that remain seemingly detached from social media. In other words, social media affordances allow for online relational practices, which have been found to shape offline relationships, from influencing levels of commitment (Toma & Choi, 2015) to determining relationship satisfaction (Saslow et al., 2012). For example, we have shown that Facebook's *editability* enables partners to erase textual and visual information about their previous partners, thus helping them move forward as part of the establishment stage. More generally, the quotes described throughout the findings section have shown that while first online interactions develop into offline relationships, users continuously shape and reshape the latter through online practices. In this sense, our findings challenge the popular idea that online interactions between potential partners are a preliminary phase before they get to the "real thing," thus rejecting the hierarchized distinction between online and offline worlds. Therefore, this study does not suggest two parallel relationship development processes, offline and online. Alternatively, it shows

that relational partners who use social media to maintain their relationship, knowingly or unknowingly, usually experience a modified process of relationship construction consisting of three stages, as the different possibilities offered to them by social media alter the offline process described by Knapp.

This interplay demonstrated in this study between social media affordances, online relational practices, and offline relationship dynamics suggests that in the context of relationship construction, offline and online spaces are highly interrelated in terms of interinfluence. Therefore, the merger of five offline stages into three is not merely a technical rearrangement but rather an indication of the fundamental change that online practices bring to people's offline realities (see also [Marciano, 2014](#)), altering the way we understand and experience romantic relationships in the digital age.

This study joins a growing body of knowledge that explores how social media users initiate, maintain, and dissolve relationships online ([Brody et al., 2020](#); [Fox & Tokunaga, 2015](#); [Fox & Warber, 2013](#); [Tong, 2013](#)). As shown in the literature review, previous studies that applied offline romantic relationship models to social media focused on specific online practices ([Fox et al., 2013](#); [LeFebvre et al., 2015](#)) and their contribution to relationships' quality ([Brody et al., 2016](#)). This study contributes to this corpus by delineating the underlying, fundamental process beyond specific practices: the stages relational partners who use social media undergo as part of their relationship construction.

This study has four main limitations that should be considered in future research. First, participants were students from a specific university, reflecting a particular context not necessarily applicable to other relational partners on social media. Second, participants were recruited through Facebook; while most of them had active Instagram accounts, this recruitment strategy might reflect their preference of Facebook as a leading platform. Third, most participants initially met offline (see [Appendix 1](#)); therefore, the analysis did not give equal weight to the relational experiences of those who met online. Last, all participants were required to be in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months to ensure they had wide perspective on most or all stages of relationship construction. This inclusion criterion could have influenced the results as research show that partners behave differently in different stages of their relationship. Future research will benefit from a systematic comparison between Facebook and Instagram, as well additional platforms (e.g., TikTok) that have recently gained popularity among younger audiences.

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## Appendix I

### Participants' background.

#### Individual interviews

No.	Name	Gender <sup>a</sup>	Length of relationship	First met
1	Na'ama	F	8 years	Online
2	Daria	F	5 years	Online
3	Orly	F	6 years	Offline
4	Lili	F	4 years	Offline
5	Lidar	F	6 months	Online
6	Niv	M	18 months	Offline
7	Tom	M	3 years	Offline
8	Omer	M	6 years	Offline
9	Liav	M	2 years	Online
10	Adir	M	8 months	Offline

#### Couple interviews

No.	Name(s)	Gender	Length of relationship	First met
11	Yoram	M	2 years	Offline
12	Mali	F		
13	Nadav	M	4 years	Offline
14	Miri	F		
15	Matan	M	15 months	Offline
16	Maya	F		
17	Yo'av	M	14 months	Offline
18	Liran	F		
19	Kim	M	3 years	Offline
20	Michal	F		
21	Peled	M	5 years	Offline
22	Dorin	F		
23	Yotam	M	3 years	Offline
24	Sophie	F		

(continued)

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25	Rotem	M	2 years	Offline
26	Anat	F		
27	Amir	M	12 months	Offline
28	Yael	F		
29	Lev	M	3 years	Offline
30	Nurit	F		

<sup>a</sup> Gender: M = male; F = female; O = other.

## Appendix 2

### Model stages, prevalent online practices, and affordances.

Model stage	Original stages merged	Online practices	Affordances	Representative quotes
1	Exploration Initiating Experimenting	Searching information about potential partners	Anonymity Persistence Searchability	"You can find out everything about the person on social media."
		Stalking: Scanning potential partners' profiles	Visibility Storage	"You go into the profile for first impression: her profile picture, who our mutual friends are, where she studies, where she works. It provides you with a whole picture of the person."
		Initiate first interaction		"I went out with friends and met him there. We talked a bit and then he added me to Facebook and send a message."
2	Establishment Intensifying Integrating	Mutual tagging	Editability Persistence Reach	"We constantly tag each other, about everything. This is our way to send each other things, and others can see it as well."
		Mutual liking	Visibility Storage	"He always likes and comments on my posts and it's mutual. He must do it! It's weird if he wouldn't. I'd think he is mad at me or something."
		Posting dyadic photographs		"I think that posting a picture of us together at a friends' wedding carries strong meaning for a couple. In my view it represents a step forward symbolizing a relationship development."
		Erasing references to previous partners		"I asked him to delete some picture of his ex from his profile. He's with me now and everyone needs to know that."
		Uploading a joint profile picture		"Suddenly I saw that a good friend who got engaged changed his profile picture back to a solo picture. [...] Until that moment he would only upload pictures with his girlfriend, so I went in for a moment and saw that all of a sudden, she does not exist in his pictures. Changing profile pictures make people react."

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Model stage	Original stages merged	Online practices	Affordances	Representative quotes
3 Bonding	Bonding	Posting photos of moving in together	Reach Persistence Visibility Editability	<i>"We posted a picture from the apartment together, of course. It's signals confidence in a relationship or ... telling others that we've been together for a long time."</i>
		Sharing engagement or weddings photos		<i>"A wedding is a big event also in terms of social media. It's all about the wedding ring pictures and those happy pictures. It's also the post that got most likes. People are updated that there has been such an event and know it is forever."</i>
		Updating a relationship status displaying a "family"		<i>"Yes, we are married on Facebook. If one isn't married on Facebook, I think it doesn't count"</i> <i>"[...] it is a step forward in the relationship, just like moving in together [...] but this is more meaningful to us. Leon [the cat] is a more advanced stage in our relationship, and this is why it had to be on Facebook!"</i>