

“It’s Not Official Until It’s Facebook Official”—the Social Significance given to Facebook Relationship Statuses

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Late one evening in my first year of university, I made the mistake of leaving my Facebook account signed in on my laptop. My friend Oliver¹ decided it would be a hilarious joke to pretend to be me, and requested I become ‘Facebook Official’ with John—the guy I was romantically interested in at the time but was by no means in a relationship with. John happened to be sitting next to Oliver and me that evening. When I looked at my laptop, and subsequently my Facebook profile, I exclaimed in horror and outrage, “Did you just put me *in* a Facebook relationship with John? What on earth, Oliver!” Whilst Oliver mischievously laughed at his joke, John turned and asked me with utmost seriousness, “Well, what’s wrong with him doing that?”

Reflecting upon this incident led me to question: why did I react so abruptly and with such outrage to this joking change in Relationship Status? And not just a joke, but a joke contextualized in a virtual world? An online persona is not a true reflection of the self; and the virtual world of Facebook is not as important as the tangible one in which we live our lives and form our relations. Yet the social significance I myself gave to the ‘Facebook Official’ (defined later on), in reality nothing more than a hyperlink, startled me. Therefore, the backbone of my research rests on the attempt to understand the

1 All names of informants have been changed in order to protect privacy.

social significance that young people at university attribute to Facebook Relationship Statuses and in particular the 'Facebook Official'.

In order to understand the motivations and social significance of Facebook Relationship Statuses, it is necessary to contextualize my field and ask primarily - what is Facebook? The internet phenomena that is Facebook had 901 million monthly active users at the end of March 2012 and is the most popular and frequently used social networking website the in world (Facebook 2012). A social networking website is one that allows its users to create public profiles, or individual webpages, within a website and form relations with other users who are allowed access to their profile (Webopedia 2012). Facebook is now available in more than 70 languages, and 80% of its users are outwith the United States and Canada (Facebook 2012).

With a field as broad as Facebook, an anthropologist cannot generalize and realistically be able to represent millions of people's views. Therefore, I felt that I ought to target users of Facebook who were more readily accessible to me as an anthropologist. My informants are young adults, ranging from the ages of 18-22, and are university students in Scotland.

The difficulty with basing anthropological research in the virtual world, in this instance the medium of Facebook, is that there is jargon that requires explanation. Having defined what a social networking website is, it is necessary to be Facebook specific. A Facebook profile displays all of your 'Basic Information' such as education, place of employment, date of birth and your Relationship Status. It also shows photos, videos, interests and activities and what was originally called your 'Wall' (Dummies

2012). A Facebook 'Friend' is another Facebook user who you are connected to on Facebook; you have mutually confirmed to be Facebook friends and have access to one another's profiles (Dummies 2012). Facebook also consists of your 'News Feed', a continuous stream of updates from your Friends' Facebook pages and activities that appears on your Home Page (Dummies 2012). My focus here is on one specific aspect of an individual's basic information on their Timeline – the concept of the 'Relationship Status' and the 'Facebook Official'.

Choosing your 'Relationship Status' is by no means an obvious choice, and of the drop down menu of choices (See Figure 1), the choices are relatively narrow. A 'Relationship Status' is the display of a user's romantic situation on their profile and defining that situation according to the options in Figure 2. Many users choose not to have an accurate representation of their romantic situation, whilst some update their Relationship Status relentlessly. My informant Malcolm commented that the nature of having a drop down menu of Relationship Statuses to choose from, rather than having a text box where you can write your status yourself, means people are forced into defining their romantic relationships according to Facebook's categories. He believes that, 'if we had a text box to type our relationship status ourselves, we would see fewer Facebook Officials and more flexibility'. By Facebook categorizing your Relationship Status under 'Basic Info' on a user's profile it implies that the creators of Facebook consider their users' Relationship Status as socially significant themselves. It is *basic*, rudimentary information that Facebook believes ought to be shared. Not only ought they to share, but that our perceptions of relationships must be defined by Facebook's

criteria. If Facebook views an individual's Relationship Status as significant, it is logical that users of Facebook would also.

The former leads us to question: what is the social significance behind a user's choice of Relationship Status? Not only their motivation, but also the social significance of one Status in particular: that of the 'Facebook Official'. This particular Relationship Status is when on a user's profile they choose the 'In A Relationship' option and there is a link to the profile of the person with whom they are in a relationship with (See Figure 2). According to Urban Dictionary, a website where users define slang and contemporary colloquial phrases, the Facebook Official is, "The ultimate definition of a college relationship - when on one's Facebook profile it says 'In A Relationship' and your significant other's name"(Urban Dictionary 2005).

Urban Dictionary's definition demonstrates the social significance given to the 'In A Relationship with' status. As a Relationship Status it has more social importance amongst college or university students than other Statuses as it is not just a definition but is the 'ultimate' definition of a university romantic relationship. It would imply that if a romantic relationship between university students is 'Facebook Official' then it should be held in higher regard than a relationship that is not on Facebook, because that relationship is visible for the world to see. The seriousness of a romantic relationship in real life is therefore determined and defined by the virtual world and definitions of Facebook. A popular phrase that now circulates around Facebook, whether it is believed or not, is that 'It's Not "official" until it's "Facebook Official"'

(Facebook 2010). So much so, that some students believe that a romantic relationship is not real or valid in real life until it is Facebook Official.

In terms of methodology, there were several research methods I utilized to gather my information. I would argue that by being an active Facebook user myself, elements of my research reflected a form of Participant Observation. Through being a user of Facebook, and a part of the network of communication and relations, I was able to observe the actions of other Facebook users. I witnessed the changing in Relationship Status of my Facebook Friends, subsequently my university peers, and acted as a bystander. Some of my interviews were conducted over the medium of Facebook, interviewing within the context of my research aims. Elements of self-analysis and anthropology of the self were involved; contrasting my own perceptions of Facebook Official and the social significance I attribute to Relationship Statuses with the views of my informants.

I chose to use a variation of structured and semi-structured interviews in the aim of uncovering my informants' perceptions of their own Relationship Status and the Statuses of their Friends, along with understanding what they believe motivates whether users share a true representation of their romantic status on their profile. Structured interviews allowed me to ask questions that related directly to my research questions; but semi-structured interviews allowed more depth and analysis on the part of the informants. In several instances informants claimed my questions made them analyse their Facebook usage in ways they had not done before. As of such, the tangents made by my informants during semi-structured interviews were hugely

insightful. This research was combined with research using the Internet itself: reading blogs, articles and using websites as sources that would not necessarily be considered academic due to literature on the Facebook Official not being readily available. Amalgamating the research from all of these methods has facilitated my ethnography and understanding the information I have gathered.

With Facebook and other social networking websites being a relatively new field of academic research, the literature on the virtual world from an anthropological perspective is fairly sparse. However, the work of Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of The Gift* (1988) could apply to the social significance of Facebook Relationship Statuses and what motivates people to publicly define their romantic relationships in certain ways. The concept that a person exists within a network of relations is defined by the network of relations becoming apparent or visible (Miller: 2010). In *The Gender of The Gift* specifically, Strathern uses the example of childbirth in Melanesian society. Through the act of childbirth, the child becomes an objective representation of the relationship of the parents. The child becomes an embodiment of the kinship relation and its coming into existence confirms the existence of the child's parents as 'parents' (Strathern 1988). As Strathern states, "the relations are always there; what gives the event [of childbirth] its unique character is how well or in what manner a particular relationship is made 'to appear' on that occasion" (1988:478).

This theory can be applied to the Facebook Official and the use of social networking websites in general. In this instance, the event rather than being childbirth would be that of a couple choosing to be Facebook Official. Through the changing of

one's Relationship Status, a relation between two users is being made to visible and therefore constitutive (Miller: 2010). The relation was already there outwith the sphere of Facebook, but the event of the Facebook Official creates a confirmation of their relation as boyfriend and girlfriend, boyfriend and boyfriend or girlfriend and girlfriend. In effect, the Facebook Official materializes the relation just as the birth of a child objectifies the relation between the parents. This can apply beyond merely the Relationship Status, in that an individual themselves can constitute their existence by being part of the network of relations that is Facebook. Through a user's interaction in any sense with another Facebook user, you are seeing a visual objectification of yourself as a Facebook user (Miller: 2010).

If we use Strathern's example as a base, the Facebook Official only represents the visibility of a romantic relationship and is not a statement on the relationship itself. If a romantic relationship is simply being made 'to appear' and exists independently of Facebook, why do some university students place such social significance on the Facebook Official? My attempt to answer this question falls under the following categories: the seriousness of a relationship; how much Facebook reflects the individual; the impact of collective social significance and group conformity; the social significance of fake or inaccurate Statuses; and finally the controversial Status of 'It's Complicated'.

I asked my informants whether being Facebook Official meant that a romantic relationship was more serious and therefore of more social significance. The responses varied, but generally my informants believed that if a relationship is on Facebook it reflects a security and strength of the relation between the couple. Kirsten, who has

been in a Facebook Official relationship with her boyfriend Sam, for two and a half years, believes that being Facebook Official shows seriousness because “you want the whole of Facebook to know”. Whilst Maria—a self-confessed addict to using Facebook—claims, it is a way of 'confirming a relationship'. Kirsten’s reflection of Facebook Official in general is difficult to separate from the context of her own romantic relationship, as just because her relationship is both Facebook Official and serious does not mean all Facebook relationships are. With Maria, she confessed that she spends a large amount of her time on Facebook and that she takes it very seriously. This dedication to Facebook was likely to influence her interpretation of the Facebook Official—by her considering Facebook holistically as a 'real' thing would explain her viewing the Facebook Official as a reflection of how serious or ‘real’ a relationship is.

Continuing on the topic of seriousness, Robert argued that Facebook Official is a statement about your perception of your own relationship and how long you see the duration of your relationship. He argues 'you only put it on Facebook if you’re confident in your relationship', demonstrating that he must perceive his current relationship (a Facebook Official Relationship) is one that will have a long duration. However, informants Kate and Bee both agreed that sharing or having your relationship ‘appear’ on Facebook depends entirely on the couple’s personalities, not seriousness. Kate raised the argument that a couple could collectively be extroverted and want to ‘show off’ (an argument made frequently by people in Facebook Official relationships) or are introverted and want to remain private. She claims that as a couple, she and her Facebook Official boyfriend Graham are fairly out-going and open individuals. As

extroverted individuals, it would be logical for them to be extroverted with their Relationship by displaying it on Facebook. However, Kate expresses understanding that not all couples are extroverted like them. With regards to Bee, her personal history with the Facebook Official has influenced her feelings towards Facebook Official in general. She explains that she was Facebook Official with her boyfriend, but they broke up for a brief period and after rekindling their relationship they did not put their relationship back online. Was this because of the public break up, or the pain and embarrassment of having to remove the Facebook Official? Her negative attitude towards the Facebook Official as a concept would suggest her break-up is a factor.

When asked if we are giving the Facebook Official too much social significance, the majority of informants believed that it depends on how much your Facebook profile reflects who you are. When asked whether their Facebook profiles are an adequate reflection of whom they are, my informants were split down the middle. It depends greatly upon how much information users are willing to share. Elements such as photos only show so much of a reflection of identity; whilst Bee discussed her photos she commented that there were photos of her doing things that interested her such as Hockey, Golfing and other 'fun things I do'. But I would argue that her lack of Facebook Official shows an untrue reflection of her as a person entirely, as all my informants agreed that an individual's romantic relationship is the most personal aspect of himself or herself. She is only demonstrating the 'fun' side of her, not her in her entirety. Robert, in contrast, believes that Facebook is a form of self-advertising and 'no advert truly sells you the whole package'. He removes photos of himself that he deems

unattractive, and rarely posts information. Does this mean that his Facebook Official demonstrates an aspect of himself that he is proud of, or that he views as socially significant, in comparison to other parts of his Facebook? I would argue it does.

In terms of social significance of the Facebook Official, collective social significance and the target audience play an influential role. If a couple is already in a romantic relationship outwith the realm of Facebook, for whom are they going Facebook Official? I wanted to understand who the target of making their relationship 'appear' on Facebook is for—the couple themselves or the rest of Facebook? Kirsten summarizes the double edged sword of the Facebook Official well: if a couple is happy being in a relationship they should want to share being happy with other users on Facebook. However, if a couple is truly happy then they should not need to conform and validate their relationship by making it Facebook Official. Their relationship already exists; what is the need of making it 'appear'? The majority of my informants agreed that becoming Facebook Official is primarily to tell people you are happy; secondly because you are happy. Emma, who is in a pretend civil partnership with her friend Lisa, because 'we are so close, we're practically in a relationship', made a hugely insightful argument. When a couple changes their Facebook Relationship Status the change flashes up on all of their Friends' Newsfeeds. This public declaration is testimony in itself, and makes it no longer about the couple. It is asking the users of Facebook to comment and considers a change in Relationship Status worthy of 'news'. By Facebook Official or any change in Relationship Status being for the rest of Facebook, it shows group conformity and collective social significance regarded by users. It is the collective

norm to display a change in Relationship Status so all users can acknowledge and admire.

I further inquired, what is the social significance of fake or inaccurate Relationship Statuses? In interviewing Maria, I asked how she would interpret my own false Civil Partnership. She believes that fake Statuses are mainly a testimony of friendship between two Facebook users, and she would view my own Civil Partnership as such. Malcom argues that you cannot assume that a Relationship Status is not a reflection of a user's real life situation; you can only know it is fake if you know the user well in real life. The majority of fake Relationship Statuses are a reflection of privacy and not wanting to share the entirety of yourself with your Facebook Friends. Especially in relation to public break ups, such as Bee experienced, with your personal heartbreak being viewed as 'news' on your Friends' Facebook. Fake relationships are a reflection of your commitment to privacy, and my informants argued collectively that not having the Facebook Official holds just as much social significance as having it. A statement is being made about the privacy of your relations and not wanting to be forced into having your relationship 'appear' on Facebook by collective norms.

Finally, I asked about one Relationship Status in particular and how it is perceived - the Status of 'It's Complicated'. Of all the Statuses all informants met this with the most negative reaction. The consensus was as a Status it is 'attention seeking', 'embarrassing', 'arrogant' and 'unnecessary'. The perception of it collectively is of looking to cause drama and warranting a reaction from other Facebook users. Malcom continues that It's Complicated is not a Status in itself; it depends on the user's change

in Status. If one goes from Facebook Official to It's Complicated, Malcom argues it would imply problems between a romantic couple. If a Relationship Status is changing from Single to It's Complicated it signifies some form of romantic relation that is unable to be defined by Facebook criteria. The collective belief is that even if the former is true, an individual should not share when an individual is having romantic problems. Relationship Statuses are public but It's Complicated, as a Status, is sharing too much information. This lack of sympathy for 'It's Complicated' goes beyond my informants, as shown by an advice article for modern romance on university site HerCampus.com saying, 'if things really are "complicated", advertising it on Facebook will not simplify your situation.' (Sanders Goldstein 2009) It is broadly considered socially significant in a negative manner.

At the end of my prying into the thoughts and perceptions of my informants, I felt a mixture of dissatisfaction and confusion. With such a mixture of answers and opinions about Relationship Statuses expressed, drawing conclusions was by no means an easy feat. Yet despite the varying conclusions I had drawn from my various research I found myself coming back to Kirsten's comment: if you are happy in your relationship then there is nothing to hide from the Facebook world; but if you are happy then your relationship itself should be satisfaction enough – Facebook Official should not be necessary. Ultimately, The Facebook Official is as socially significant as you choose to make it. All Relationship Statuses depend entirely on personal interpretation and the context of your real life romantic situation. To generalize is to make inaccurate assumptions and belittle real life relationships. How serious a romantic relationship is,

how much you wish your Facebook to reflect your true identity, who your public declaration of Relationship Status is for all play a vital part of the decision process. My gut reaction is to take the social significance of Relationship Statuses out of the equation entirely by suggesting excluding it from your Profile. However, I think the key to understanding the social significance of Relationship Statuses is to accept the social complexity of them.

Appendix Cited

Figure 1:



A screenshot of a web form showing a dropdown menu for 'Relationship Status'. The menu is open, displaying a list of options. The option 'In a civil partnership' is selected and highlighted with a blue bar. The background shows parts of other form fields: 'Birthday' with the value '1992', 'Interested in' with the value 'my tim', and 'Relationship Status' with the value 'with'.

Field	Value
Birthday	1992
Interested in	my tim
Relationship Status	with

Select Relation:

- Single
- In a relationship
- Engaged
- Married
- It's complicated
- In an open relationship
- Widowed
- Separated
- Divorced
- ✓ In a civil partnership**



A screenshot of a 'Basic info' profile section. It contains three rows of information: 'Interested in' with the value 'Men', 'Relationship Status' with the value 'In a relationship with Scott Smylie', and 'Anniversary' with the value '8 November 2008'.

Basic info	
Interested in	Men
Relationship Status	In a relationship with Scott Smylie
Anniversary	8 November 2008

Figure 2:

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