

Does Facebook break up marriages?

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New research suggests a link between social networking and divorce



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Facebook users, beware. You may be one “like” away from divorce court.

A growing body of research links increased use of Facebook [FB, 3.32%](#) to marital discord. The latest of these studies, published in the July 2014 issue of the journal “[Computers in Human Behavior](#),” says increased use of Facebook is “positively correlated” with rising divorce rates during the same time period even when adjusting for economic and socio-demographic factors that might affect divorce rates. “Although it may seem surprising that a Facebook profile, a relatively small factor compared with other drivers of human behavior, could have a significant statistical relationship with divorce rates and marital satisfaction, it nonetheless seems to be the case,” the study concluded.

A 20% annual increase in the share of a state's population with a Facebook account from 2008 to 2010 was associated with a 2.2% increase in that state's divorce rate. To reach that conclusion, researchers cross-referenced divorce rates in 43 U.S. states from the National Center for Health Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey with the number of Facebook accounts opened in those states. The study suggests a correlation, however, and not causation. "We don't know whether Facebook is causing divorce or divorce is causing the use of Facebook," says Sebastián Valenzuela, co-author of the study and assistant professor in the School of Communications at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.



Is Facebook Causing Divorces?

Previous studies also support the conclusion that there's a connection between social networking and marital problems. Adjusting for other variables, 32% of heavy social-media users say they've thought seriously about leaving their spouses, compared with 16% of people who don't use social networks, according to a 2011 University of Texas at Austin survey of 1,600 married 18- to 39-year-olds. This is one of the few — if not only — publicly available representative surveys in the U.S. that contains questions about both social-network use and indicators of marriage well-being, Valenzuela adds. One-third of divorce filings in the U.K. contain the word Facebook, a separate 2011 survey by Divorce Online, a legal services website, found. (A Facebook spokesman says it's "ludicrous" to suggest a link between the social network site and divorce.)

One theory: Extramarital affairs might have taken months or even years to develop in the past, but with Facebook, Snapchat and other social networks your ex-boyfriend or girlfriend is just a click away, says New York-based divorce financial strategist Jeff Landers, author of "[Divorce:](#)

Think Financially, Not Emotionally.” When marriages go through rocky patches and people do seek support, temptation has never been closer, he adds. “You can easily reconnect with an old boyfriend or girlfriend from college online,” Landers says. “It all starts innocently enough, but the next thing you know you are meeting for coffee and the next thing you know you’re having an affair.”



Inside Facebook's Data-Science Team

Even the most mundane stories on social media provide an escape, says Abby Rodman, a psychotherapist in Boston, and people who bury their head in a computer screen risk paying less attention to the problems in their relationships. “If you are glued to a computer screen, you’re not looking into your partner’s eyes,” she says. “Instead of reading what’s going on with your partner, you’re reading about someone’s dog’s surgery on Facebook. It’s a clear message to your partner that you’re more interested in what’s going on elsewhere rather than what’s in front of you.” Being in a relationship takes work, she adds, but spending your time communicating with others via social media — including your spouse — is “relationship lite.”

It’s hard to know what comes first: Divorce or obsessing about the lives of others on Facebook. One thing is certain: Facebook is useful after a marriage breaks down. Over 80% of divorce attorneys have seen a rise in cases using social networking, according to the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. But Michael Stutman, New York state chapter president of AAML and partner at the law firm Mishcon de Reya in New York, says Facebook pops up so often because more people use it. The site is usually cited in divorce cases during child custody disputes, and the search for assets and income, he adds. “These communications are most useful when the people believe nobody else is listening,” Stutman says