

<b>Institution:</b> Brunel University London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Making Facebook more compassionate		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2011-2013		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Dr Tara Marshall	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Lecturer (Psychology)	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 01/2009-09/2018
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> November 2015 – December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Every week, millions of people experience romantic breakups. The near-ubiquitous presence of social media in contemporary life opens up new avenues for individuals to monitor or be exposed to their ex-partners activities. Dr Tara Marshall's research on online behaviour during relationships and after breakups indicated that post-breakup monitoring of an ex-partner is linked with negative personal growth and post-breakup adjustment. As a direct result of this research, Facebook introduced a new feature which allows users to "See Less" of an ex-romantic partner following a breakup. Within the first 6 months of piloting this feature with approximately 8,000,000 Facebook users, over 3,000,000 had engaged with the feature in some way. It has since been rolled out internationally, making it available to over 2,700,000,000 active users. Consequently, this feature, which has the potential to make Facebook more compassionate by ameliorating negative outcomes and promoting emotional recovery in the immediate aftermath of a breakup, has extraordinary reach.

### 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Dr Tara Marshall's research has contributed to understanding how social networking platforms are used to maintain relationships and the potential barriers of social networking sites to personal growth following a breakup (R1-3).

Dr Marshall's research extended previous findings by investigating the manifestation of attachment-dynamics in a novel context: social networking sites, which are ubiquitous and differ from traditional contexts due to the ease, anonymity, and low-risk of detection with which one can engage in covert observation and surveillance. For example, Dr Marshall's research suggests that, within a romantic relationship, attachment anxiety and avoidance predict levels of Facebook-related jealousy and surveillance (R1). Attachment orientations are a core aspect of personality which shape how individuals engage in relationships. Secure individuals believe they are worthy of love and others can be relied upon or trusted. Anxious individuals fear rejection and may be preoccupied with fears of abandonment because they do not have a positive model of self; they may engage in hyperactivating strategies to avoid rejection and abandonment by their romantic partner. Avoidant individuals strive for emotional independence and report low trust of others. Dr Marshall's research indicated that anxious individuals reported increased Facebook-jealousy and surveillance; higher jealousy and surveillance were explained in part due to anxious individuals' decreased trust in their partners. Indeed, anxious individuals checked their partners' Facebook pages more frequently, in part due to their increased Facebook-jealousy. Conversely, avoidant individuals avoided looking at their partners' Facebook pages. Thus, Dr Marshall's research indicates that Facebook is an additional method through which individuals high in anxiety can surveil their partner. There are also implications for the importance of Facebook in relationship maintenance, as Facebook surveillance was also

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prevalent in more passionate and committed partners; this may be because individuals find looking at their partners' page rewarding and use it as symbolic proximity seeking.

Crucially, Dr Marshall has also investigated the role of social networking sites in the aftermath of a romantic breakup (R2; R3). Dr Marshall's research indicates that monitoring of an ex-partner's online activities such as their Facebook page or friends lists, which are available functions *even if* one is no longer friends, is a barrier to personal growth and is linked with greater post-breakup adjustment, including breakup distress, negative feelings, and longing for an ex-partner. Although remaining Facebook friends with an ex-partner was linked with less negative feelings and longing, it was also associated with lower personal growth (R2). Thus, as remaining Facebook friends with an ex-partner is likely to expose individuals to updates about their ex-partners separate lives, individuals may find it difficult to engage in making meaning of the breakup and constructing a personal growth narrative to move on. In other words, exposure to an ex-partner via Facebook may obstruct personal growth and prevent people from moving on after a relationship breakup. These effects may be particularly pronounced in anxious individuals (R3). Anxious individuals report greater breakup distress, which may serve as a catalyst for greater personal growth at a later time. This association is in part explained by greater reflection and brooding. Dr Marshall's research highlights that those individuals who might experience the most breakup distress may, in turn, report great personal growth; however, Facebook surveillance may impede the process of reflecting on a breakup and building personal-growth narratives (R3).

In sum, Dr Marshall's research has allowed us to develop an understanding of how social networking sites can buffer or impede individual personal growth and post-breakup adjustment following relationship dissolution, as a result of the ease with which information and updates about ex-partners can be retrieved.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

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- R1: Marshall, TC., Bejanyan, K, Di Castro, G. and Lee, RA. (2013). Attachment styles as predictors of Facebook-related jealousy and surveillance in romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 20 pp. 1 - 22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01393.x>
- R2: Marshall, TC. (2012). Facebook surveillance of former romantic partners: Associations with post-breakup recovery and personal growth. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15 (10). pp. 521 - 526. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0125>
- R3: Marshall TC, Bejanyan K, Ferenczi N (2013) Attachment Styles and Personal Growth following Romantic Breakups: The Mediating Roles of Distress, Rumination, and Tendency to Rebound. *PLoS ONE* 8(9): e75161. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0075161>

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

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With more than 2,700,000,000 active users and an annual revenue of USD70,700,000,000, equivalent to GBP51,548,430,500 (01-2021), Facebook is currently the world's most popular social networking site. In addition to using the network to keep in touch with friends and family, it plays an important role in many romantic relationships. Not only do people use Facebook to keep in touch with, and monitor the activities of, current romantic partners, but as many as 900,000,000 people use Facebook to keep tabs on former romantic partners.

Dr Marshall's research on the links between Facebook usage and personal growth following break-ups directly informed the development of new features by Facebook, that allow people to modify how they receive information about former romantic partners after a relationship breakup. Specifically, Dr Marshall's research underpinned the introduction of the "See Less" feature in October 2015. This feature allows users to opt to see less of a former partner's name and profile picture around Facebook without having to unfriend or block them. When activated, it means that a former partner's posts will not show up in users' News Feed and their name will not be suggested when people write a new message or tag friends in photos. The feature also allows users to limit what their former partner sees of their posts on Facebook, and gives the option for

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people to edit who can see past posts with their former partner. The Facebook Compassion Team described the development of this feature (and Dr Marshall's contribution to its development) on their blog in November 2015: "For this product...we also devoured academic research detailing peoples' experiences after a breakup, including Tara Marshall's work about Facebook surveillance of former romantic partners" (E1). In a testimonial from Facebook, they state that: "The Facebook Compassion team builds products to help ease the experience of difficult life moments online. In 2015 one of our areas of focus was romantic breakups, and our work was heavily informed by Tara Marshall's 2012 work, "Facebook Surveillance of Former Romantic Partners: Associations with Post-Breakup Recovery And Personal Growth." This work was considered a "100% must read" by our team, and heavily informed our decision to build a new feature entitled "See Less." This feature allows someone to stop seeing updates in their News Feed and elsewhere on Facebook without having to remove them as a friend. Our intention is that it serves two of the needs Tara identified — it helps reduce surveillance by not sharing content about the former partner in an unplanned way, but gives the person access to the former partner's content on their own terms (by navigating to the profile). We deeply appreciate that Tara choose to research in this area — it had very tactical application in our product design." (E2)

The feature was initially rolled out for testing with 5% of Facebook users, equivalent to 135,000,000 people, in the USA in October 2015. By March 2016, over 3,000,000 users had engaged with some aspect of the break-up flow that contained the See Less feature (E3). Since then, the feature has been rolled out worldwide (E4).

Facebook has more than 2,700,000,000 active users globally – and Facebook noted that millions of people break up on their site weekly (E1) – so the impact of this research has extraordinary reach. Across the world, hundreds of millions of people's lives have been affected by this work.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

E1: Blogposts from Facebook relating to the See Less tool and Dr Marshall's involvement in it: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/kelly-grimaldi/designing-a-product-to-ease-one-of-lifes-difficult-moments/10153139353216581/>

E2: Testimonial from the Facebook Compassion team to Dr Marshall, summarising her important contribution to the project

**Sources for initial engagement numbers and global roll-out**

E3: NYT: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/fashion/facebook-breakup-compassion-team.html>

E4: BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-34875474>