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Social networking site transforms the dating scene

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Lindsay Schallon and Charlie Potts spend some time together in Memorial Union at MU on Tuesday. Potts has more been "married" more than 20 times using the "relationship" feature on Facebook.com. Schallon is his current "wife," which is really just a friendship. † FAN BU

BY BRIAN D. PELLOT

COLUMBIA — Late last year, Charlie “Freakin” Potts ended his year of marital bliss with Jen to explore

his options. Hayley, Anne, Amy and about 20 wives later, his life as a Facebook polygamist might have just begun.

The MU sophomore has exchanged virtual vows with his “wives” for nearly two years on Facebook.com, a social networking Web site popular among teens and young adults.

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- MU students Lindsay Schallon and Charlie Potts read a text message Tuesday in Memorial Union. Potts has more been "married" more than 20 times by changing his relationship status on Facebook.com. Schallon is his current "wife," but the two say their relationship is just platonic.

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“When I first got Facebook, I just added my friends, but then I started branching out and adding all these hot foxes online,” said Potts, 19. “Without this Web site, I wouldn’t know half the people I do today.”

Facebook allows users to indicate if they are single, dating, in an open relationship, engaged, married or “complicated.” The option has transformed the dating scene by allowing friends and Facebook acquaintances to see if someone is already taken.

Potts, who has taken this new-age dating form to a new extreme, doesn’t use the Web site to express his undying love for just one significant other.

“Just being in a relationship status, fake or real, sparks things,” he said. “I’ve actually started a few relationships just by asking girls to be my Facebook wives.”

Potts' current Facebook wife, MU freshman Lindsay Schallon, said that the couple's relationship is strictly platonic. She followed a friend's footsteps by electronically eloping with this cyber Casanova.

"He was 'married' to my best friend before me, but she got a real boyfriend so they had to divorce," Schallon said of the situation. "This is actually our second Facebook marriage."

The first ended when Potts caught Schallon chatting online with one of his friends.

"My friends know it's all a joke," Potts said. Some of Schallon's, however, were left out of the loop.

"My friends freaked out. They were like, 'What? Are you really married?' It's funny how many people actually thought it was legit," she said.

Anne Meyer, a psychologist at the MU Counseling Center, sees both benefits and drawbacks in this rapidly evolving form of friendship and intimacy.

"For people that tend to be more shy, (Facebook) is a way to meet people and to develop relationships that would be harder to do face-to-face," she said. "On the other hand, these relationships might end up being much more fragile."

For serious couples, Facebook can be just as complicated. Cassandra Novy, an MU sophomore, has seen firsthand the destructive effects that Facebook can have on relationships.

"If you're in a long-distance relationship, Facebook definitely promotes jealousy, untrustworthiness and that fear of not knowing what your significant other is doing," Novy said.

When she first arrived at MU last year, her former boyfriend grew jealous of what he perceived as Facebook flirting between Novy and some of her new male friends when he read comments on her Facebook wall and clicked through her photo albums.

"Facebook can ruin a relationship if you don't have a solid foundation of trust," Novy said. "It can lead to unnecessary fights and things that wouldn't be that big of a deal if the site weren't around."

Meyer also warns that Facebook relationships run the risk of being assigned more value than what has actually developed and that the pain from an online breakup can be greater than that associated with a traditional phone call or rendezvous because it lacks closure.

"You lose so much when you're only interacting with people online," Meyer said. "If there weren't benefits to Facebook, though, people wouldn't be using it."

MU freshman Lauren Hystead used the Facebook relationship status feature to avoid an awkward encounter earlier this year. Rather than telling an unwanted prospect that she wasn't interested, she entered into a fake Facebook relationship with a friend to make the point clear.

"There are way too many new easy ways to break up or go out with someone that don't involve face-to-face communication," Hystead said.

In the Facebook world, young couples must now decide when to make their relationships "Facebook official" – the popular term designating the status shift from single to "in a relationship with" their

significant other.

Erica Zucco, an MU freshman, faced this decision when her boyfriend created a Facebook account during the couple's senior year of high school.

"We were friends, and then we started kind of dating, but we weren't sure what we were," she said. "We just made it say 'in a relationship.' I guess it was kind of obvious that we were getting to that point."

Since making the commitment more than a year ago, Zucco has changed her relationship status to engaged and married several times as a joke, attracting instant attention from friends.

"We're playing around with people," Zucco said. "It's Facebook. It's not an actual document or anything serious."

Paul Rolfe, an MU freshman, discovered that his girlfriend wasn't playing around when she ended their relationship on Facebook with the simple click of a button. He learned it was over when a friend called him to deliver the bad news.

"I was just confused," Rolfe said. "I tried to talk to her, but the first week, she was like, 'I'm not ready.' I never heard from her. Now she's going out with my best friend from high school."

Despite his unfortunate experience, Rolfe still enjoys reading relationship updates on Facebook's news feed feature. "I find it to be a good shortcut to people's lives," he said.

Polygamous Potts has certainly seen the plus side. "I wouldn't have the relationships I have with these girls without Facebook," he said. "I guess I'll just keep marrying them until I find a real girlfriend."

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