

## Public declarations of attachment take over online dating

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The days of announcing a new relationship by wearing a crush's class ring or letterman's jacket have evolved. Now it's all about the relationship status on social networking sites.

Some people now list themselves as "married" on their profiles when a relationship gets serious and "divorced" when the breakup is painful. And finding that your crush has changed his or her status on MySpace or Facebook to "single" is the dreaded, fatal sign.

This newfound PDA -- public declaration of attachment -- has taken over the dating world, and that one small part of a MySpace or Facebook profile can make or break a relationship.

"People's identities are being created through their MySpace accounts," says Michael Smalley, founder and director of the Smalley Marriage and Family Center in The Woodlands, Texas.

"We can now meet and get married online, and MySpace is the most popular way to do that," he said.

Smalley says that before the Internet, a new relationship between two people wasn't official until they held hands or kissed, but networking Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook have changed the rules.

Pepper Schwartz, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington, says it's a strong statement to say you're in a relationship.

"A lot of people see each other but don't call it a relationship," she says.

Allison Carr of Spokane, Wash., is someone who manages her relationship status online.

Carr, 22, has accounts on both MySpace and Facebook, but her status on each is different.

She's just "in a relationship" on MySpace but "engaged" on Facebook.

"My Facebook status was an affirmation that we really like each other," Carr says.

For the record, Carr is not really engaged to be married in the traditional sense.

She feels that people like her probably exaggerate their status because it's a more meaningful way to express the level of commitment.

Kelli Breen of Sacramento remembers what it was like changing her status when she had a boyfriend.

"I was excited and wanted to tell my friends about it," says Breen, 19. "Something was different, and I wanted my friends to ask me what it was."

She listed herself as "married," not because she wanted to walk down the aisle but because she felt it sounded more serious and wanted her love for her boyfriend to stand out.

So what happened when the two broke up?

Breen changed her status to "divorced" and is still listed that way. She says her breakup isn't the only reason she's using the harsh term.

"It was the only way to tell people you're single and not looking."

Smalley thinks that since divorce has become such a common occurrence, people assume that it best describes their breakup.

"Our society and culture is being convinced that divorce is the solution to a bad relationship," Smalley says.

So what happens when someone is dating but things aren't official yet?

Meet Justin Harris.

"Single," "in a relationship" and "divorced" are three choices that do not apply to him.

The California State University-Sacramento student has accounts on MySpace and Facebook but wants people to know

his current situation.

On Facebook, he has listed his status as "it's complicated," and over on MySpace, which doesn't include that option, he's a "swinger."

"I have been in some sort of relationship for the past three years," he says. "It's been with different girls, one after another, and right now I'm taking a break."

Harris, 22, admits that he is seeing more than one woman at the moment but wants to make it clear that he's not leading them on.

Even though Harris may be in a sticky situation, he's among millions who are forced to declare their status on MySpace, which may explain why the "marital" status has become so important on a profile.

For new users who sign up on MySpace, three "details" are automatically posted when their new account is created -- marital status (which defaults to "single"), astrological sign and the option "I don't want kids."

After updating a profile, a user can eliminate most physical and personal details, except for marital status and zodiac sign. In order to do that, special coding is needed, which can be found by typing "hide MySpace details" in a search engine such as Google.