

Understanding Controlling Dynamics in Romantic Relationship Through Social Media: A Qualitative Study of Monitoring, Jealousy and Digital Boundaries

Areeba Bashir¹, Muhammad Sharjeel Ahmad Khan¹, Dr. Ulfat Nisa²

¹ MPhil Scholar Department of Applied Psychology, National University of Modern Languages. Islamabad.

² Assistant Professor Department of Applied Psychology, National University of Modern Languages. Islamabad.

For Correspondence: Muhammad Sharjeel Ahmad Khan, Email: sharjeela929@gmail.com

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Abstract

Social media excessive use can transform romantic relationship in to different ways. It can be change by how an individual can communicate, shows affection and maintain digital boundaries. Day by day where social media facilitate but it also can cause jealousy, emotional insecurity and difficulty negotiating boundaries. With an emphasis on monitoring behaviors, jealousy, emotional insecurity, and digital boundaries among young adults in the Pakistani context, the current qualitative study sought to investigate controlling dynamics in romantic relationships using social media. A qualitative research design is used to gain in-depth insights. Semi-structured interviews with individuals who have used social media in romantic relationships were used to gather data, which was then subjected to thematic analysis. The results showed that digital surveillance activities, like checking one's online status, likes, and interactions, are frequently accepted as signs of concern rather than control. Social media has been found to be a major source of jealousy, especially when interacting with people of the opposing gender. This can cause mental pain and insecurity. Due to unclear online conduct, participants often reported overanalysing and making unfavourable conclusions, which commonly led to dispute escalation. Participants' differing opinions on privacy, password sharing, and openness further demonstrated the difficulty of navigating digital borders. Rather than being the lack of insecurity, trust was defined as emotional assurance and honesty. Overall, the study shows that, especially in the sociocultural setting of Pakistan, social media plays a dual role by promoting connection but also escalating emotional difficulties and regulating dynamics inside romantic relationships.

Keywords: Social Media, Romantic Relationships, Jealousy, Digital Monitoring, Emotional Insecurity, Digital Boundaries.

Introduction

Social media is growing vastly and importantly changing the nature of interpersonal communication and romantic relationships in modern society. Through different online platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram, partners communicate and show love and care, maintain intimacy, and monitor each activity. In a period of time where social media connects new individuals for emotional connection and relationship maintenance, it also initiates jealousy, observation, emotional dependency, and digital boundary violations (Abbasi, 2019). Due to an increase in online interactions through social media platforms, romantic relationships are made. To remain always connected, both can use different features to see last seen, comments, followers, and stories as well, but side by side these features invade

privacy and encourage monitoring behaviors. Individuals think of online interaction as a symbol of loyalty, attraction, and infidelity, resulting in enhancement of emotional distress. Online platforms show an environment where uncertainty and availability coexist and increase misunderstanding and trust issues (Quiroz et al., 2021).

In this time, social media plays a role in romantic relationships; couples are using online platforms for chatting, sharing moments, expressing affection, and publicly displaying their relationships. According to Ibrahim Saleh Abbasi (2019), on social media many committed relationship structures are changed that affect the emotional state and relationship ambiguity. Different features can enhance connection and availability but somehow intensify emotional dependency and relational insecurity. Previous research indicates that social media platforms, to some extent, facilitate an individual, but at the same moment, they can cause conflicts. Partners who are romantic engage in disclosure of their selves to strengthen the communication and intimacy. Side by side, this platform is somehow suspicious, causing misunderstanding and trust issues (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Most of the interactions on social media are vulnerable because individuals are open to interpretation that leads to jealousy and insecurity when observing their partners talking to others.

Tracking and observing romantic partners online activities is known as digital monitoring such behaviors includes checking likes, comments, reading messages and demanding password for check n balance. According to Robert S. Tokunaga (2011), online sites are behaving as a tool of interpersonal electronic surveillance where an individual's monitor their partners to reduce ambiguity and gain emotional reassurance. Previous literature suggests that in a period of time where social media connects new individuals for emotional connection and relationship maintenance, it also initiates jealousy, observation, emotional dependency, and digital boundary violations (Abbasi, 2019). Previous studies on different online platforms suggest that due to constant accessibility and visibility, there is a vast enhancement in emotional distress and feelings of intuition with romantic relationships (Muscanell et al., 2021). Individuals think of online interaction as a symbol of loyalty, attraction, and infidelity, resulting in enhancement of emotional distress. Online platforms show an environment where uncertainty and availability coexist and increase misunderstanding and trust issues (Quiroz et al., 2021).

Moreover, most of the research is adopted using a quantitative method to investigate the correlation between social media use and relationship outcomes. These studies statistically associate behaviors and psychological factors, but there is little research on qualitative methods that are in-depth or individual lived experiences. Additionally, many studies focus on Western societies, where many cultural differences, such as privacy, dating, and romantic relationships, differ from our collectivist culture, Pakistan. In Pakistan's sociocultural context, romantic relationships are shaped by gender norms, cultural values, and social restrictions.

Research Objectives

1. To study the role of social media in the surveillance and control of behaviors in romantic relationships.
2. To explore the experiences of jealousy and emotional insecurity related to social media interactions between romantic partners.
3. To explore how people negotiate digital boundaries and privacy in romantic relationships.

Research Questions

1. How social media helps to monitor and control behaviors in relationships?
2. How do social media use affect jealousy and emotional insecurity in romantic relationships?
3. How do romantic partners negotiate privacy and digital boundaries within the digital environment?

Methods

Sample

The current study focuses on university students who are active users of different online platforms where they engage in romantic relationship. For the current study, 10-15 participants are more than enough. The convenience sampling technique used in the current study where individuals are selected on the basis of their ease of access, availability, and preparedness.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency(n)
Gender	Male	5
	Female	5
Age	18-20 years	3
	21-23 years	5
	24-26 years	2
Educational Level	Undergraduate	6
	Graduate	3
	MS/MPhil	1
Relationship Status	Currently in a relationship	7
	Previously in a relationship	3
Duration of Relationship	Less than 1 year	2
	1–3 years	5
	More than 3 years	3
Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform	WhatsApp	4
	Instagram	3
	Snapchat	2
	Facebook	1
Daily Social Media Usage	1–3 hours	2
	4–6 hours	5
	More than 6 hours	3
Type of Institution	Public University	10

Design & Procedure

The current study focuses on university students who are active users of different online platforms where they engage in romantic relationship.

Thematic Analysis Approach. The approach used in qualitative research, where data are analysed, interpreted, and themes are generated, is flexible, allowing researchers to obtain rich data sets and systematically align the data. The process consists of six phases: Familiarization with the data by reading and re-reading interview transcripts, Generating initial codes by identifying meaningful segments of data, Searching for themes by grouping related codes together, Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represent the data, Defining and naming themes by refining their meanings and scope, and Producing the report by presenting themes with supporting participant quotations and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data is collected through semi-structured interviews, as in this type of interview, an individual shares their own opinions and thoughts and provides the data in detailed form. The interviews allow flexibility but ensure that each topic will be discussed well. An interview was conducted individually for deeper responses and it will take place approximately 30-45 min.

Ethical Considerations

The first step was to obtain informed consent before the interviews, carefully following the ethical considerations. Participants were assured of confidentiality of their data and anonymity of their identity. Individuals could leave at any time without penalty. All identifying information was removed and pseudonyms used to protect the privacy of the participants.

Results

Table 2: Key findings of each theme and sub-theme.

S. No	Themes	Codes	Verbatim
1	Monitoring Digital Interaction as a Common Relational Practice	Online Status checking Monitoring activities likes, comments Access to partner accounts Observing another partner silently	"Last seen" "I'm constantly watching to see which train is which" "Instagram logged in on each other's devices"
2	Jealousy in the Age of social media	Interacting with opposite gender cause jealousy Emotional Insecurity Overprotectiveness Anxiety Sensitivity	"I feel very bad if he interacts with the families." "Uncomfortable feelings".
3	Overanalysing and Feeling Uncertain	Overthinking Negativity Self-blame	"I'm an over-thinker... when he's online and doesn't replay, I think he's ignoring me." "I feel like I am not enough... I am problematic". "Ignored when partner is online but not replying".
4	Conflict Initiators and Social Media Escalation	Dry replies Unseen messages Miscommunication Interacting with others	"seen" "It is active, but not replaying." "Small things become bigger because of social media". "Increased overthinking and negativity"
5	Negotiating Privacy and Digital Boundaries	Mutual understanding Sharing passwords Personal space	"We have not made any formal bonds" "We decide through discussion what is okay" "I don't want her passwords"
6	Trust as Emotional Security, Honesty, and Transparency	Openness Comfort Emotional Support Trust is equal to Honesty	"honesty" "Feeling secure even when partner is online"
7	Privacy Preference over Public Relations Display	Avoid posting publicly Privacy Concern Negativity about oversharing	"I don't post my relationship" "Evil eye"
8	Emotional Expression and Communication: The Impact of social media	Expression through status Faster replies Online conflicts	"Status posts express emotions" "Intensified emotions"

Findings

Monitoring Digital Interaction as a Common Relational Practice. The results uncovered the standardizing of digital surveillance patterns in intimate relationships as a major theme.

Verifying their partner's online behavior was often deemed by participants as a predicted and usual aspect of being in a relationship. Tracking activities such following followers, viewing story exchanges, checking likes, and observing "last seen" were disclosed by numerous individuals. As an example, one participant said, "I'm constantly watching to see which train is which" displaying a proactive and continuous interest in keeping an eye on the partner's social media activity. Another participant also shared their access, saying, "Instagram logged in on each other's devices" demonstrating an equivalent digital transparency. It's mentally stimulates that these actions were seen as to show concern, caring, or emotional attachment rather than as obtrusive. Overseeing was normalized within the relational setting rather than being tagged as commanding by participants. This denotes that social media has reconceptualised what established appropriate behaviour, permitting surveillance to permeate routine interpersonal interactions.

Jealousy in the Age of social media. One of the main emotional experiences linked to social media use is jealousy. Participants consistently stated feeling uneasy and uncertain while interacting with people of the opposing gender through texting, likes, and comments. One participant elucidated, "I feel very bad if he interacts with the families." underlining the emotional intensity related with such relationships. Resembling emotions were voiced by another participant, who claimed that these conditions create "Uncomfortable feelings". The findings show that even small internet exchanges are seen as possible hazards to the permanence of relationships. Social media makes relationships viewable and interpretable, which increases covetousness. Relationship tension and emotional pain were intensified by participants' inclination to interpret their partner's actions negatively.

Overanalysing and Feeling Uncertain. Overanalysing and emotional uneasiness, especially in response to tardy communication or unclear online policy, was another important issue. When their expectations for interaction were not fulfilled, participants often reported cogitating negatively. For example, one participant stated, "I'm an over-thinker... when he's online and doesn't replay, I think he's ignoring me." Another participant verbalised profound emotional insecurity, stating, "I feel like I am not enough... I am problematic". Though commonly exhibited in a different way, male participants also reported feeling emotions. One person said that he feels "ignored when partner is online but not replying". These participants answer indicate that social media magnifies emotional and cognitive responses. It causes people to make adverse conclusions about their partner's intentions. This theme highlights how people try to surmount the uncertainty created by digital communication contexts. By overanalysing, insecurity and mental suffering frequently increased.

Conflict Initiators and Social Media Escalation. Social media-related elements that lead to clash in relationships were discovered by the different participants. Delayed responses were mostly highlighted and interactions with other people, being "seen". Participant's highlighted "It is active, but not replaying" exhibit uncommunicative online presence. Another participant simplified that social media exacerbates trivial problems by saying, "small things become bigger because of social media". Further underscored the impact of platform algorithms. He/she saying that disclosure to particular information following disputes "increased overthinking and negativity". This implies that conflict surge is influenced by both technology aspects and human conduct. Social media's 24/7 accessibility promote an atmosphere where minor miscommunications rapidly turn into serious interpersonal disputes.

Negotiating Privacy and Digital Boundaries. Participants' varied knowledge with digital limits is frequently unofficial and negotiated within relationships. While some participants stressed mutual understanding, others said they had no definite rules. As an example, one participant said, "We have not made any formal bonds" suggesting an implicit and versatile approach to limits. However, another participant clarified, "we decide through discussion what

is okay” presenting that digital expectations are being actively stipulated. Perspectives on privacy also differed. Some participants preferred password sharing as a show of trust, others highlighted liberty. One participant, for instance, said, “I don’t want her passwords” demonstrating a longing to protect personal privacy. These results show that digital boundaries are intricate and situation-specific. It frequently influenced by personal convictions, interpersonal relationships, and emotional need.

Trust as Emotional Security, Honesty, and Transparency. A key idea that verified the experiences of the participants was certainty. Participants defined trust as the presence of openness, honesty, and emotional confidence as opposed to the absence of envy. One participant defined trust as “honesty”, while another portrayed it as “feeling secure even when partner is online”. Crucially, participants admits that trust permits people to express their worries. One participant, for instance, said that trust is the capacity to freely express inconvenience without worrying about being judged. Furthermore, some participants stressed that safeguarding trust involves abstaining from covert actions. This notion implies that rather than being taken for granted in relationships, trust is intentionally created via openness and conversation.

Privacy Preference over Public Relations Display. Participants all conveyed a strong desire for secrecy. The majority of individuals said they evaded using social media to overtly display their relationships. Many of the participants said, “I don’t post my relationship”, while another noted that “private relationship is better”. One participant depicted public sharing as “cringe” illustrating unfavourable opinions about the perceptibility of relationships online. Participants also quoted personal and cultural pretext for preserving private, that relationships should be shielded from outside influences (such as the “evil eye”). This framework demonstrates how participants respect relational and personal boundaries. It believe that privacy is crucial to the uprightness of relationships.

Emotional Expression and Communication: The Impact of social media. According to the partakers, social media has substantially changed how people express and share their feelings in relationships. Many talked about expressing emotions obliquely through postings or status updates. One participant, by way of illustration, said, “Status posts express emotions”. Another participant noted that social media has “intensified emotions”, proposing that digital platforms enhance emotional experiences. However, some participants declared that they preferred face-to-face communication since it diminishes miscommunication. All things considered, social media has complicated and diversified emotional expression, which frequently results in indirect communication and more misapprehensions.

Discussion

The present study's findings reveal that social media plays a significant role in romantic relationships, not only in communication but also in the perception of trust among partners. Connected with previous literature, the results suggest that digital platforms both facilitate connection and relational challenges (Abbasi, 2019; Muscanell et al., 2021). The significant finding of the present study shows that monitoring behavior online within romantic relationships is totally normalized. Mostly participants can check their partner's online activities and think of it as the symbol of care rather than control. The current findings connected with the Robert S. Tokunaga (2011) concept of interpersonal surveillance; he suggested that online sites provide partners to reduce ambiguity and gain reassurance. However, such behaviors are friendly, but they contribute to controlling dynamics such as monitoring, jealousy, and insecurity. The current findings suggest that online platforms serve as a trigger for jealousy when connecting with opposite genders. When partners are engaged in online interactions with others, such as likes and comments, explained by a participant. This current finding is linked with previous literature where online platforms enhance jealousy by

connecting with others and uncertain information (Quiroz et al., 2021). Similarly, research has demonstrated that due to the visibility of online interactions, the stability of relationships is at risk (Muscanell et al., 2021). In the present study, there is an important concept regarding the role of overthinking and insecurity in shaping one's individual behavior. Participants suggest that when partners are online but not in contact with their partner, it may lead to negative thought patterns. This concept can be elaborated by John Bowlby (1969), a theory where he emphasized that individuals have different attachment styles. Over time, linked with the theoretical framework, previous literature explained that social media jealousy and monitoring behaviors are influenced by attachment anxiety (Sharma & Yadava, 2023). The current study findings suggest that due to the online communication environment, it increases cognitive and emotional states, which leads to overthinking. Rising conflicts within romantic relationships can be investigated in this study. Without communication, partners can argue about delayed responses and online activity regarding anything. Due to miscommunication and constant accessibility, it can raise conflicts between online relationships (Abdul Gaffar et al., 2020). As reported by participants, online algorithms can increase overthinking and reinforce negative emotions. This technological advancement can influence psychologically where conflicts are not interpersonal it can be shaped by digital systems. Participants explained that trust can be influenced by social media-related obstacles. Another participant explained that trust is the root of honesty, clarity, and emotional reassurance. Individuals can assess relationships on previous rewards as suggested by Social Exchange Theory proposed by John Thibaut and Harold Kelley (1959). Trust can be enhanced by open communication and relational awards. The current findings suggest that if partners are communicative and honest, then individuals can tolerate a certain level of insecurity.

Other findings explained that public display of relationship over privacy. Most of the participants explained that privacy can maintain emotional security and relationship protection rather than posting on online platforms. This finding reflects how relationships are culturally influenced by honor and social judgment. Due to cultural expectations, previous literature explores that in collectivist societies, individuals prioritize privacy and relational boundaries (Abbasi, 2019). The current study contributes to this literature for qualitative insights. At last, the study highlights how emotional expression and communication can be influenced by social media. Participants expressed that using indirect methods to communicate with partners leads to misunderstanding. In the meanwhile, constant communication on social media also reduces clarity that enhances misinterpretation. These findings are linked with previous literature that nonverbal cues can cause emotional misreading (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

Conclusion

The present study findings suggest that social media plays a significant role in maintaining online romantic relationships along with monitoring behaviors. Mostly participants can check their partner's online activities and think of it as the symbol of care rather than control. The current findings connected with the Robert S. Tokunaga (2011) concept of interpersonal surveillance; he suggested that online sites provide partners to reduce ambiguity and gain reassurance. Connected with previous literature, the results suggest that digital platforms both facilitate connection and relational challenges (Muscanell et al., 2021). Due to cultural expectations, previous literature explores that in collectivist societies, individuals prioritize privacy and relational boundaries (Abbasi, 2019). The current study contributes to this literature for qualitative insights.

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