The online ideal persona vs. the jealousy effect: Two explanations of why selfies are associated with lower-quality romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on social-psychology and communication theories, we advance a theoretical model to explain the negative effects of selfies on romantic relationships. We suggest that this individualistic use of social media is related to selfie related conflicts between partners through two processes: (1) jealousy, stemming from excessive individual photo-sharing or comments about those pictures, and (2) that, by sharing flattering images of oneself, an online ideal persona is created in the picture-taker's mind that diverges from real-life. These conflicts in turn reduce perceived quality of the romantic relationships. To test the model we conducted a two-wave, representative panel survey, separated by one year. Results support a partial mediation model between taking selfies and lower perception of relationship quality, suggesting that both mediators, jealousy and the online ideal persona, have a negative effect on romantic relationship over time.

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1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNS) have become quotidian routines for many millions of people, supporting a culture of remote connectivity by allowing users to maintain social relationships, and are especially notable for upholding contact with weaker social ties (Ellison, 2007). Facebook, for example, was created with the vision to make the world more connected and help users to discover what is going on in their social world. However, despite its professed mission to help people to connect with each other, social media generally, and Facebook particularly, have been accused of damaging the relationship of thousands of couples (Valenzuela et al., 2014). The first of a growing line of research linking social media use to problems in romantic relationships was a 2009 study that found a positive association between Facebook use and jealousy among romantic partners (Muise et al., 2009). Since then, the "jealousy effect" has attracted detailed scholarly attention (Clayton et al., 2013; Elphinston and Noller, 2011; Hudson et al., 2015; Utz and Bekeumon, 2011, among others).

With some variations in the details, this line of research highlights that the affordances presented in SNS may be harming relationship quality (Hudson et al., 2015; Utz and Beukeboom, 2011). Substantial decline in partner search costs, for instance, lead to higher levels of breakups: when people manage more information about others, the expected benefit from a new match may outweigh the cost of dissolving the old one, fueling divorce rates (Kendall, 2011). Thus, since SNS have sundry affordances that reduce these searching costs, they may be indirectly contributing to cheating (Clayton et al., 2013). SNS also

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increase the likelihood of exposure to ambiguous scenarios involving contact with past sexual partners, a common trigger of jealousy (Muise et al., 2009). Given the semi-public nature of relationship activities on Facebook, and the shift in control over relational information from individuals to network members, romantic partners struggle to maintain privacy and independence, which also affects negatively the relationship (Tokunaga, 2011). Through similar affordances, Twitter has been used by romantic partners to publicize their fights (Garimella et al., 2014), which as Clayton (2014) confirmed, it is strongly associated with subsequent breakups. Finally, given the temporal nature of its content, Snapchat has been used for flirting and elicits even higher levels of jealousy than Facebook (Utz et al., 2015).

However, relatively little research has focused on how specific uses of SNS – and not the affordances – affect romantic relationships. Nevertheless, a strong trend in social media photography, coined "selfies," which is being used transversally across these platforms, provides a gateway to investigate this topic. Selfies allow users novel opportunities to customize their self-presentation by giving picture-takers a vast array of ways to portray themselves (Katz and Crocker, 2015). We suggest that this individualistic use of social media is associated with selfie-related conflicts between partners through two processes: (1) jealousy, stemming from excessive individual photos sharing or comments about those pictures, and (2) that, by sharing flattering images of oneself, an online ideal persona is created in the picture-taker's mind that diverges from real-life. These conflicts in turn, reduce perceived quality of the romantic relationships. To test the model we conducted a two-wave, representative panel survey, with the two waves being separated by one year.

2. Literature review

Though self-portraits have been long-present in many societies, the selfie phenomenon arrives as something new in social media culture. Enabled by progress in digital technology, from a social vantage point the selfie is related to the idea of "sharing" oneself and the omnipresence of digital connectivity. Defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" (Oxford Dictionary), selfies have rapidly permeated global culture and their popularity can only be described as phenomenal: during the 2014 Oscar ceremony a selfie was re-tweeted more than 2 million times. Thus it is worth considering the practice's effects. In the present case, we ask if there is a negative link between this individualistic form of SNS usage and the quality of romantic relationships. Relevant for our research is the fact that recent studies have found that this individualistic form of SNS usage, where users focus on how they want to be seen by others from their own perspective, is related positively to personality traits that may jeopardize more stable and long-term relationships.

Sorokowski et al. (2015) for example, concluded that posting selfies is heavily related to narcissism, a personality trait that includes grandiosity, dominance and superiority, which is also marked by the constant pursuit of veneration by others (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). In fact, narcissists need social contacts in order to obtain the attention they require for building their self-esteem (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). This leads them to pursue attention-seeking and exhibitionist strategies (Bergman et al., 2011) which may explain its association with posting selfies. Narcissists also tend to not seek long-term relationships, preferring instead to use relationships to augment their popularity and satisfy short-term status needs (Campbell, 1999). In this context, Weiser (2015) concluded that posting selfies is related to two dimensions of narcissism: (1) the Leadership/Authority dimension (individuals who are motivated to lead and seek power and authority over others), and (2) the Grandiose Exhibitionism (GE) dimension (individuals who eagerly seek attention and admiration from others), which is also related to self-absorption, vanity, and exhibitionistic propensities.

Moreover, Fox and Rooney (2015) found that selfie posting is related to higher levels of psychopathic traits, namely impulsivity, thrill-seeking and reduced self-control (Paulhus and Williams, 2002). (The argument is about relative levels of the trait, not the condition of clinical psychopathology.) Interestingly, Fox and Rooney conclude that those with higher levels of psychopathy do not edit photos of themselves despite (or one might argue, due to) posting more selfies. This finding seems related to the concept that those with psychopathic tendencies lack appropriate cognitive processing filters concerning the photos they upload in their SNS accounts. This lack of filtering and impulsivity is relevant for our research because those with psychopathic tendencies are not interested to empathy with others and frequently get involved in thrill-seeking behaviors regardless of the cost to others (Jonason and Krause, 2013). Therefore, given that one of the bases for a strong, stable, and satisfying relationship is how much actors focus on their significant others instead of themselves (Davis, 1985; Roberts, 1982), and that by taking selfies users may engage their self-centered behaviors, this individualistic form of SNS usage, in which users concentrate on their physical appearance to achieve social gains, may create conflicts between partners that jeopardize more stable and long-term relationships.

Further, we advance here a theoretical model wherein two processes of selfie posting behavior are associated with lower-quality romantic relationships. First, we propose that conflicts between partners such as jealousy may arise due to selfie-sharing practices. Second, we propose that in sharing enhanced images of oneself, a fantasy or ideal persona is created within the user's belief system. This belief system diverges from real-life, causing relationship problems arising from a tension between the picture-taker's self-perception and the partner's perception of the picture-taker as influenced by the selfie.

The first perspective finds validation through previous studies of SNS use. The second perspective is consistent, albeit less compellingly, with the SNS literature showing that the creation of desirable identities are an important motive for setting up profiles on SNS (Siibak, 2009; Zhao et al., 2008).