



Private flirts, public friends: Understanding romantic jealousy responses to an ambiguous social network site message as a function of message access exclusivity



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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that social network site use can amplify romantic jealousy, but studies have yet to identify the causes for these reactions. An experiment was conducted to examine how message exclusivity affects jealousy responses to a hypothetical scenario. A total of 191 undergraduates were randomly assigned to imagine their potential emotional and behavioral responses to an ambiguous message given by their partner to a romantic rival, either in a private Facebook message (high exclusivity) or posted publicly as a message on the rival's Facebook wall (low exclusivity). Those participants reading about high exclusivity messages reported more negative emotion and were more likely to imagine being confrontational. Threat perception and negative emotion both predicted confrontational behavior. There was an indirect effect of message access exclusivity on threat perception through negative emotion; there was no direct association between exclusivity and threat perception. This research has implications for the study of message processing on social network sites and the conceptualization of masspersonal communication.

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1. Introduction

The archival and public nature of social network sites (SNSs) provides individuals with a wealth of information about online and offline behaviors of others. Because they permit individuals to view their own and others' social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), these sites give individuals access to much more information about other's social interactions than they would be able to obtain with other online or offline strategies (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Tokunaga, 2011). Individuals can view others' profiles, see their posts to message boards (such as Facebook walls), or scan newsfeeds that display information about users' activity on a given SNS. Although the ability to survey so much information about one's social network has a number of positive consequences for relationship development (such as increased social capital among college students; cf. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007), research on the damaging effects of SNS surveillance on personal relationships is also accumulating. In particular,

there is mounting evidence that use of SNSs such as Facebook can exacerbate jealousy in romantic relationships (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2012; Muise et al., 2009; Muscanell et al., 2013; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

The current paper suggests that these potential negative influences of social media on relationships – in particular, romantic relationships – is partially the result of individuals' negative emotions to and threatening interpretations of ambiguous content posted on SNSs. Past work (Goldman, Bowman, & Westerman, 2013) has shown that social media users interpret private and public messages differently in terms of emotional intensity and appropriateness, particularly when the message conveys negative interpersonal information. By extension, the current work posits that the exclusivity of ambiguous but potentially flirtatious message posted on SNSs (either in a private Facebook message or a public Facebook wall post) by a romantic rival, should cause one to differentially perceive, feel, and respond to the message.

2. Literature review

2.1. Jealousy

Because it can lead to negative relationship outcomes, jealousy is often considered a detrimental aspect of interpersonal

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relationships (Carson & Cupach, 2000). White (1981) defines jealousy as a “complex of thoughts, feelings, and actions which follow threats to self-esteem and/or threats to the existence or quality of the relationship” (p. 129). Building on this work, Pfeiffer and Wong (1989) conceptualized jealousy as a multidimensional construct with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitive jealousy involves the appraisal of relational threats or suspicions regarding a romantic partner’s infidelity. Affective jealousy involves the experience of negative emotions directed at relationship threats. Behavioral jealousy consists of protective or surveillance actions that individuals engage into interfere with romantic partners and a potential rivals, or to “check up on” romantic partners. The interplay of cognition and emotion in determining expressions of jealousy has been somewhat difficult to tease out (cf., Bevan, 2013), but a number of prominent models of jealousy are rooted in appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Lazarus, 1984) and argue that the process of jealousy begins with a cognitive appraisal of a relationship threat (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; White, 1981). Nonetheless, the sequence of cognitions and emotions has not been investigated specifically (Bevan, 2013), and as some scholars suggest that these components can occur and influence behavior simultaneously (Guerrero & Andersen, 1998; Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) – consistent with theory that conceptualizes cognition and emotion as fused components (Zajonc, 1980).

2.2. Ambiguous messages on social network sites

There is mounting evidence that SNS use can exacerbate romantic jealousies (for review, see Bevan, 2013). For instance, Muise et al. (2009) found that trait jealousy (measured as one dimension) predicted the experience of jealousy in the context of Facebook. The researchers presented some qualitative findings that indicate that jealousy experienced offline can make individuals more vigilant about scanning SNSs for information related to partner fidelity. Elphinston and Noller (2011) found that people with excessive and dysfunctional attachment to Facebook tended to exhibit more jealous thoughts and more frequent engagement in surveillance of romantic partners. More recently, Marshall et al. (2012) provided evidence indicating that individual differences in attachment style predispose people to engage in jealousy-related SNS surveillance behaviors. Collectively, this research demonstrates some of the dispositional variables that make people more inclined to use Facebook as a surveillance tool and experience romantic jealousy in response to SNS use, but much less is understood about the contextual features of SNS that foster jealousy.

Drawing from this line of research, Bevan (2013) outlines three circumstantial reasons that SNSs can should fertile ground for romantic jealousy: (1) they provide a centralized place to survey romantic partners’ social connections and behavior; (2) they make it easier for users to maintain relationships with both romantic partners and romantic rivals; and (3) they collapse contexts, generating more ambiguous social situations that could result in misinterpretations. More generally speaking, it is not uncommon for any type of ambiguous event in romantic relationships involving people outside of the relationship to evoke jealousy (Sheets, Fredenall, & Claypool, 1997). Sheets et al. suggest that ambiguous events that could (or could not) indicate some threat to the relationship, typically prompt neutral reactions from partners. But in about 20% of cases, these ambiguous events elicit negative reactions when partners perceive some relationship threat. Their research found that in offline environments, jealousy-evoking situations include cases such as discovering that a partner has engaged in social activities with others or developed relationships with people outside of the romantic relationship. Presumably, many of these ambiguous events would be unknown to interested romantic partners unless they occurred in that partner’s physical presence. However,

because SNSs make it easier for people to monitor their romantic partners’ behavior within a wider social network, users may regularly experience feelings of uncertainty or jealousy in response to seeing interactions their partner has that they ordinarily would never have known about (Bevan, 2013). As articulated by a participant in Muise et al.’s (2009) study, “I have enough confidence in her [his partner] to know my partner is faithful, yet I can’t help but second-guess myself when someone posts on her wall... It can contribute to feelings of you not really ‘knowing’ your partner.” Drawing from examples such as these, the authors point out that there are many ways that any given message on a SNS can be interpreted. And therein lies a question: when the meaning of message content is ambiguous, what are the cues that SNS users consider to determine whether or not a message is a relational threat or not? We propose that if the intention or meaning of a message posted on SNSs is unclear, observers may look for message exclusivity cues to understand the message’s meaning or implications.

2.3. Message access exclusivity and jealousy responses

To address the increasingly-blurred lines between mass and interpersonal communication (e.g., Lievrouw, 2009; O’Sullivan, 1999; Rogers, 1999), O’Sullivan (2005) coined the term “masspersonal communication” to acknowledge increasingly common instances in which individuals engage in some form of mediated communication and interpersonal communication simultaneously. His conceptualization advocates categorizing mediated interpersonal communication, such as the use of SNS to communicate with friends and romantic partners, in terms of message personalization (the extent to which a message is customized with the receiver’s idiosyncrasies in mind) and message access exclusivity (the extent to which public others can read a message, often understood in terms of completely private to completely public). The model of masspersonal communication suggests that a mass marketing e-mail sent to a list of anonymous receivers (low in message access exclusivity and low in personalization) is distinct from a tailor made e-mail exchanged between two close friends (low in message access exclusivity and high in personalization). Likewise, a Facebook love note sent as a private message between romantic partners (high in message access exclusivity and high in personalization) is unlike the same love note posted on a publicly accessible Facebook wall (low in message access exclusivity and high in personalization). As both of these examples demonstrate, this model offers a way to distinguish between different types of masspersonal communication that may be transmitted through the same medium, but could nonetheless have fundamentally different uses and effects on users. To our knowledge, however, this model has not been specifically employed in empirical research to understand responses to different types of masspersonal communication.

Considering jealous responses on SNSs, we argue that message personalization and exclusivity should both affect how threatening a message sent from a partner to a potential romantic partner should be perceived. In an attempt to examine a SNS contextual feature (as oppose to content features) that affect perceptions of threat, this present study focuses specifically on exclusivity as a deciding factor in how people interpret ambiguous messages on Facebook.

There is already some evidence that users consider message exclusivity when considering how threatening SNS communication is to their romantic relationships. In a study of perceptions of message intimacy on Facebook, Barzova (2012) recently found that messages were considered to be more intimate if they were more exclusive, posted privately through Facebook’s messaging system, as opposed to being posted as a status update or a public wall post. Similar work by Goldman, Westerman, et al. (2013) and Goldman, Bowman, et al. (2013) found that private messages were deemed

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