



**INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE,  
JEALOUSY & ATTACHMENT STYLES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OF  
YOUNG COUPLES**

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**ABSTRACT**

The triad of Social Media Use, Jealousy and Attachment Styles is an important topic of study in times where social media has become a norm for communication especially in romantic relationships. The current research highlights the relationship between the above-mentioned variables and the gender differences were further explored. A total of 200 participants took part in the study (M=100, F=100) in the age range of 18-26 years and have been in a relationship for at least 6 months. For data collection; The Social Media Use Scale (Tuck & Thompson, 2023); The Multidimensional Jealousy Scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989) and Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996) was used. Statistical analysis was done with the help of

Spearman's Rank Correlation and Mann Whitney-U test. The results revealed a moderate positive relationship between Social Media Use and Jealousy including Behavioural dimensions, weak positive relation between Social Media Use and Cognitive and Emotional Jealousy. Social Media Use revealed a moderate positive relationship with Attachment Anxiety and a weak positive relation with Attachment Avoidance. Jealousy inclusive of Cognitive and Behavioural Jealousy indicated a significant positive correlation with Attachment Anxiety, while Emotional Jealousy showed a weak positive association. Attachment Avoidance revealed a weak positive relation with all the dimensions of jealousy. Gender differences were insignificant in Social Media Use, Attachment Styles and Emotional dimension of Jealousy. While significant gender differences were observed in Jealousy including Cognitive and Behavioural dimension. The results of the study can be implicated in understanding the functioning of romantic relationships in modern times and be used for resolution of conflicts in a cohesive manner.

**Keywords:** Romantic Relationships, Social Media Use, Jealousy, Attachment Styles

## Introduction

With the advancements in technology, social media is just a click away and accessible to anyone at any point of time. With the launch of Facebook & Twitter in mid-2000s the world was introduced to a whole new world of communication allowing people to share their photos, content & events (Bhati et al., 2019).

According to a report by Forbes Advisor published in august 2023, it was observed that on an average an individual spent about 145 minutes on social media especially short form videos. Instagram has around 516.92 million active user bases in India, Facebook being the second most used platform (Wong, 2024).

### **Romantic Relationships**

They are understood as mutually acknowledged ongoing voluntary interactions, commonly marked by expressions of affection and perhaps current or anticipated sexual behaviour (Collins et al., 2009).

Love has been understood in various ways and types with one of them being divided into Passionate and Companionate love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000). The Triangular Theory of Love was developed by Robert Sternberg (1986) to describe the functioning of relationships and recognised three elements of love - Intimacy, Passion & Commitment. Passionate love is defined by emotionally intense engagement that can be thrilling and agonising for both. It is mostly bound with sexuality. Companionate love is understood as affection experienced by people who lead interdependent lives like doing activities together. The main tenant behind this division is that relationships that start with passionate love will end except for the passion washes away over a period and turns into a strong and steady companionate love.

### **Social Media Use & Romantic Relationships**

The use of social media by couples has also been seen as ways of causing disputes in the relationship (Arikewuyo et al., 2020). Being socially active has been shown to negatively effect relationship satisfaction (Yacoubt et al., 2018).

While some research also points towards positive effects on relationship like putting up couple related details leading to better relationship with the partner. It has been shown that partners whose account photos were with their partners & those who openly shared pictures with their partner had higher relationship satisfaction (Papp et al., 2012).

## **Jealousy**

Pines (1998) defined jealousy as a “complicated reaction in response to a perceived threat, which would end to destroy a relationship that is considered important.”

From an evolutionary perspective (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Daly et al., 1982) jealousy can be seen as having a functional importance with the focal goal as being involved with an opposite sex relationship for bearing children & handing down one's genes to the coming generations. Not experiencing enviousness has been seen under the light of suffering the loss of investment & generatively.

Pfeiffer and Wong (1989) hold a multifaceted view of jealousy namely cognitive, emotional & behavioural. Cognitive enviousness refers to the dubious thoughts regarding one's partner, emotional component relates to feelings like fear, anger, insecurity & behavioural jealousy manifests itself as inquiring for cues of disloyalty. From a positive perspective jealousy has also been seen as a driving force leading to a successful relationship in terms of marriage or union (Mathes, 1986).

## **Social Media Jealousy**

To understand the effects of social media use, a generic approach comprising of the concept of affordances has been used (Evans et al., 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Affordances refer to the operations one is allowed to perform on the objects for intentional & creative purposes. In terms of social media, it has been understood as visibility, perseverance, modifiability, interrelation, searchable & transparency of audience (Bayer et al., 2020; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Affordances extend the number of plausible enemies in terms of being related & in reach of friends & followers. It also implies the plausible connection between partner and their ex-partners which can trigger retrospective & retroactive jealousy.

If the partner gets to know about the interaction that took place over a less apparent medium like Snapchat, it can be perceived to hide the relation and further exacerbated envy. Furthermore, when a partner doesn't make use of the visibility affordance as it should be, like not updating one's relationship status from single to in a relationship it can lead to conflicts in the relationship (Utz et al., 2015).

### **Attachment Styles**

An internal working model of self & others is made with the help of memories, cognitive manuscript & emotions related to a particular style (Bowlby, 1988). Our interactions with other at any time of one's life can lead to the creation of attachment; however, it is often affected by prior relationships (Bowlby, 1979).

Neglected & erratically cared children are susceptible to developing less positive internal model's developing poor self & others' perceptions. They adopt harmful affect regulation patterns that ultimately result in dysfunctional interactions with others. The two affect regulation strategies could be understood as hyper activation tactics & deactivation strategies. Hyperactivation tactics include clinging, insistent behaviours to establish proximity. Whereas deactivation strategies could be understood as the opposite of clinging behaviours & involve isolation & thought repressing methods (Bowlby, 1989).

Two major attachment styles have been frequently determined: avoidance & anxiety. The avoidance element evaluates the extent to which people advance or keep away from intimacy & relational connections. It is understood as the level to which one is sceptical towards others & makes use of deactivation coping strategies at times of stress. Attachment anxiety is closely linked to people's sense of perception of themselves as deserving of love & attention. It is the extent to which one worries that their significant other won't be present at difficult times and makes use of hyper activation techniques (Jones, 2015).

### **Attachment Styles & Jealousy**

According to Knobloch et al. (2001), emotional enviousness is more prevalent in people who have attachment anxiety. It has also been found that those with a secure attachment pattern has increased levels of commitment, faith & reciprocator interrelatedness in their connection with others as compared to those with anxious or avoidant attachment pattern (Simpson, 1990).

In accordance with reports on adult attachment, individuals with high degree of attachment related anxiety are increasingly susceptible to survey their partner's conduct to ensure the maintenance of partner's interest & to evaluate emotional & sexual hazards to the relationship (White & Mullen, 1989).

### **Attachment Styles & Social Media**

Using social media has been seen to aid people with significant levels of attachment anxiety governed the way people portrayed self, get the intimacy they were looking for & lower the likelihood of being turned down (Coan & Sbarra, 2015; Oldmeadow et al., 2013). Astonishingly people with elevated levels of attachment avoidance have earlier stated that social media either has no impact in any sense or had an adverse one (Hart et al., 2015; Oldmeadow et al., 2013).

Those with attachment avoidance who make use of deactivating tactics which could manifest as inhibiting their desire for being close to others, those with this trait might be less likely to partake in problematic use of social media due to their favour for in-person communication with people thus desiring to avoiding and maintaining relationships (Worsley et al., 2018).

## Methods

### Purpose

To study the correlation between social media use, jealousy and attachment styles and the differences in social media use, jealousy and attachment styles between young male and female couples in romantic relationships.

### Research Objectives

1. To study the relationship between social media use and jealousy in young couples.
2. To study the relationship between social media use and attachment styles in young couples.
3. To study the relationship between jealousy and attachment styles in young couples.
4. To study the differences in social media use between males and females.
5. To study the differences in jealousy between males and females.
6. To study the differences in attachment styles between males and females.

### Hypothesis

1. There will be a significant relationship between social media use and jealousy in young adults.
2. There will be a significant relationship between social media use and attachment styles of young adults.
3. There will be a significant relationship between jealousy and attachment styles of young adults.
4. There will be significant differences in social media use between males and females.
5. There will be a significant difference in jealousy between males and females.

6. There will be significant differences in attachment styles between males and females.

### **Sample**

The following sample, measures and procedures were done to study the research objectives. Total number of samples is 200 (N=200). Number of females in romantic relationships is 100 and the number of males in romantic relationships in the study is 100. The age group of the sample collected is 18-26. The sample was collected through purposive & snowball sampling.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Young adults: 18- 26-year-olds
- In a romantic relationship since at least 6 months
- Social media users
- Can understand & express English language.
- In a committed monogamous relationship
- Couples in heterosexual relationships

### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Middle & older adults
- In a romantic relationship for less than 6 months
- Non-social media users
- Cannot understand & express English Language
- Open, polygamous, etc relationships
- Couples in homosexual relationships

## Measures

**The Social Media Use Scale by Tuck and Thompson (2023)** was used to measure social media use in young adults. There are a total of 17 items in the scale, 5 items for Image Based, 3 items for Comparison Based, 4 items for Belief Based & 5 items for Consumption Based sub scale. Each item was rated on a 9-point scale, never to hourly or more. The score for each scale is the average of items in that scale. The Cronbach's alpha values were good ( $r = .75$ ,  $-.86$ ). Factor correlations ranged from small ( $r = .25$ ) to moderate ( $r = 0.50$ ). The reliability for items in each scale was good to excellent ( $r = .77$   $-.93$ ).

**The Multidimensional Jealousy Scale by Pfeiffer and Wong (1989)** was employed to measure the various components of jealousy namely Emotional, Cognitive & Behavioural. Each sub scale consists of 8 items each & has a seven-point rating scale with responses ranging from 1- never to 7- all the time for cognitive & behavioural scales. For the emotional jealousy scale the options range from 1- very pleased to 7 - very upset. Cronbach alphas of 0.92, 0.85 & 0.89 has been reported for cognitive, emotional & behavioural dimensions. Cognitive jealousy showed moderate correlation with emotional ( $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) & behavioural ( $r = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), emotional & behavioural jealousy also showed moderate correlations ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**The Revised Adult Attachment Scale** by Nancy Collins (1996) was utilised to estimate the attachment styles in population of young adults. There are a total of 6 items in Anxiety scale & 12 items in Avoid sub scale. Every item was on a self-report 5-point scale with 1 being not at all characteristic of me & 5 very characteristic of me. The alpha reliability coefficient over a period of 4 months on 38 in married couples was .72 & .71 for anxiety & avoidance respectively (Ahmad, 2018).

## Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Offline, face to face mode. Each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized scales were administered to the participants.

## Analysis of Data

The data obtained was analysed quantitatively using the following statistical techniques: Mean, Standard Deviation, Spearman's Rank Correlation. & Mann Whitney- U test, Microsoft Excel & SPSS 21.0 were used for analysis purpose.

## RESULTS

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables*

| Variables            | Mean  | SD    |
|----------------------|-------|-------|
| Attachment           | 2.73  | 0.96  |
| Anxiety              |       |       |
| Attachment Avoidance | 2.89  | 0.66  |
| Social Media         | 11.14 | 4.34  |
| Use                  |       |       |
| Cognitive            | 20.75 | 10.91 |
| Jealousy             |       |       |
| Behavioral           | 20.52 | 10.08 |
| Jealousy             |       |       |
| Emotional            | 43.6  | 7.96  |

|                       |              |              |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Jealousy</b>       |              |              |
| <b>Total Jealousy</b> | <b>84.89</b> | <b>19.56</b> |

**Table 2***Correlation between Attachment styles & Jealousy dimensions*

| <b>Variables</b>                | <b>Cognitive<br/>Jealousy</b> | <b>Behavioral<br/>Jealousy</b> | <b>Emotional<br/>Jealousy</b> | <b>Total<br/>Jealousy</b> |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Attachment<br/>Anxiety</b>   | 0.39*                         | 0.33*                          | 0.28*                         | 0.49*                     |
| <b>Attachment<br/>Avoidance</b> | 0.17*                         | 0.22*                          | 0.21*                         | 0.28*                     |

\* p &lt; 0.05 (2- tailed)

**Table 3***Correlation between Attachment Styles & SMU*

| <b>Variables</b>            | <b>Social Media Use</b> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Attachment Anxiety</b>   | 0.37*                   |
| <b>Attachment Avoidance</b> | 0.13*                   |

\* p &lt; 0.05 (2- tailed)

**Table 4***Correlation between Social Media Use and Jealousy dimensions*

| <b>Variables</b>        | <b>Cognitive Jealousy</b> | <b>Behavioral Jealousy</b> | <b>Emotional Jealousy</b> | <b>Total Jealousy</b> |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Social Media Use</b> | 0.29*                     | 0.36*                      | 0.07*                     | 0.38*                 |

\* p &lt; 0.05 (2- tailed)

**Table 5***Descriptive Statistics and Differences in Study Variables between Male & Female Participants*

| <b>Variables</b>            | <b>Males</b> |           | <b>Females</b> |           | <b>Mann-Whitney U test</b> |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|----------------------------|
|                             | <b>Mean</b>  | <b>SD</b> | <b>Mean</b>    | <b>SD</b> |                            |
| <b>Attachment Anxiety</b>   | 2.69         | 1.01      | 2.76           | 0.91      | 0.68                       |
| <b>Attachment Avoidance</b> | 2.87         | 0.69      | 2.91           | 0.64      | 0.76                       |
| <b>Social Media Use</b>     | 11.53        | 5.26      | 10.75          | 3.15      | 0.93                       |
| <b>Cognitive Jealousy</b>   | 23.20        | 11.65     | 18.31          | 9.57      | 0.00*                      |
| <b>Behavioral Jealousy</b>  | 22.64        | 11.14     | 18.41          | 8.43      | 0.01*                      |

|                           |       |      |        |       |       |
|---------------------------|-------|------|--------|-------|-------|
| <b>Emotional Jealousy</b> | 43.14 | 8.54 | 44.09  | 7.34  | 0.72  |
| <b>Total Jealousy</b>     | 85.14 | 16.6 | 126.19 | 28.80 | 0.00* |

\* $p < 0.05$  (2 tailed)

## Discussion

The study was aimed at exploring the correlation between SMU, jealousy and attachment styles and the differences in social media use, jealousy and attachment styles between male and female young couples in romantic relationships.

The first objective of the study was to study the relationship between social media use and jealousy in young couples and the hypothesis was that there will be a significant relationship between them. Correlation results reveal a weak positive relationship of SMU and cognitive jealousy, a moderately positive association between behavioral jealousy and SMU, emotional jealousy has a weak positive relationship with SMU and a moderately positive relation is shown between total jealousy and SMU. The current finding can be upheld by a study conducted by Frampton and Fox (2018) in which the results revealed that social networking sites were actively used to get information and monitor partner's activity. Muise et al. (2009) found increased usage of Facebook has been linked to heightened jealousy because it makes information about partner accessible. Thus, the hypothesis was accepted.

The second objective of study was to explore the relationship between SMU and attachment styles of the subjects and the hypothesis assumes a significant relationship. The analysis results revealed attachment anxiety having a moderate positive relationship with SMU and attachment avoidance having a weak positive relation to SMU. A study conducted on

college students revealed a positive relationship between anxious attachment style and social media usage (Liu & Miu, 2019). People displaying attachment avoidance have reported to be either unaffected or negatively influenced by social media (Hart et al., 2015; Oldmeadow et al., 2013), lending support to the low level of association with social media. Worsely et al. (2019) found that those with an anxious attachment style actively engage in social media to bring about a change in their psychological well-being. The hypothesis is accepted.

The relationship between jealousy and attachment styles according to the hypothesis was assumed to be significant and the analysis revealed a moderately positive relationship between attachment anxiety and cognitive and behavioral jealousy, weak positive relation between attachment anxiety and emotional jealousy and a high positive relationship is shown between total jealousy & attachment anxiety. The internal working model by Bowlby (1969) can be used to understand how internal representations of early caregiver's attachment figures shape our future expectations, defense mechanisms, emotions & relational conduct (Levy & Kelly, 2010). Simpson et al. (2007) suggested that preoccupied or fearful avoidant individuals are more inclined to experience jealousy and perceive competitors as more dangerous.

Attachment avoidance showed a weak positive relation with cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and total jealousy. Mathes (1986) views jealousy as a reaction to the separation from attachment figure viewing jealousy and love from the same lens. Chursina (2023) stated that avoidantly attached individuals have negative sense of self image and that of their partner showing a double doubt which further led to jealousy among its dimensions. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted.

It was hypothesized that significant gender difference exists in social media use. The results of Mann-Whitney U test were found to be insignificant. The mean differences are almost

similar, indicating that no distinct differences exist in social media usage between males and females. This is consistent with the past researchers which state that men & women make use of social media for different reasons such as males use social media to form new friendships & relations, making contacts and networks whereas females use social media to look for their old friends, connections and to maintain relations with old friends (Mazman & Usluel, 2011). Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

The fifth objective of the study was to discover gender differences in jealousy and its dimensions. The hypothesis assumed a significant difference in jealousy in males & females. The results revealed a significant difference in cognitive jealousy between males & females & the mean differences showed increased cognitive jealousy in men. A similar study done by Sahana and Ganth (2016) found that men scored higher on the cognitive component of jealousy, and it was best predicted by closeness in one's relationship.

The difference in the behavioral jealousy component was significant with mean scores of males higher than that of females. Atencio (2017) stated that feelings of fright and sorrow are more likely to appear in women, while hatred, anger and revenge are more skewed towards men.

For the study of jealousy on whole inclusive of all the components of jealousy namely cognitive, emotional, and behavioral, the analysis revealed a significant gender difference in jealousy with females having a higher mean value than that of males. The higher degree of jealousy in women has often been understood from the notion of social power where women are more prone to jealousy producing situations because they are placed in a lower level of social hierarchy (Mint, 2010)

Although the three sub parts of jealousy show gender differences and the total jealousy dimension showing higher jealousy in women, emotional jealousy does not show any significant gender differences. Social and economic frameworks, along with it the consequent internalization and conformity to gender norms can account for gender differences in jealousy (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

The sixth purpose of the study was to explore the differences in attachment styles namely attachment anxiety and avoidance, the hypothesis presumed a significant difference existing between the two. The results showed no significant difference between the two groups for attachment anxiety and avoidance. Giudice (2011) studied attachment styles from an evolutionary point of view primarily for the benefit of reproduction in which a secure atmosphere and high security in attachment stimulate shared commitment and collaborative parenting efforts. A similar study conducted in China found no gender differences in college going students (Giudice, 2011; Shu et al., 2017 & Li et al., n.d). Thus, the hypothesis is rejected.

## **Conclusion**

The current study aimed to inquire the correlation between social media use, jealousy & attachment styles, and the gender differences in young couples in regard with the variables of study. The results provided significant insights into the functioning of relationships of young couples with significantly positive relations being observed between social media usage and behavioural jealousy and jealousy on a whole, weak positive correlation between social media use and emotional & cognitive jealousy. A weak positive correlation was observed between social media use and attachment avoidance and positive moderate relation was revealed in terms of attachment anxiety and using social media. Attachment anxiety on the other hand revealed to be having positive moderate relation with cognitive and behavioural jealousy, weak

positive relation with emotional jealousy and having positive strong correlation with total jealousy. Attachment avoidance on the other hand showed to be having weak and positive relationship with all the dimensions of jealousy. No significant gender differences were observed in social media, attachment styles and emotional jealousy, on the other hand significant differences were revealed in cognitive and behavioural jealousy as well as jealousy on a whole.

### **Limitations**

One of the major limitations was the inability to collect data from both the partners in relationship. It is important to note that while collecting responses in front of the partner in some ways altered the responses due to the fear of their partner getting to know about their opinions. Self-report measures often bring about a bias in the reporting of results indicating a need for inclusion of qualitative measures. Further, exploration of variations in SMU, attachment patterns and manifestation of jealousy in homosexual and heterosexual couples is recommended.

### **Future Implications**

Results of the study offer insightful details about the intricacies of relationships in the modern time where social media plays an integral part in all our relations. It actively interacts with our ways of attaching to others and experiencing enviousness because of an evolutionary reaction. The research can be used in couples therapy and development of measures to explore relationship related factors.

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