"Baby it's Cold Online": A Qualitative Investigation About What is and is not Appropriate to do on social media in Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media in relationships can be beneficial or detrimental for relationship quality depending on the behavior. Although posting photos and sharing one's relationship status on social media can be beneficial, oversharing information or posting inappropriate content on social media can be bad for relationships. However, these studies have relied on empirical data, without defining what inappropriate or excessive content is. The goal of this study is to understand emerging adults' perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable social media behavior in a romantic relationship. This qualitative study applied a critical realist epistemological design, recruiting participants between 18-29 who had used social media in their current or previous romantic relationship. Participants in this study participated in one-one-one interviews (N = 41) or one of four focus groups (N = 20), answering questions about what is and is not appropriate social media behavior in romantic relationships. Data was analyzed using coding reliability thematic analysis. Results showed that it is acceptable to post life updates, meaningful relationship events, and partner-approved content. Inappropriate behaviors included posting relationship issues, posting relationships too often, posting provocative pictures, and posting with an ex-partner or rival. It was also suggested that individuals should not post too frequently, overshare relationship information, or post public displays of affection. This study confirms that there are specific online behaviors that could support or disrupt the development and maintenance of romantic relationships. Additional implications for romantic relationships will be discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Social media, romantic relationships, posting, critical realist epistemology, coding reliability thematic analysis*

Social media allows individuals to post with or about their romantic partners, communicate with their partners both publicly and privately, or monitor their partners' interactions with others. Some social media behaviors can have relationship-promoting qualities, but others may create potential conflict. For example, 23% of all adults and 34% of 18-29-year-olds report jealousy or uncertainty in their relationship because of social media use (Vogels & Anderson, 2020). While much research has been done about relationship behaviors on social media and their potential consequences for those relationships, the perceptions regarding what is and is not appropriate

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behavior on social media when in a romantic relationship is relatively unknown. Therefore, the goal of this qualitative investigation is to identify emerging adults' perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable social media behaviors in romantic relationships.

To address the goal of this study, the current investigation incorporates a critical realist epistemological design (Finlay, 2021) using coding reliability thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018) to analyze the data. This approach allows participants to share their experiences with social media within their romantic relationships, which can be analyzed to identify themes that reflect perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate social media behavior in this context. Additionally, this study specifically focuses on emerging adults, individuals who are between 18 and 29. Theoretically, these individuals are romantic relationship-focused. According to Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory of development and Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood, individuals in this age group are driven to address the conflict of intimacy versus isolation. Essentially, emerging adulthood is a time when individuals 18-29 years old seek out opportunities to form and maintain long-term relationships. This study also recruited emerging adults as they are heavy consumers of social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2024). Additionally, compared to other age groups, emerging adults are most likely to integrate social media into romantic relationship processes, such as formation and maintenance (Fox et al., 2013; Seidman et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria for this study were individuals between 18 and 29 years old, who had ever utilized social media when in a romantic relationship. From the results of this study, we share recommendations for social media behavior for those forming and maintaining romantic relationships.

Social Exchange Theory and Social Media Use in Relationships

This study is grounded in social exchange theory (Thibault & Kelley, 1959). This theory argues that satisfaction in close relationships is constructed by the costs and rewards within a romantic relationship. When an individual experiences more rewards than costs in their relationship, the satisfaction is high. When costs outweigh rewards, the relationship is less satisfying and is more likely to end. Specific social media behaviors can serve as rewards or costs in romantic relationships. For instance, posting dyadic pictures online has been consistently associated with relationship quality over time and across social media platforms (Lee et al., 2019; Sharbi & Hopkins, 2021). Alternatively, other behaviors hinder relationship satisfaction, such as posting a relationship or romantic partner online too often (Bouffard et al., 2022; Seidman et al., 2019) or oversharing relationship information, such as romantic conflicts online (Dunn & Langlais, 2020). Essentially, social media behaviors can be good or bad for relationships depending on how they impact relationship satisfaction. The current study focuses on the rewards and costs of emerging adult relationships, given their developmental attention towards the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000), their high use of social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), and the integration of social media into their relationship experiences (Dunn & Langlais, 2020; Fox et al., 2013; Seidman et al., 2019). By identifying and describing appropriate (i.e., rewarding) and inappropriate (i.e., costly) social media behaviors, we can provide recommendations for how to best promote emerging adults' relationship satisfaction in the context of social media.

Social media offers an opportunity for couples to engage in several relationship-promoting behaviors that serve as rewards in romantic relationships. Past research has found that posting one's significant other, or engaging in online relationship visibility behaviors, is positively related to higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Bouchard et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2021). Making a relationship known to others via social media allows a significant other to feel valued and

appreciated within the relationship. Dyadic displays on social media may provide relationship-protecting effects. For instance, using dyadic displays on social media is an effective way to communicate involvement in a high-quality relationship and portray romantic unreceptiveness to other potential partners (Kreuger & Forest, 2020). Posting a relationship on social media can prevent individuals from being romantically pursued by others and minimize threats of alternative partners (Seidman et al., 2019). Additionally, image-based social media use may decrease loneliness (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Image-based social media activity, such as sending videos and images to each other on Snapchat or creating TikToks together, may allow individuals to feel more connected with one another and increase feelings of closeness (Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021; van de Ven, 2022). Empirical evidence supports dyadic social media behaviors for promoting satisfaction in romantic relationships.

However, past research has indicated that there are social media behaviors associated with declines in relationship satisfaction and increased conflict. Increased Instagram selfie-posting predicted relationship conflict and negative relationship outcomes (Ridgway & Clayton, 2016). Focusing on personal displays on social media could distract from a romantic relationship. Another behavior associated with poor relationship outcomes is photo-manipulation on social media. The magnitude of individuals self-discrepancies as a result of photo manipulation on Instagram was positively correlated with Instagram infidelity and relationship dissolution (Stewart & Clayton, 2022). Photo manipulation may signify deeper insecurities within a relationship that could lead to conflict. For example, an individual who uses photo-manipulation on their body in a post may be looking outside their relationship for self-validation (Tiggeman et al., 2020).

Monitoring one's partner and spending more time on social media are also associated with relationship dissatisfaction. Monitoring may allow for a partner to develop feelings of jealousy and betrayal because they may come across content that can be perceived as threatening to the relationship (Satici et al., 2021; Seidman et al., 2019). Spending more time on social media may distract from quality interactions with a romantic partner. For example, research on 'phubbing' (snubbing someone in a social setting by focusing on one's phone; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018) shows spending more time on the phone than with one's romantic partner can distract from the relationship, thus hurting relationship quality (Roberts & David, 2016). McDaniel and Coyne (2016) found that individuals who reported that technological devices intruded or interrupted their interactions with their partner reported lowered relationship satisfaction, increased conflict over technology use, and depressive symptoms. Generally, empirical data illustrates that social media use can rewarding or costly to romantic relationships.

Current Study

Despite the reviewed information, there is still a clear gap in the literature regarding social media posting behaviors. Notably, these studies are predominantly empirical – although they advance our understanding of the influence of social media in romantic relationships, the *experiences* of these social media behaviors have not been explored. How does an individual perceive a dyadic post or describe their monitoring behaviors? Qualitative data is needed to better understand *what* appropriate and inappropriate social media behaviors are in the context of romantic relationships. It is also unclear what expectations emerging adults have regarding what is and is not appropriate social media behavior when in a romantic. To help address these deficits in the literature, this study will describe individuals' perspectives about what is and is not appropriate social media behavior when in a romantic relationship. We focus on emerging adults given their extensive social media use and their orientation towards forming and maintaining romantic

relationships (Arnett, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2024). Given the exploratory nature of this study, we proffer the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are acceptable social media behaviors for emerging adults when in a romantic relationship?

Research question 2: What are inappropriate social media behaviors for emerging adults when in a romantic relationship?

Research question 3: What relationship behaviors should emerging adults engage with on social media when in a romantic relationship?

Method

Research Design

The current study applies a qualitative methodology using a critical realist epistemological design (Finlay, 2021; Maxwell, 2012). This design assumes that knowledge of the world is influenced by our own personal biases and that "there is a real world that exists independently of our own beliefs and constructions" (Maxwell, 2012, p. vii). Critical realist epistemology allows participants to say what they mean using language that illustrates a "largely unidirectional relationship…between meaning and experience and language," which allows us to understand experiential meanings in a "straightforward way" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This design relies on triangulation, such as using multiple coders and data sources in order to increase accurate in reporting participant experiences (Madill et al., 2000; Stahl & King, 2020). This approach was selected over other qualitative designs, notably narrative inquiry, phenomenological design, and grounded theory. First, this study does not rely on participants' stories of their relationships, but rather focuses more on their descriptions of a particular phenomenon (i.e., social media behaviors in the context of romantic relationships), which would eliminate narrative inquiry as a possible design. This study also does not depend on the lived experiences of participants, which is a central aim of phenomenology. Rather, this study focuses on descriptions of social media behaviors in romantic relationships, which is different from lived experiences. This study also does not serve to critically address or create a new theory, which represents the aim of grounded theory. In comparison to other qualitative designs, the critical realist epistemological design was deemed as the best approach to capture participant perceptions about appropriate and inappropriate social media behavior in relationships.

Consistent with other studies using this design (e.g., Ross et al., 2023), semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted to collect qualitative data for this study. Semi-structured interviews provide opportunities to collect rich data, as interviewers can ask probing and follow-up questions to learn as much about the phenomena under investigation as possible (Creswell, 2007). To establish trustworthiness, triangulation was used by using more than one method to study the phenomenon (Stahl & King, 2020), including interviews and focus groups. We aimed to collect data from at least 30 participants in interviews, which is recommended by Dworkin (2012). To be fair to all individuals interested in participating, we interviewed all participants who agreed to do an interview, which not only ensured data saturation, but also increased trustworthiness and credibility in study findings. Additionally, it is recommended that at least two focus groups are conducted to address trustworthiness and achieve data saturation (Hennink et al., 2019). However, after conducting two focus groups, data saturation was not achieved. Therefore, two more focus groups were conducted, in which data saturation was achieved. Participants self-selected whether they wanted to do interviews over Zoom or to participate in in-person focus groups. The participants were recruited from a variety of lower-level undergraduate courses that

were open to all majors, while encompassing the primary characteristics of the study population of emerging adults (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Participants were of varying genders, racial backgrounds, and majors, but all represented emerging adults (ages 18-29), who had romantic relationship experience in which both individuals had a social media account at the time of the relationship.

Participants and Procedures

All procedures for this study were approved by the appropriate institutional review board and all participants provided their informed consent to participate. Participants were recruited through posts in volunteering courses in Human Development and Family Science in a large university in the Southeastern U.S. These courses were elective options in most majors at this institution. Using convenience sampling, interested instructors shared information about the study in the learning management software (i.e., Canvas) associated with their course. Interested participants were prompted to email the research team to indicate interest in completing a one-on-one interview via Zoom or participate in one of four focus groups. For those interested in an interview, participants were emailed a date and time to meet with an undergraduate research assistant based on their availability, were sent a Zoom link for their interview, and a copy of the informed consent. When participants logged into the Zoom for the interview, they were asked if they had any questions about the study based on the consent form, and then prompted to say, "I consent to participate in this study and agree to be recorded." The undergraduate research assistant would then start the recording, and had the participant repeat this statement so that consent was documented. Forty-one emerging adults participated in one-on-one interviews (83% female; 17% male; range of age: 18 to 27) Interviews took an average of 29.11 minutes to complete ($SD = 6.43$ minutes).

If participants were interested in participating in a focus group, they were sent a GroupMe link to sign up for one of four in-person focus groups. Once they signed up for a time, they were sent an email reminder the day before the focus group and a copy of the informed consent. All focus groups were held in the same location, which was a windowless conference room in an academic study hall in the center of campus. The focus groups met in person and were audio-recorded using Zoom (the camera was turned off during the recording to maintain anonymity). Before the recording began, if participants agreed to participate, they were told to say, "I consent to participate in this study and agree to be recorded." Then the recording began, and all participants restated their consent. Twenty emerging adults participated in focus groups (group size ranged from 3-7; 80% female; 20% male; range of age: 19-28). The average time of focus groups was 44.37 minutes ($SD = 4.89$ minutes).

In order to understand what participants perceived as appropriate or inappropriate social media behaviors in romantic relationships, participants were asked semi-structured questions regarding participants' experiences with social media behaviors in romantic relationships. Some example questions asked in the interviews included the following: "What is okay to post on social media when you're in a relationship?", "What is not okay to post on social media when you're in a relationship?", and "How frequently, if at all, should you post with or of your significant other on social media?" Some focus group questions included the following: "What is okay to post on social media when you're in a relationship?" and "What is not okay to post on social media when you're in a relationship?" All questions were based on feedback from three qualitative experts and the interview questions were finalized after conducting three field tests. After data collection, qualitative data was transcribed using *Transcribe* in order to prepare for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Consistent with critical realist epistemology, coding reliability thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data (Braun et al., 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach was selected because it provides strong, descriptive qualitative data that may not be readily achieved with other analytical techniques. The objective of coding reliability thematic analysis is to provide reliable and valid information from rich, qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2022). Through this approach, researchers frequently use domain summaries to serve as themes, using preexisting coding categories (Braun et al., 2018). First, four undergraduate research assistants who had completed an advanced research methods course and received additional training in qualitative research, conducted initial analysis of the data. The four undergraduate research assistants met with one of the principal investigators to discuss their positionalities and any potential biases related to phenomena under investigation. The undergraduate research assistants took personal notes and met weekly with one of the principal investigators regarding potential biases throughout the process of conducting analyses.

The first step of coding reliability thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data (Braun et al, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2022). All four undergraduate research assistants immersed themselves into the data, by reading and reading the transcripts, identifying statements and patterns from participants' experiences of social media behavior in romantic relationships. Each undergraduate research assistant took notes independently, and they met weekly to discuss similarities and preliminary coding categories. During the first few meetings, the undergraduate research assistants reported minor codes that, through discussion of similarities with other codes, led to the emergence of themes to answer the first research question. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe themes as "something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). This approach was repeated for each research question associated with this study.

Consistent with coding reliability thematic analysis, the research assistants with one of the principal investigators defined the themes and the coding rules for each theme. The research team then created a codebook that included a label, a definition, examples, and descriptions of exclusions and inclusions for each theme. The data was then coded using each of these themes. Having multiple coders is consistent with this analytic technique (Braun et al., 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022) and is a form of triangulation used to increase trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Stahl & King, 2020). All four of the undergraduate research assistants coded the data by sentence. Interrater reliability across the coders was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the product of total number of ratings by each rater times the number of rates, which was then multiple by 100 to get a percentage. As a result, inter-rater reliability was 82.4%, which is an appropriate percentage agreement in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Disagreements during thematic analysis were addressed during weekly meetings through discussions and consensus building to ensure participants' responses were presented accurately (Braun et al., 2018). As recommended by Creswell (2013), another principal investigator, who did not participate in the coding process, reviewed the coded data to ensure that participants' perspectives were accurately represented within the themes,

Results

The results for the research questions are presented in Table 1. The themes for the first two research questions represented individual and relationship specific behaviors. The themes for the

third research question represented recommended behaviors and unrecommended behaviors. We discuss the results by research question, theme, and then subtheme.

Table 1.
List of themes from qualitative analysis (N =41)

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
What are acceptable social media behaviors when in a romantic relationship?	Individual behaviors	
		Updates on life
		Selfies
		Posts with friends and/or family
		Posting revealing pictures
		No changes
	Relationship behaviors	
		Meaningful events
		Posts with and/or about romantic partner
		Socially approved posts
		Partner-approved posts
		Minor public displays of affection
What are inappropriate social media behaviors when in a romantic relationship?	Relationship behaviors	
		Posting relationship issues
		Private information about partner
		Intense public displays of affection
		Posting relationship too much
		Posting partner without permission
		Sharing intimate relationship information
	Individual behaviors	
		Posting provocative content
		No inappropriate pictures with opposite gender
		Pictures with an ex-partner or rival
		Posting inappropriate behavior
		Attention-seeking behavior
		Responding to thirst traps
What relationship behaviors should people engage with on social media when in a romantic relationship?	Do's	
		Seeking opinion for social media posts
		Post the relationship occasionally
		Post momentous occasions
		Maintaining pre-relationship social media behavior
		Engage in partner's post
		Remove some or all pictures of past relationships
		Make relationship known
	Don'ts	
		Don't post too frequently
		Don't overshare romantic relationship information
		Don't post public displays of affection

RQ 1: What are acceptable social media behaviors when in a romantic relationship?

Theme 1: Individual behaviors

This theme represents social media behaviors that do not involve one's significant other. The subthemes included *updates on life, selfies, posting with friends or family, posting revealing pictures*, and *not changing current social media behaviors*. When asked what appropriate social media behavior looked like while in a romantic relationship, a male participant said, "pictures with friends…pictures with family, pictures of accomplishments, sport pictures." Other participants had similar views on posting content about themselves. A female participant reported posting "pictures of going out when I look presentable or cute" while another said, "I love posting pictures of myself when I look good and feel good so I'm obviously going to keep posting those." Participants also reported posting updates of life to be acceptable. A male participant stated, "posing cool things like traveling are good" while a female participant stated, "I just post the moments that make me happy." Participants reported that a social media page is meant for them as an individual, that their viewers are there to see them not their partner, so they will continue to post about their life. Similarly, participants responded positively to posting pictures with friends and family. A female participant stated, "I think it's pretty normalized to post when you're going to events with friends" while another female said, "it's always ok to post with like your guy friends or I like I post with my brother all the time." In the context of romantic relationships, participants were likely to think that posting with friends and family, posting pictures of themselves, and posting life updates were acceptable while in a relationship.

Many participants indicated that *posting revealing pictures* was acceptable when you begin a relationship. One female participant disclosed that her boyfriend should have no say in what she decides to post of herself on social media: "He has no say in what I post on social media. I don't think they should have a say at all. If their significant other has such a problem with a scandalous picture, the relationship should be secure enough where that isn't an issue." Another participant agreed with this idea, stating that "no one should tell you what to do" when it comes to posting on social media. One participant believed that most revealing pictures were acceptable to post while in a relationship by saying, "I think anything is appropriate that isn't full on nudity." Another participant also thought revealing pictures were fine to post within reason: "Revealing pictures are fine as long as it's not super frequent or looks like you're putting yourself out there to meet another person."

Similarly, participants reposted *no changes were necessary to social media content* when in a relationship. Several participants noted the importance of maintaining individuality on social media while in a relationship. One participant said, "You should remain who you are on social media even when you're in a relationship." Another participant had similar thoughts sharing, "anybody in a relationship should be allowed to post whatever they want because it is their social media and their own life." One participant stressed the importance of communicating with one's partner if the posted content becomes an issue: "I don't feel like you should really change what you post at all, unless there's something that your partner goes out of their way to say that they prefer you not to post but I feel like that should be more of a discussion." Some participants stressed the importance of their partner feeling comfortable with their posts. One said, "I think you are your own person and I think you should be able to post what you want at the end of the day, as long as your partner is okay with it." Overall, participants provided consistent ideas about what is appropriate posting behavior on social media.

Theme 2: Relationship behaviors

This theme reflects social media behaviors that involve one's romantic partner. The subthemes identified for relationship behaviors included *meaningful events*, *posts with and/or about the romantic partner*, *socially approved posts*, *partner-approved posts*, and *minor public displays of affection*. *Meaningful events* and *posts with and/or about the romantic partner* were regarded as positive social media behaviors by participants. Participants reported posting meaningful moments such as anniversaries, birthdays, and vacations together to be positive ways to display relationships. A female participant reported, "I think it's ok to post fun things like anniversaries or happy birthdays, like any good events." Similarly, a male participant reported, "on big occasions I post on Instagram, like anniversaries, trips, vacations." Participants reported posting only the meaningful moments as opposed to posting everyday activities such as eating together or casual hangouts. By only posting a relationship once in a while, a female participant reported they felt couples were not "throwing their relationships down my throat" while a male participant reported "its cringy when couples post all the time." Many participants reported couples should only post once in a while. For instance, a male participant stated, "if you're posting every week that could get annoying" while another male reported, "it makes it seem like you care more about posting than the relationship itself." Participants reported positively to posts centered around special occasions and meaningful events.

Socially approved and *partner-approved* posts were two additional behaviors participants considered to be appropriate while in a relationship. Socially approved posts were often referred to as posts participants would not mind their current/future employers seeing. For example, a female reported, "I don't think about my relationship and what I can't post; I think about my future careers, grandparents, or parents seeing." These posts often consisted of posts with friends, family, or non-scandalous pictures of themselves. A female participant explained: "In regard to provocative stuff, I think I'm ok with them posting whatever their ok with their grandma seeing." Participants reported being ok with their partner posting with the opposite sex as long as they were not "all over each other" or as a female reported, "as long as it is in a friendly way." Participants reported asking for their partners approval on posts when it may be provocative, when posting with the opposite sex, or when seeking approval on posts of oneself. A male participant reported talking with his partner about what they were comfortable posting in regard to provocative content: "mutual understanding between both parties is very important; if they post something I'm not ok with, we have some form of discussion or we delete it." This participant also reported being ok with their partner posting bikini pictures. He stated, "for some people it's a way to show off their confidence." Another participant reported, "I wouldn't be posting scandalous pictures, like bikini is fine, but like I wouldn't be trying to put myself out there in a scandalous way." If the post is something that someone is comfortable posting and their partner is ok with the post, participants said that "nothing has to change." When discussing posting with the opposite sex, a female participant reported, "they can post with guy friends in like a group or like [with a girl] one-on-one for a birthday post; but sitting on their lap or anything, not so much." Another female participant stated, "posting with friends that your significant other knows is fine, but you shouldn't post people that you already have a problem within the relationship." Furthermore, participants reported seeking partners approval on posts of themselves when asking if they "look good." A male participants reported, "I definitely ask does this look good, but I have the final say in what I post" while a female participant reported, "I send him what I post to show him how cute it is but he doesn't have a say in what I post unless he thinks he looks bad in it." Participants reported positively to their significant other posting socially approved posts such as with friends, family, or non-provocative pictures of themselves.

Minor public displays of affection were also held in positive regard by several participants. Participants reported minor displays of affection such as hugging, kisses on the cheek, or short kisses on the lip to be acceptable. A female participant reported, "I draw the line with a small peck" and a male participant stated, "I rather see no PDA on there at least kissing and stuff; having your arm around them, that's fine." Other participants reported, "I think normal stuff like hugging or kissing on the cheek [is fine], but like making out and stuff is cringy." The theme of minor public displays of affection was common among many participants with one going as far as to explain "like intimate things like kissing should not be public; it's a very intimate thing that should be valued, but like a peck on the cheek is fine." In general, minor displays of affection such as small kisses and hugging is viewed positively whereas making out and more intimate displays are viewed as "cringy."

RQ2: What are inappropriate social media behaviors when in a romantic relationship?

Theme 1: Individual behaviors

The subthemes for individual behaviors for RQ2 included *posting provocative content*, *inappropriate pictures with opposite gender*, *pictures with an ex-partner or rival*, *posting inappropriate behavior*, *attention-seeking behavior*, and *responding to thirst traps*. Many participants discussed *posting provocative content* when in a relationship. A female participant described provocative content as "pictures like you're kinda like not wearing much clothing. Stuff like that." When asked about provocative content, one participant noted, "I would be mindful of what I show of my body; I feel like you should be a little more private if you are in a relationship out of respect for your partner." Another participant noted that communicating feelings about revealing pictures is important in a relationship: "I feel like it depends based on what you and your partner agree on. So, like maybe if you wouldn't want them to post revealing pictures maybe you shouldn't do it either." A male participant noted that provocative pictures can been seen as advertising oneself as single: "I feel like if you are in a relationship, you shouldn't post provocative pictures in the degree of advertising yourself, which can be verbal or body language." A female participant also disclosed that provocative pictures may make someone look single or available: "My opinion is that it shouldn't be done. It gives the idea that you're single and ready to mingle." One participant noted the importance in the context/environment when posting revealing photos by saying, "there's a difference between revealing and disrespectful; like if it's because it happens to be a revealing environment that's fine but if it's with the intent of getting sexual attention, that's different." Many participants agreed that posting provocative pictures with the intent of getting attention was inappropriate when in a romantic relationship.

Posting inappropriate pictures with opposite gender was also described negatively by participants. A female participant said, "some kinds of posts that make me uncomfortable would be like my partner posting with a bunch of girls. Like his arm around different types of girls." Another participant noted that photos with the opposite sex, when in a heterosexual relationship, can be perceived by others in a negative way: "If it is someone of the opposite sex, you do have to be careful…because it can come off wrong to anyone." A female participant stated, "when posting with the opposite sex and they are hanging all over each other and you can tell the vibes are not friendship, that's where I draw the line" while another female reported, "no kind of romantic posting or things that could make it seem to other people like he's cheating… or things that would risk our image as a couple." Essentially, participants viewed posting with the opposite sex in distinct contexts to be inappropriate when in a romantic relationship.

Pictures with an ex-partner or rival was something that participants did not want to see within their relationships. When asked if pictures from past relationships should be removed from one's social media page, one participant said, "I would say yes; I feel those ties need to be cut…because your social media is more like showing who you are at the present moment and not so much of like who your past was." This example was echoed by other participants in this study, reflecting the negative connotation associated with ex-partner online behavior. A female participant discussed posting rivals while in a romantic relationship saying, "you shouldn't post other people you were ever interested in romantically" while another said, "I would never post with someone we've previously had a problem with." These participants discussed not posting with the opposite sex when post or current romantic feelings were involved out of respect to their current partner.

Posting inappropriate behaviors, engaging in attention seeking, and *responding to thirst traps* were other behaviors that participants indicated they would not be okay with their partner engaging in. Many participants noted that posting partying or drugs/alcohol and other illegal content was not acceptable while in a romantic relationship. A female participant, when asked what she was comfortable with her partner posting stated, "I'm just worried about him posting things he shouldn't be doing like smoking and drinking with his friends" while another female stated, "I think I'm more concerned if my boyfriend was posting illegal stuff." Other participants discussed being uncomfortable with their partner posting attention seeking content or responding to other users' attention seeking content. One participant said, "if you're doing it as a thirst trap and looking for attention…I wouldn't be super comfortable." Another participant noted their distaste for attention seeking behaviors when asked what social media behaviors they thought were inappropriate in a relationship: "Calling attention, like when other people can interact with your story. For example, when people can use the sliding scale to rate your attractiveness." Another female participant noted, "anything looking for female attention would bother me" while another female stated, "you shouldn't post like those interactive like swipe up messages on your story cause those can be secretive." Finally, participants disclosed that they were not okay with their partner using social media to look for romantic alternatives. One said, "it's not okay to go outwardly look for cheating opportunities."

Theme 2: Relationship behaviors

The subthemes for relationship behaviors for RQ2 included *posting relationship issues*, *disrespectful information about partner*, *intense public displays of affection*, *posting the relationship too much*, *posting partner without permission*, and *sharing intimate relationship information*. *Posting relationship issues and private information about a partner* was as inappropriate for romantic relationships. Posting relationship issues was conceptualized as posting about disagreements within the relationship and posting about breakups. Participants reported that it is inappropriate to post "fights or low moments." A female participant stated, "not posting relationship problems, like arguing in a way that everyone else can see" while a male participant stated, "posting text messages; those things should be private between you and them." These participants reported not feeling comfortable when their partner made their relationship problems public by sharing intimate conversations or experiences on social media. Another participant reported that she thought it was inappropriate to publicize a breakup by saying, "I wouldn't post certain quotes or things you see online about being single or anything disrespectful." Participants reported that sharing private information about their partner was inappropriate; this information consisted of emotions and life stressors that were shared by their partner. A participant reported, "you shouldn't post if they're having a tough day or opened up to you about something. You

shouldn't post a screenshot of their text on your Snapchat story complaining." This female participant reported posting about private conversations to be inappropriate as their partner was sharing personal experiences, specifically seeking support from their significant other. Posting relationship issues and private information about a partner or relationship were deemed inappropriate relationship behaviors.

Intense public displays of affection were viewed as inappropriate online behaviors in a relationship. Participants viewed posting highly explicit content with partner, such as making out or anything further to be "cringy" or "gross." A female participant stated, "I feel like that's not meant to be seen by everyone, or I would never post something like that" while a male participant said, "I think that if it gets to a point where you are making out on social media, that's kinda gross."

Posting a relationship too much was deemed inappropriate social media behavior. Participants provided a wide range of what was considered 'too much' posting in a relationship. Some participants stated, "just not every day" while another stated, "once in a while is ok" and some thought "just once is fine." Most participants agreed that if an individual is active on social media and they have never posted their significant other, that would be not posting enough. When asked how often one should post their significant other, a female participant said, "I wouldn't post that frequently like it's your social media page; they are there for you and I understand your partner can be an extension of you, but you still want individuality." A male participant stated things such as "maybe just let people know once; it doesn't need to be posted consistently because I get annoyed with that." A common theme between most participants was too much posting of a significant other was inappropriate, becoming annoying to viewers.

Posting partner without their permission and *sharing intimate relationship information* were also subthemes of inappropriate behaviors. Posting a partner without their permission was described as posting a picture that your partner might not think they look attractive in or posting inappropriate pictures of them without their permission. These posting behaviors were deemed disrespectful. A female participant talked about posting pictures of her boyfriend that he may feel unattractive in, stating, "I feel like consent is a big thing, like I'm in a long-term relationship and I'll still be like hey are you ok if I post this?" Another female participant was broad in her response saying, "don't post your partner without their consent like if they don't want it posted…it just ruins the relationship." A female participant spoke more on posting inappropriate pictures of a partner without their consent; she stated, "don't post your partner without their consent especially when they are underdressed or when they don't want to be posted."

A common theme when posting pictures with or about a significant other was gaining their consent. Participants also reported it was inappropriate to post intimate relationship information on social media either directly or through subtle quotes. When asked what was not ok to post on social media while in a relationship, a male participant stated, "details of your relationship that shouldn't be online in the first place." Another male stated, "some things are meant to stay just in your relationship." These participants touched on not sharing private information with others through social media. A female reported it was inappropriate to share relationship information, even when done subtly through quotes. She said, "you shouldn't post relationship quotes and things like that cause then you're letting people into your relationship." She discussed posting things that might hint to relationship problems and that this information should be kept private.

RQ3: What relationship behaviors should people engage in on social media when in a romantic relationship?

Theme 1: Do's

Do's are relationship behaviors that individuals should engage in on social media while in a romantic relationship. These behaviors were reported to make the participant comfortable and more confident in their relationship. Subthemes included *seeking opinion for social media posts, posting the relationship occasionally, posting momentous occasions, engaging in partner's post,* and *making relationship know.* Participants responded positively from *seeking the opinion of their partner for social media posts*. A male participant reported, "like if it makes them uncomfortable, out of respect you should hear them out." Similarly, a female participant stated, "I like it when he runs it by me." When asked what you shouldn't post in a relationship, a female reported, "certain things you post might trigger your significant others' feelings so like maybe ask." Whether asking for an opinion before or after making a post, participants responded positively.

Making the relationship known and *posting the relationship occasionally* were perceived as beneficial behaviors. Participants reported keeping the relationship private but not secret by letting their viewers know about the relationship through occasional posts or subtle hints. One participant reported that he posts his relationship occasionally because "it would probably make them feel better." A female participant stated, "maybe like posting them twice a month like a little video or something just not too frequently" and another female said, "it definitely needs to be out there so people know it's official but not too much." Participants reported that posting a relationship occasionally benefitted the couple but also informed others about their relationship status. Making the relationship known was used to inform others about the relationship. A male participant stated, "I feel like you at least need to post them once or twice to like let people know" and a female participant stated, "like the whole private but not secret, like your whole page doesn't have to be them but at least one." Another female participant discussed more subtle ways to show they are in a relationship. She said, "just a subtle picture, or like an initial in the bio…it doesn't have to be an entire name, just letting people know." No matter the delivery method, participants responded positively to posts letting others know they were in a relationship.

Furthermore, *posting momentous occasion* and *engaging in partner's posts* were active behaviors participants reported they should engage in when in a romantic relationship. Participants reported momentous occasions to include anniversaries, vacations, or fun dates the couple had been on. When asked what they should post when in a relationship, a male participant reported, "achievements, or anniversaries, wonderful places you go together." Another male participant said, "on big occasions, post on Instagram." Participants reported engaging in their partners content whether they were featured in the post or not to be important in a relationship. A male participant stated, "it's just expected to just like and comment to claim your territory in that way." Another male participant stated, "there's no obligation but if I see it, I always like it; I don't always comment." When asked if they should engage in their significant others' posts, a female participant said, "I personally like getting comments from the person I'm talking to…it's like validation," while another female participant reported, "I always like and comment on my boyfriend's Instagram just to like show support… and it will show any other girls that he has a girlfriend if she's in his comments." Although participants had different intentions when engaging in significant others' posts, many reported it to be a positive behavior in relationships.

Also, participants reported they should *maintain pre-relationship social media behavior* despite entering a relationship. When asked what they should post after entering a romantic relationship, participants stated, "everything that you use to post is ok," "just posting what you

normally post," and "nothing I posted changed." These participants reported that what they post on social media was not influenced by their romantic relationship. A female participant went into detail saying, "if he doesn't like what I post then it's like, did he not like what I posted before, do we not have the same values." Participants reported not feeling the need to alter social media behavior when entering a relationship.

Removing some or all picture of past relationships was viewed positively when entering a new romantic relationship. Participants reported that the context of a picture with an ex determines if it needs to be taken down when entering a new relationship. A female participant reported, "I didn't want to remove my prom pictures because those are like my prom pictures, but like if it's you hugging or kissing, you should [take it down] because they just like send the wrong message." Another female participant reported, "if it's a vacation picture, that's fine to keep; but if it's like an anniversary or you guys kissing, that's weird." Other participants reported that they take down all pictures of their ex when in a new relationship stating, "it makes me more comfortable if they delete posts with their ex" and "if you keep [posts of your ex] up, it's just making a problem for you." Participants responded positively to deleting all or some pictures of their ex, depending on the context, when starting a new relationship. A female discussed the difference between deleting and archiving a post: "If you just archive the picture, that is so toxic; it just means that there is still potential for the person." This participant explained that if pictures are not deleted, they believed that their partner still has feelings for that person. Another female described archiving pictures as, "those are his memories, and I can't just tell him to delete them." Although participants had differing views on archiving versus deleting pictures, they agreed some if not all pictures with their ex needed to be removed from their page.

Theme 2: Don'ts

Don'ts are relationship behaviors that individuals should not engage in on social media while in a romantic relationship. These behaviors were reported to make participants uncomfortable or were detrimental to the relationship. Common subthemes included *don't post too frequently, don't overshare romantic relationship information,* and *don't post public displays of affection.* Participants reflected that posting a relationship too often is not good. A female participant reported, "if that's all you ever post or if you're posting like paragraphs about them, it gets kinda annoying." A female participant discussed keeping their social media individualized by not posting their partner often, stating, "I wouldn't post them frequently, like it's your social media page." Participants often stated once in a while or twice a month to be often enough, while others reported, "depends on how often you post before the relationship." Participants responded negatively to couples that post the relationship too frequently.

Oversharing romantic relationship information and *posting public displays of affection* were also described as behaviors that should be avoided while in a romantic relationship. Oversharing relationship information consisted of sharing personal information about a significant other or any problems within the relationship. A female participant reported, "I do not think that negative things in a relationship should necessarily be shared to the world because that's literally just drama." When asked the same question about what individuals should not share while in a relationship, a male reported, "any information about the person probably isn't a good thing to post, like text messages and things like that." Other participants shared these views. A female said, "like you know those relationship quotes hinting at fights." Participants also responded negatively to extreme public displays of affection. A female participant stated, "I feel like maybe a kiss is ok, I mean like I wouldn't, but I don't judge, but like past that, no." Another female reported, "the kissing and hugging is ok… if it's a simple pop kiss or innocent kiss, it's ok to post; but when it gets too

touchy, like hands going everywhere, that's too much." A male participant simply stated, "anything explicit should be kept off the internet" while a female participant reported that context matters. She said, "if it's New Years and you're posing under the fireworks and its romantic, that's not cringy."

Discussion

Empirical studies have found that social media contributes to the growth and quality of romantic relationships, yet there is an absence of information about *what* behaviors contribute to relationship quality and *how* these behaviors relate to relationship satisfaction. To address this deficit and to identify ways to support emerging adult romantic relationships, the goal of this study was to understand emerging adults' perceptions regarding what are and are not appropriate social media behaviors in romantic relationships. Emerging adults were the central focus of this study given their high social media use and focus on forming romantic relationships. Qualitative results showed that it is acceptable to post life updates, post with friends and family, post meaningful relationship events, and post partner-approved content. Inappropriate behaviors included posting relationship issues, posting relationships too often, posting provocative pictures, and posting with an ex-partner or rival. Participants suggested that when in a relationship, it is expected that individuals post momentous moments in their relationship on social media, maintain pre-relationship social media behaviors, and make the relationship known. It was also suggested that individuals not post too frequently, overshare relationship information, or post public displays of affection. These results reflect the main ideas of social exchange theory (Thibault & Kelley, 1959), where certain behaviors in romantic relationships could serve as rewards and others could be perceived as costs.

The first research question evaluated what was acceptable to post on social media while in a romantic relationship. Acceptable behaviors posited by participants included posting updates on life, posting selfies, posting with friends and/or family, posting revealing pictures, and not making changes to social media use when entering a relationship. Most participants reported having no problems with their partner posting life updates or posting with friends and/or family. Many participants stated that their partner's social media is still theirs, and they should post what is going on in their lives, particularly if they have done so in the past. In other words, people didn't want to control what their partner posted, particularly if the intent was simply to share meaningful information with one's social network. Maintaining social media behavior when entering a relationship could serve as a reward promoting relationship satisfaction. An abrupt change in social media behavior because of a new relationship, could become a source of dissatisfaction.

Some stated they were comfortable with their partner posting revealing pictures, which predominantly meant bathing suit pictures based on participant responses. This behavior could be seen as rewarding, as posting revealing pictures is a form of showing confidence (McLean et al., 2019). Acceptable relationship behaviors also included posting meaningful events, posting with and/or about romantic partners, socially approved posts, partner-approved posts, and minor displays of affection. Many participants reported that posting meaningful relationship events such as anniversaries or vacations was an acceptable way to make a relationship known without posting too often, which is a common behavior that people engage in, particularly if the relationship is high quality (Chinchanachokchai & Pusaksrikit, 2021). Showing off the relationship and sharing meaningful events is a way to increase intimacy in a relationship, which is a rewarding behavior given that it predicts relationship satisfaction. Additionally, many participants said posting minor displays of public affection such as handholding, hugging, or small kisses were appropriate. Minor displays of affection can serve as rewards to show off commitment and investment in the

relationship (Bouchard et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2021), but posting too intense displays of affection was seen as inappropriate, a potential cost to the relationship, which is consistent with previous studies (Seidman et al., 2019).

The second research question examined what behaviors are inappropriate on social media when in a romantic relationship. Some individuals were focused on their partner's behaviors on social media, regardless of relationship expectations in the online context. Some participants were uncomfortable when their partner posted revealing content that they perceived as a way of getting attention from others, which is costly behavior, as it draws attention from alternative partners. Many participants also reported being uncomfortable with their partner posting content with the opposite sex in an 'overly' friendly way, which could also reflect threats to relationship, another costly behavior. Participants also shared that they were unhappy when responding to others' thirst traps online, which also signals an increased attention to alternative partners that could threaten satisfaction within a relationship.

Participants also commented on inappropriate relationship behaviors on social media, such as posting relationship issues and private information about their partner. Sharing intimate details of the relationship may serve as a way to conjure up support, manipulate the conflict, make the partner feel bad, or garner attention. All of these motivations are likely to make people dissatisfied since they serve to promote one's ego rather than resolve the conflict. Many participants claimed posting relationship problems gave their followers the idea they may become single soon, which illustrates a lack of commitment to the relationship, another behavior that represents a cost emblematic of social exchange theory.

The third research question prompted participants to give suggestions about what to do and what not to do on social media when in a romantic relationship. First, it was recommended that individuals let others know they are in a relationship, such as showing a few dyadic pictures like posting a picture holding hands in public with someone without showing faces (what was colloquially termed, "private, but not secret" in this study). Some participants encouraged individuals in relationships to post their relationship status online, such as including a tagline of a romantic partner on one's Instagram page. Displaying the relationship online reveals that one is invested in the relationship, which is linked to increased relationship satisfaction (Hetsroni & Guldin, 2017). Some suggested that individuals consult the opinion of their partner on what they post. Getting a participant's approval on a post could reflect trust in a relationship that could serve as a reward. In other cases, participants said that they should post what they want regardless of what their partner thinks. These individuals were against the idea of partner input as they viewed this behavior as overstepping their role in a relationship, which is damaging to relationships as it shows issues in trust (Marin, 2017), reflecting a costly behavior. Generally, participants recommended that people post their relationship to their social media accounts but not overshare information with their social media network.

Conclusions and Limitations

Although this study expands the literature on social media behaviors and romantic relationships by addressing a gap in the literature, it is not without its limitations. First, participants in this study were predominantly female participants. Second, participants were all recruited from the same university in the Southeastern U.S., which means the results lack generalizability. Additionally, this study asked participants to talk about social media broadly since emerging adults do not all use the same SNS, and many use multiple applications (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). It is likely that some suggestions are specific to certain social media platforms, like Instagram, which was brought up multiple times in this study. Future studies should examine what social media

behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate depending on the social media platform. Results were also prone to social desirability and retrospective biases. If a participant had a negative romantic relationship experience, these feelings could have biased participant responses. Future studies should engage more representative samples of participants in current romantic relationships to help address these limitations. Additionally, future investigations should examine gender differences regarding these perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Because this study also included emerging adults, future studies should consider exploring other populations, which could lead to making comparisons based on age or generation.

The goal of this study was to learn about participants' perceptions regarding what is and is not appropriate social media behavior in romantic relationships. Results revealed that some behaviors can serve as rewards in relationships, helping promote satisfaction, whereas other behaviors, such as posting too much or posting inappropriate information on social media could be costly behaviors, potentially hindering relationship satisfaction. This study also provided identified recommendations by participants about what to do and not to do online when in a romantic relationship. Although this study had some limitations, it provided a nuanced examination into the intersection of social media behaviors and relationship quality.

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