THE ROMANTIC INFLUENCER: A REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

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Abstract

Social media is a significant part of the modern human experience. It infiltrates every part of life. There is great value in understanding the nature of social media in every sphere of its influence, especially the romantic relationship. The general public has long been concerned over the suspected harmful impact of social media in relationships. This literature review synthesizes studies over the past decade on the relationship between social media usage and romantic relationship satisfaction. While many problematic outcomes have been found for romantic partners due to social media, other studies have shown positive effects. Most of these social media behaviors foster unintentional consequences, whether positive or negative. A few examples of negative social media influences include increased partner suspicion, conflict, and pressure. Ultimately, these produce lower levels of satisfaction. Benefits from social media's inclusion in the life of a couple, such as easier communication and common interest building, were found to positively impact satisfaction. Additionally, this review interacts with unique studies on the impact of intentional social media abuses, including addiction and unfaithfulness. The overarching theme is the circular causality of romantic satisfaction. There are many interacting factors involved in social media's use and the way it is perceived among partners. These must be studied in greater depth to truly capture social media's pull in romantic relationships. In review of the literature, specific considerations toward sampling and measurement are noted. Opportunities for further research include employing new research methods and focusing on the impact of social media on the family system. These findings have the potential to improve the quality of therapy among professionals who work with couples. Public agencies can use such information to improve education and implement preventative measures in the social media arena. In this review, social media is referred to as SM for the sake of brevity.

Keywords

Social Media, Social Media Usage, Romantic Relationship, Satisfaction

Introduction

Social media (SM) has its foothold in nearly every aspect of human interaction, including the most intimate human partnership: romantic relationships. It has weaved its way in the routine of every individual and societal system. While the public has voiced concerns about potential imbalances between its negative and positive consequences, researchers have sought to gather applicable data on the connection between SM and romantic relationship satisfaction.

The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize the data that has been collected on the relationship between SM usage and romantic relationship satisfaction. SM usage refers to all aspects of engagement on these online platforms, including amount of time spent and type of activity engaged in on those platforms. Romantic relationship satisfaction refers to the contentment, fulfillment, and quality levels expressed by romantic partners. Of the study populations described in this review, some researchers chose to focus on married couples, while others broadened their scope to those who had been/were currently in a romantic relationship of any commitment level. This review follows the data from least consequential to greatest impact of SM use on romantic relationship satisfaction.

Literature Review

Inconsequential Uses of SM

Studies taken in the United States seem to show that certain SM factors are not very influential in romantic relationships. In a study by Delle et al. (2023) on the impact of various SM platforms, Facebook was the only one that did not appear to have a correlation with strain or contentment levels in romantic relationships. Norton and Baptist's (2014) research with couples found no significant relationship between the establishment of SM protective parameters and marital fulfillment. There are some uses of SM which do not appear to be impactful to romantic partners, according to these studies.

Internationally-based research projects also indicate circumstances in which SM lacks positive or negative consequences. Collecting survey responses from Nigerian college students, Arikewuyo et al. (2022) found no link between the proportion of involvement on SM and unfaithful relationship habits. Canadian participants in Paulin et al.'s (2021) study on SM retaliation methods reported very few retaliation experiences between partners on these platforms. Taken together, these international project findings imply that some SM behaviors are infrequent and others have limited effect.

Comparison of Male and Female SM Consumers

Studies have found that men and women in romantic relationships use SM in similar ways. In a combined survey and interview study conducted by Vaterlaus et al. (2020), spouses, regardless of gender, reported using SM to equal degrees. Saeed Abbasi (2018) recruited survey participants across the United States, revealing no significant discrepancy between males and females in their rates of partner distance and Facebook dependency. When noting feelings brought on by SM activity, Frampton and Fox (2018) discovered that men and women held similar reasons for experiencing discomfort when viewing SM posts of their significant other with former partners. Together these findings show some parallel means by which men and women employ and experience SM platforms.

Research into the influence of SM on romantic relationships has indicated some differences in how men and women use SM. A large survey across the United States was completed through the work of Dew and Tulane (2015), where risk of marital dissatisfaction seemed to be greater when men used SM than when women did. In a study on Ghanaian couples, Konlan et al. (2023) found that women engaged in SM interactions more frequently than their husbands. These studies have found differences in SM use among genders in the United States and abroad.

Benefits of SM

Inherent Benefits

The inherent benefits of SM for romantic couples have been reiterated in many research projects. Participants in a study by Vaterlaus et al. (2019) shared that they saw great usefulness in SM as a mode of keeping up their relationship and conveying daily information with one's partner. SM's importance may also appear in times of family separation, as portrayed in Rea et al.'s (2015) qualitative interviews with military wives, who described SM as their preferred way to talk with their husbands during deployment. As these findings convey, people have found many helpful uses of SM in their relationships.

Adaptive Benefits

Many individuals have chosen to adapt SM to fit their diverse needs, reporting this in various research studies on the subject. An unconventional use of SM, as explained by Frampton and Fox's (2018) interviewees, is viewing their partner's SM history to ease insecurity by validating the stories they were told of past relationships. In another finding, Norton and Baptist (2014) saw that greater openness and sharing of partners about their SM interactions was linked to increased trust. As noted by Vaterlaus et al. (2020), many participants mentioned that they used SM to find things to do even when together face-to-face. These findings are indicative of the multitude of ways romantic partners modify SM and use it as a tool to fit their lifestyles.

Unintentional Negative Impacts of SM

Many studies have shown that SM can have unintentional, yet negative effects on romantic partners. Various research with married couples carried reports of technology's ability to pull them from focusing on each other's presence (Vaterlaus & Tulane, 2019; Vaterlaus et al., 2020). Delle et al. (2023) found that the resulting pressure of SM produces lower levels of satisfaction in relationships. Likewise, in Rea et al.'s (2015) study with military wives, some participants recognized SM's influence on miscommunication and fear-inducing news flashes. These results show the negative impact of SM diversion, pressure, miscommunication, and news reports.

Research directed internationally has also resulted in some findings on the link between SM and negative outcomes in romantic relationships. Of all participants surveyed and interviewed by Konlan et al. (2023), the majority believed SM affected their relationships negatively. Results in a study from Arikewuyo et al. (2022)

showed that SM involvement may lead to conflict even when the activities themselves are neutral. These different studies indicate that there may be a connection between SM behaviors and negative impact on couples.

SM Addiction

Specific research has been done into the effect of SM addiction on romantic couples. The findings of a study by Satici et al. (2021) in Turkey show that higher levels of SM use may lead to higher levels of depression and anxiety, thus leading to less romantic satisfaction. According to a project with participants from the United States by Bouffard et al. (2022), increased Instagram usage showed a pattern of conflict and lower fulfillment levels of partners. From Saeed Abbasi's (2018) analysis, a negative correlation was seen between Facebook dependency and couple distancing. Taken together, these studies show an unhealthy connection between SM addiction and romantic satisfaction.

Sharing on SM

Investigation into sharing personal information on SM (either sharing between partners or sharing about their relationship to the public) has revealed varying results as to their effect on romantic relationships. A survey of Cypriot college students, by Jarrar et al. (2019), found that those who more frequently shared about pranking their partner on SM reported lower levels of contentment in their relationships. In Lee et al. 's (2019) dyadic study at the University of Kansas, the results indicated that individuals who chose to share with their partners about themselves through online platforms, as well as the listening partners, were less likely to experience fulfillment in their relationship. Conversely, in a survey study conducted by Hughes et al. (2021), the majority of participants did not base their decision to stay in/leave a relationship on how much they had posted about their relationship as a couple. These findings show that there are differing results in the relationship between sharing on SM and the quality of romantic couples.

SM and Partner Unfaithfulness

Suspicion Formation
Research has indicated multiple harmful effects connected to partner suspicions brought on through SM use. Most of the participants in a study by Konlan et al. (2023) expressed fear over their spouse's ability to communicate with unknown acquaintances and manifested this concern by checking up on their partner's SM activities. The results of Frampton and Fox's (2018) research showed that SM not only caused insecurity in partners related to unfaithfulness concerns, but also the discomfort of viewing their partner's past relationships. Analyzing data from Turkish college students, Kovan (2023) found that the more romantic envy a partner feels, the less contentment they will experience in their relationship. These findings show possible negative implications of the fear created by SM in their relationships.

SM Tracking
Studies have shown different experiences among individuals who track their partner's SM out of unfaithfulness-related concerns. Some subjects in Frampton and Fox's (2018) study shared that viewing SM histories seemed helpful to them for validating stories told by their partner, while others admitted to feeling worse after looking through their partner's histories. Pauline et al. 's (2021) research into negative retaliation on SM discovered that this behavior plays out uniquely in couples through extreme tracking and interference in their partner's SM activities. The findings of these studies show that individuals may feel differently about the method and experience of tracking their partner's SM interactions.

Blatant Unfaithfulness on SM
Various research studies have found that the ease of engaging in extramarital/partner behaviors on SM is unsettling to couples and results in negative relational outcomes. In a survey of spouses, Vaterlaus and Tulane (2019) reported that participants mentioned unfaithful interactions channeled through SM impose significant concern and risk in their relationships. A nationwide study in the United States, by McDaniel et al. (2017), indicated how engaging in SM usage that includes extra-marital conduct specifically, leads to lower rates of marital satisfaction. These research projects indicate possible harmful effects from using SM to establish a romantic relationship outside of one's commitment to their current partner.

SM Boundaries

Some studies have intentionally sought to better understand the use and outcomes of SM boundaries, whether faithfulness-related or simply quality-building, in romantic relationships. When interviewed in a study by Vaterlaus et al. (2020), every couple noted their inclusion of various boundaries to mediate technological use (including SM), such as keeping away from sexual content and establishing meal times as technology-free zones. In Frampton and Fox's (2018) study, some participants admitted to using SM for spying on their partner's previous relationships,

while others intentionally limited their searches on SM to prevent uncomfortable feelings. Together these findings show the choice to use SM boundaries in some couples' lives.

SM and Circular Causality

Studies show that there may be other outside factors which feed into the relationship between SM and relationship satisfaction. After analyzing their findings and discovering a very small correlation between SM and satisfaction, Dew and Tulane (2015) speculated that there were many causal variables which impact SM use and marital quality. Many participants in a study by Konlan et al. (2023) reported falling into SM usage as an escape from their marital troubles, creating further difficulties. These research projects express that there may be other factors which contribute and/or aggravate the relationship between SM and romantic couples' satisfaction.

Additional research has found certain attachment styles and confidence levels contributing to SM behaviors and romantic relationship quality. In McDaniel et al. 's (2017) study, personal patterns of relational clinginess correlated with higher levels of unfaithfulness than patterns of relational isolation. Self-confidence was shown to have a positive relationship with marital fulfillment, according to research by Hughes et al. (2021). Likewise, Jarrar et al. (2019) discovered that participants who described feeling more confident were less likely to circulate pranks on SM, which would have later created dissatisfaction as explained previously. These studies show a possible circular causality of confidence, SM engagement, and romantic relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion

In review of these various studies on the relationship between SM usage and romantic relationship satisfaction, some considerations and areas for further investigation should be noted. The majority of research into this phenomenon has been conducted through self-reporting assessment in the form of surveys. They may, therefore, contain recall and/or desirability biases. Most of the reviewed studies sampled heterosexual couples (exceptions: Delle et al., 2023; Frampton & Fox, 2018; Hughes et al., 2021). As Konlan et al. (2023) suggested, important research could be done into how marital couples' SM use influences the family system as a whole.

The overarching theme of this literature review is the reality of circular causality in the relationship between SM usage and romantic relationship satisfaction. Many studies purposefully looked into mediating factors in this relationship (Kovan, 2023; Satici et al., 2021). As the studies have shown, the effects of SM usage varied with each sample, though some correlations could be observed.

SM is increasingly becoming a fixture of the modern world. Its use is growing in the lives of individuals across the globe, further infiltrating those individuals' private world of romantic relationships. With its growing presence in couples' lives, it is very important to understand the ways in which it influences interpersonal, and specifically romantic, satisfaction. Research into these connections will help individuals, societies, and organizations limit SM's harmful impacts and garner its greatest benefits.

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