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Attachment Anxiety and Relationship Satisfaction in the Digital Era: The Contribution of Social Media Jealousy and Electronic Partner Surveillance

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) are woven into modern romantic relationships, particularly among young adults. Grounded in the attachment framework, this study expands on previous literature by using a longitudinal design to examine social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance as mediators between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction. Over a 2-year span, 322 young adults aged 18–29 years and in a romantic relationship completed questionnaires about their social media use, attachment orientation, and relationship satisfaction. Results showed that social media jealousy was associated with more electronic partner surveillance, and lower relationship satisfaction 1 year later. Additionally, although longitudinal support for the association between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction was found, it was no longer significant when accounting for the more proximal influence of social media-related jealousy and electronic partner surveillance. These findings emphasize the interplay between social media use and young couples' relationship functioning over time.

1 | Introduction

In recent decades, social media has played a significant role in romantic relationships, particularly among young adults who often view these platforms as key interfaces for expressing affection toward their partners (Arikewuyo et al. 2020; Vogels and Anderson 2020). Although Facebook's popularity has declined in recent years, 68% of young adults aged 18–29 are active users, whereas Instagram leads in popularity with 76% of young adults using this platform (Pew Research Center 2024). Notably, a few studies substantiate that positive relationship-focused behaviors (Coundouris et al. 2021), such as displaying relationship status, posting dyadic pictures, and public or private interactions with a partner online, are associated with

greater relationship quality and satisfaction (Cole et al. 2018; Coundouris et al. 2021; Papp et al. 2012; Saslow et al. 2013).

However, the use of these platforms can also elicit jealousy, electronic partner surveillance (Coundouris et al. 2021), and even conflicts with serious offline consequences, such as intimate partner violence (Daspe et al. 2018; Emond et al. 2023). In addition, evidence suggests that these pitfalls related to social media use are linked to lower relationship quality and satisfaction (Arikewuyo et al. 2020; Elphinstone and Noller 2011; Evasiuk 2016; Aníbal González-Rivera et al. 2022). Given the pervasiveness of social media use in emerging adults' relationships and its potential to influence relationship outcomes both positively and negatively, examining how these digital platforms

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contribute to relationship satisfaction may help promote healthier romantic bonds during this crucial developmental period.

One way of gaining a thorough understanding of the contribution of social media to relationship well-being is by grounding research on digital technologies in established theoretical models of relationship functioning (High et al. 2024). Accordingly, the current study draws on attachment theory and extends prior work linking: (1) attachment anxiety (i.e., fear of abandonment) with social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance (Marshall et al. 2013; Muise et al. 2014), and (2) attachment anxiety with lower relationship satisfaction (Candel and Turliuc 2019). Our goal was therefore to examine, among young adults in a romantic relationship, whether social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance act as mechanisms of the negative association between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction, over time.

1.1 | Adult Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction

Within adult romantic bonds, attachment is framed along two specific dimensions: anxiety over abandonment and avoidance of intimacy (Hazan and Shaver 1987). Individuals with higher attachment anxiety tend to hold a negative view of themselves, and although they often seek close intimate relationships, they fear abandonment (Bartholomew 1990). Conversely, individuals with high attachment avoidance often hold a negative view of others, experience a lack of trust toward their partner, and a discomfort with proximity in intimate relationships (Bartholomew 1990). Findings from meta-analyses consistently show that insecurely attached adults (i.e., higher anxiety and/or higher avoidance) and their partners report lower relationship satisfaction (Candel and Turliuc 2019; Hadden et al. 2014; Li and Chan 2012). Although an important body of studies has focused on identifying mechanisms of the link between attachment insecurities and relationship satisfaction (e.g., conflict, emotional regulation; Brassard et al. 2009; Mónico et al. 2022), none, to our knowledge, have focused on mechanisms related to digital technology. However, and especially among young adults who use social media platforms pervasively, it remains unclear whether the links between attachment and relationship satisfaction can be partially explained by factors related to the ever-growing digital world. Thus, it is increasingly important to consider contemporary elements, such as social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance, given the links found with both attachment and relationship satisfaction (Bevan 2018; Evasiuk 2016; Marshall et al. 2013).

1.1.1 | Attachment, Social Media Jealousy, and Electronic Partner Surveillance

Whereas jealousy is traditionally examined in an offline setting, a landmark study by Muise and colleagues (2009) highlighted social media jealousy as a unique emotional response arising from ambiguous information posted online and involving a romantic partner (e.g., a photo with an ex-partner or a photo with a potential romantic rival). The accessibility and permanence of partner-related content on social media make these platforms potent triggers for jealousy in young couples

(Bevan 2013; Cohen et al. 2014; Vogels and Anderson 2020). Moreover, many cross-sectional studies have demonstrated that individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety, but not those with high attachment avoidance, tend to exhibit greater jealousy regarding their partner's Facebook content (Drouin et al. 2014; Marshall et al. 2013; Muise et al. 2014). This is consistent with attachment theory, which suggests that individuals high in attachment anxiety are especially sensitive to relational threats, tend to experience more feelings of jealousy given their hypervigilance to signs of rejection, and fear that their partner may abandon them for a romantic alternative (Collins 1996; Guerrero 1998; Marshall et al. 2013; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016).

As a common response to social media jealousy (Frampton and Fox 2018; Muise et al. 2009; Utz and Beukeboom 2011), electronic surveillance is characterized by various covert monitoring strategies employed through digital technologies (Tokunaga 2011). These strategies are used to acquire information about the offline and/or online activities of the romantic partner and include monitoring the partner's profile, friends list, posts, or photos (Tokunaga 2016). Given that social media allows access to personal information about others, these digital platforms are a fertile ground for anonymous interpersonal surveillance, a normalized behavior online (Alhabash and Ma 2017; Chen and Peng 2023; Fulton and Kibby 2017; Utz and Beukeboom 2011). As with social media jealousy, the attachment framework has been used to understand partner surveillance behaviors (Stöven and Herzberg 2020). Whereas individuals with high attachment anxiety are more inclined to engage in electronic surveillance of their partner's Facebook profile, those with high attachment avoidance engage less in this behavior (Fox et al. 2013; Marshall et al. 2013). These findings align with attachment theory, as individuals with greater attachment anxiety often worry about their partner's availability (Hazan and Shaver 1987; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016) and commonly respond to real or perceived relational threats (e.g., infidelity) by monitoring their partner's behavior (Guerrero and Afifi 1999). In the digital world, social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance are closely linked (Frampton and Fox 2018; Muise et al. 2009; Utz and Beukeboom 2011). Results from two daily diary studies suggest that on days when an individual felt more jealousy due to online content from their significant others, surveillance of their partner's Facebook profile was more frequent (Marshall et al. 2013; Muise et al. 2014). Indeed, responses to jealous feelings among individuals with high attachment anxiety include investigative behaviors and mate guarding strategies, such as spying or monitoring (Barbaro et al. 2016, 2021; Brassard et al. 2020; Buss et al. 2008; Guerrero 1998; Pfeiffer and Wong 1989; White 1981). As a result, individuals with high attachment anxiety may be at greater risk of becoming caught in cycles of social media jealousy and electronic surveillance within their romantic relationships.

1.2 | Social Media Jealousy and Electronic Surveillance as Contemporary Mechanisms

Despite some mixed findings (Coundouris et al. 2021; Stewart et al. 2014), jealousy and surveillance—online or offline—have

both been linked to lower relationship satisfaction (Bevan 2018; Dainton and Berkoski 2013; Dandurand and Lafontaine 2014; Elphinston and Noller 2011; Evasiuk 2016; Goodboy et al. 2010; Aníbal González-Rivera et al. 2022; Tokunaga 2016). Indeed, being confronted with perceived threats to the relationship (e.g., seeing a partner's Instagram story with an attractive stranger) and engaging in intrusive behaviors online (e.g., monitoring a partner's online interactions with others) can ultimately decrease relationship satisfaction by fostering distrust or relationship uncertainty (Marshall et al. 2013; Rus and Tiemensma 2017).

As such, and given evidence for the links between attachment anxiety, social media jealousy, and electronic surveillance, the latter two online phenomena may act as contemporary mechanisms contributing to the negative link between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction. Individuals with high attachment anxiety are especially sensitive to perceived threats in romantic relationships, often responding with hyperactivating strategies, such as clinginess, anger, and intrusive behaviors (Mikulincer and Shaver 2007). In the digital world, social media can amplify insecurities that anxiously attached individuals are already prone to experience (e.g., fear of losing their partner to someone else) through the exposition to jealousy-inducing content. In turn, engaging in electronic partner surveillance can be a strategy aimed at managing these insecurities. However, these attempts to gain reassurance may overall have the opposite effect. Instead of reducing fears, these behaviors could reinforce insecurities, increase conflicts, and lessen relationship satisfaction within young adults' romantic relationships (Aníbal González-Rivera et al. 2022). Therefore, the contributions of social media jealousy and electronic surveillance as proximal factors through which high attachment anxiety is linked to lower relationship satisfaction deserve attention and need to be examined longitudinally to determine their potential long-term effect on young adults' romantic bonds.

1.3 | Current Study

The current study, anchored in an adult attachment framework, seeks to examine the longitudinal associations from attachment anxiety to relationship satisfaction, through social media jealousy and electronic surveillance. Given the documented negative association from attachment avoidance to social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance, these constructs are unlikely to contribute to the negative association between avoidance and relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the current study specifically focuses on the attachment anxiety dimension. Using data collected at three time points (T1–T3) over 2 years, the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Attachment anxiety at T1 will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction at T3.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Attachment anxiety at T1 will be positively associated with social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance at T2.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Social media jealousy at T2 will be positively associated with electronic partner surveillance at T2.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance at T2 will both be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction at T3.*

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance at T2 will mediate the negative association between attachment anxiety at T1 and relationship satisfaction at T3.*

2 | Methods

2.1 | Participants and Procedure

Data for the present study were obtained from a larger 3-year longitudinal project examining the contribution of digital technology use on young adults' romantic relationships. Participants were recruited between January 2019 and December 2021, through advertisement websites (e.g., Kijiji), social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), and mailing lists. After giving their informed consent, participants were directed to the online survey. At T1, a set of self-reported questionnaires was completed by participants through Qualtrics, a survey platform. One year later, participants were asked to complete the same questionnaires through an email invitation (T2). The same procedure was followed a year later (T3). To maximize retention rates, reminders were sent at T2 and T3 through email after 3, 7, and 14 days to participants who had not yet completed the questionnaires. Reminders were also made through phone calls when needed. After completion of the questionnaires for both T1 and T2, participants received a compensation of CAN\$10. After completion of the questionnaires at T3, a compensation of CAN\$15 was given to participants. This study project was approved by the Ethics Boards of Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and Université de Montréal.

At T1, 1384 participants were deemed eligible, and the sample included individuals who were single or in a relationship. After giving their informed consent, participants were directed to the online survey. Among those who met the eligibility criteria, 383 were later excluded for the following reasons: (1) they failed two out of three attention-testing questions at T1 ($n = 19$) or (2) failed to complete the questionnaires at T1 and, as a result, were not solicited at the subsequent time points ($n = 364$). Thus, the final sample for the larger longitudinal study included 1001 participants at T1, 934 participants at T2, and 893 participants at T3, for a retention rate of 89% throughout the study.

To be included in the current study, participants had to: (1) be involved in an exclusive romantic relationship, (2) be with the same partner at all three time points, and (3) be between the ages of 18 and 29 at T1. First, because the larger study also included romantic dyads (both partners participated), one partner was randomly removed to avoid nonindependence in the data ($n = 153$). Then, a total of 526 participants were removed based on the following reasons: (1) they were under 18 years of age at T1 ($n = 57$), (2) they were not in an exclusive romantic relationship ($n = 294$), and (3) they were in a relationship with a different partner than at the previous time points ($n = 175$). The final sample for this study included 322 participants who met the inclusion criteria. A summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of the sample at T1.

Variables	N = 322	
	M	SD
Age	23.52	2.74
Relationship length (in months)	36.26	29.88
	%	n
Highest degree completed		
High school	5.9	19
Vocational	6.5	21
Preuniversity	40.4	130
Undergraduate	35.1	113
Graduate	12.1	39
Relationship status		
Dating	42.1	135
Cohabiting or married	57.9	186
Sex		
Women	65.2	210
Men	34.8	112
Sexual attraction		
Other sex only	55.3	178
Same sex only	2.8	9
Other sex mainly	33.9	109
Same sex mainly	1.9	6
Both sexes	3.1	10
A person, regardless of sex/gender	3.1	10

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Attachment Anxiety

Attachment anxiety at T1 was assessed by a French version of the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR; Brennan et al. 1998) validated by Lafontaine and colleagues (2016). This 12-item questionnaire assesses both dimensions of insecure romantic attachment (i.e., avoidance and anxiety). Only the 6-item attachment anxiety subscale was used in the current study. Items were answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*, assessing the extent to which participants endorsed statements such as “I’m afraid that my partner isn’t as attached to me as I am to them.” Participants were invited to consider how they felt generally in their romantic relationships. Total scores were computed by averaging the items, and higher scores indicated greater attachment anxiety. Internal consistency in the validation studies ranged from acceptable to good ($\alpha = 0.78\text{--}0.87$; Lafontaine et al. 2016), as in the current sample ($\alpha = 0.87$).

2.2.2 | Social Media Jealousy

Jealousy regarding the romantic partner’s social media activity at T1 and T2 was assessed by a short, adapted, and translated

into French version of the 20-item Facebook Jealousy Scale (Muisse et al. 2009). The questionnaire was adapted to refer to all social media platforms and not strictly to Facebook. The 16 items of the adapted scale were answered on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) *very unlikely* to (7) *very likely*, assessing the extent to which participants endorsed statements such as “I feel jealous when my partner follows a stranger of the same sex as me” in the past 6 months. Global scores were computed from the sum of the items. Higher scores indicated greater social media jealousy. Internal consistency in the validation study was excellent ($\alpha = 0.96$; Muise et al. 2009), as in the current sample ($\alpha = 0.94$).

2.2.3 | Electronic Surveillance

Electronic partner surveillance at T1 and T2 was assessed with a 6-item subscale of the Romantic Relationship-Oriented Facebook Activities (Seidman et al. 2019). The questionnaire was adapted to refer to all social media platforms and translated into French. Using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) *never* to (7) *always*, participants indicated, with respect to the past 6 months, the frequency at which they engaged in behaviors such as “Monitor partner’s profile.” A total score was obtained by averaging the items. Higher scores indicated greater engagement in electronic partner surveillance. Internal consistency in the validation study was good ($\alpha = 0.89$; Seidman et al. 2019), as in the current sample ($\alpha = 0.83$).

2.2.4 | Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was assessed from T1 to T3 using a brief, 4-item French version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin et al. 2005). The first three items were assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (0) *always* to (5) *never*, and the last item was assessed using a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from (0) *extremely unhappy* to (6) *perfectly happy*. Participants were instructed to assess the extent to which statements described their relationship over the past 6 months. Example item includes “In general, can you say that things are going well between you and your partner?” Global scores were computed from a sum of the items, and higher scores indicated greater relationship satisfaction. Internal consistency in the validation study was good ($\alpha = 0.84$; Sabourin et al. 2005), as in the current sample ($\alpha = 0.80$).

2.2.5 | Control Variables

Sex (men, women, intersex), age (in years), duration of the relationship (in months), relationship status (0 = *dating* and 1 = *cohabitating/or married*), and frequency of social media use (average daily hours per day spent on social media) at T1 were considered as control variables since previous studies have demonstrated their associations with social media use (Hertlein and van Dyck 2020; Muise et al. 2014; Rus and Tiemensma 2017). Since no participants endorsed intersex, sex was recoded into a binary variable where 0 = *men* and 1 = *women*.

2.3 | Statistical Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29 to verify the distribution of the study variables and to perform descriptive analyses. All variables were normally distributed. To empirically verify the optimal sequence for the mediators at T2, preliminary analyses also included a cross-lagged panel model testing the direction of the associations between social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance. To do so, data for these constructs at T1 and T2 were used. The main hypotheses were tested through path analysis in Mplus version 8.6 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2017).

To examine H1, the direct association (before the inclusion of mediators) between attachment anxiety at T1 and relationship satisfaction at T3 was tested while also controlling for satisfaction at previous time points of (T1–T2). To examine H2–H5, we tested an integrative model adding social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance at T2. Furthermore, to achieve a rigorous test of the mediation model, measures of each predicted construct from the previous time points were included (Jose 2016). As such, for the mediators, we included a path from social media jealousy at T1 to social media jealousy at T2. Likewise, a path was included from surveillance at T1 to surveillance at T2. Finally, paths from relationship satisfaction at T1 to relationship satisfaction at T2 and from relationship satisfaction at T2 to relationship satisfaction at T3 were added. Controlling for previous time points increases confidence that our model is assessing changes in outcome variables beyond baseline levels, thus strengthening the study's design.

To obtain parameter estimates while handling missing data, the full information maximum likelihood method of estimation was used in Mplus. Indirect effects were tested by requesting bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals from bootstrapped estimation with 10,000 samples. Model fit was estimated using the following goodness-of-fit threshold criterion (Hu and Bentler 1999; Shi et al. 2019): (1) a nonsignificant chi-square test (p -value above 0.05), (2) a root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) and a standardized root mean square (SRMR) with a value less than 0.08, and (3) a comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker Lewis index (TLI) both above 0.90.

3 | Results

3.1 | Descriptive Analyses

Correlations between the study variables as well as information regarding means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Significant correlations were found between the variables of interest. Attachment anxiety at T1 was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction at T1 and T3, but not at T2, and positively associated with social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance both at T1 and T2. Social media jealousy and surveillance positively correlated with each other at T1 and T2. Finally, social media jealousy at T1 and T2 were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction at all three time points, whereas surveillance was only related, at T1, to relationship satisfaction at T3. Regarding potential covariables, neither sex, age, duration of the relationship, relationship

status, nor frequency of social media use was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction at T3. Therefore, they were not included in the final model.

Results from an independent samples t -test indicated significant differences between the participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria for the current study ($n = 679$) and those who were included ($n = 322$). Compared to the final sample, excluded participants showed greater attachment anxiety at T1 ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.39$ and $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.56$, respectively), $t(717.667) = 4.17$, $p < 0.001$, greater jealousy at T1¹ ($M = 37.15$, $SD = 20.99$ and $M = 41.41$, $SD = 23.68$, respectively), $t(673.547) = 2.48$, $p = 0.014$, greater electronic partner surveillance at T2 ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.86$ and $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.04$, respectively), $t(630.088) = 3.19$, $p = 0.002$, and lower relationship satisfaction at T1 ($M = 17.09$, $SD = 2.82$ and $M = 16.54$, $SD = 3.10$, respectively), $t(673.997) = -2.42$, $p = 0.016$.

Results of the preliminary crossed-lagged analyses supported the hypothesized sequence of mediators, with greater social media jealousy at T1 significantly predicting greater electronic partner surveillance 1 year later at T2 ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = 0.043$) and electronic partner surveillance at T1 being unrelated to social media jealousy at T2 ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = 0.665$).

3.2 | Longitudinal Associations Between Attachment Anxiety, Social Media Jealousy, Electronic Surveillance, and Relationship Satisfaction

As predicted (H1), results indicated that before the inclusion of the mediators, greater attachment anxiety at T1 was significantly associated with lower relationship satisfaction 2 years later at T3 ($\beta = -0.09$, $p = 0.035$), over and above relationship satisfaction at previous time points (T1 and T2). This saturated model explained 43% of the variance of relationship satisfaction at T3.

The tested mediation model (see Figure 1) showed an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(10) = 18.26$, $p = 0.0507$; RMSEA = 0.05, 90% CI [0.00, 0.09]; SRMR = 0.03; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.97. Results showed that, contrary to our hypotheses, attachment anxiety at T1 was not significantly associated with social media jealousy and electronic surveillance at T2 (H2). Moreover, the direct link between greater attachment anxiety at T1 and lower relationship satisfaction 2 years later at T3 was no longer significant after the inclusion of the mediators. Consistent with our hypotheses, however, greater jealousy at T2 was significantly associated with both greater electronic partner surveillance at T2 (H3) and lower relationship satisfaction 1 year later at T3 (H4). Surveillance at T2 was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction at T3 (H4). Finally, results showed that the indirect effect from attachment anxiety at T1 to relationship satisfaction at T3, through social media jealousy and electronic surveillance both at T2, was not significant (H5), $b = 0.001$, 95% CI $[-0.001, 0.008]$, $p = 0.466$. The model explained 50% of the variance of social media jealousy at T2, 37% of the variance of electronic surveillance at T2, and 42% of the variance of relationship satisfaction at T3. No other indirect effects were significant.

TABLE 2 | Correlation coefficients, means, and standard deviations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Attachment anxiety (T1)	—												
2. Social media jealousy (T1)	0.44***	—											
3. Social media jealousy (T2)	0.36***	0.71***	—										
4. Electronic partner surveillance (T1)	0.30***	0.44***	0.34***	—									
5. Electronic partner surveillance (T2)	0.23***	0.33***	0.39***	0.57***	—								
6. Relationship satisfaction (T1)	−0.18**	−0.19**	−0.16**	−0.10	−0.06	—							
7. Relationship satisfaction (T2)	−0.10	−0.18**	−0.17**	−0.08	−0.08	0.62***	—						
8. Relationship satisfaction (T3)	−0.17**	−0.26***	−0.26***	−0.12*	−0.08	0.51***	0.63***	—					
9. Sex (T1)	−0.20***	−0.09	−0.12*	−0.11*	−0.05	0.02	−0.09	−0.03	—				
10. Age (T1)	−0.20***	−0.17**	−0.17**	−0.17**	−0.08	−0.01	−0.00	0.02	0.00	—			
11. Relationship length (T1)	−0.12*	−0.06	−0.05	−0.14*	−0.15**	−0.13*	−0.05	−0.03	−0.05	0.29***	—		
12. Relationship status (T1)	−0.11*	0.12*	−0.09	−0.09	−0.04	0.01	0.07	0.11	−0.03	0.34***	0.36***	—	
13. Frequency of social media use (T1)	0.15**	0.12*	0.07	0.11*	0.02	−0.02	−0.01	0.04	−0.00	−0.15**	−0.04	−0.12*	—
<i>M</i>	3.54	37.15	32.48	2.45	2.14	17.09	16.85	16.54	—	23.52	36.16	—	2.34
<i>SD</i>	1.39	20.99	19.87	0.96	0.86	2.82	2.80	3.01	—	2.74	29.88	—	1.62

Note: Sex was coded as 0 = women and 1 = men. Relationship status was coded as 0 = dating and 1 = cohabiting/or married.
p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

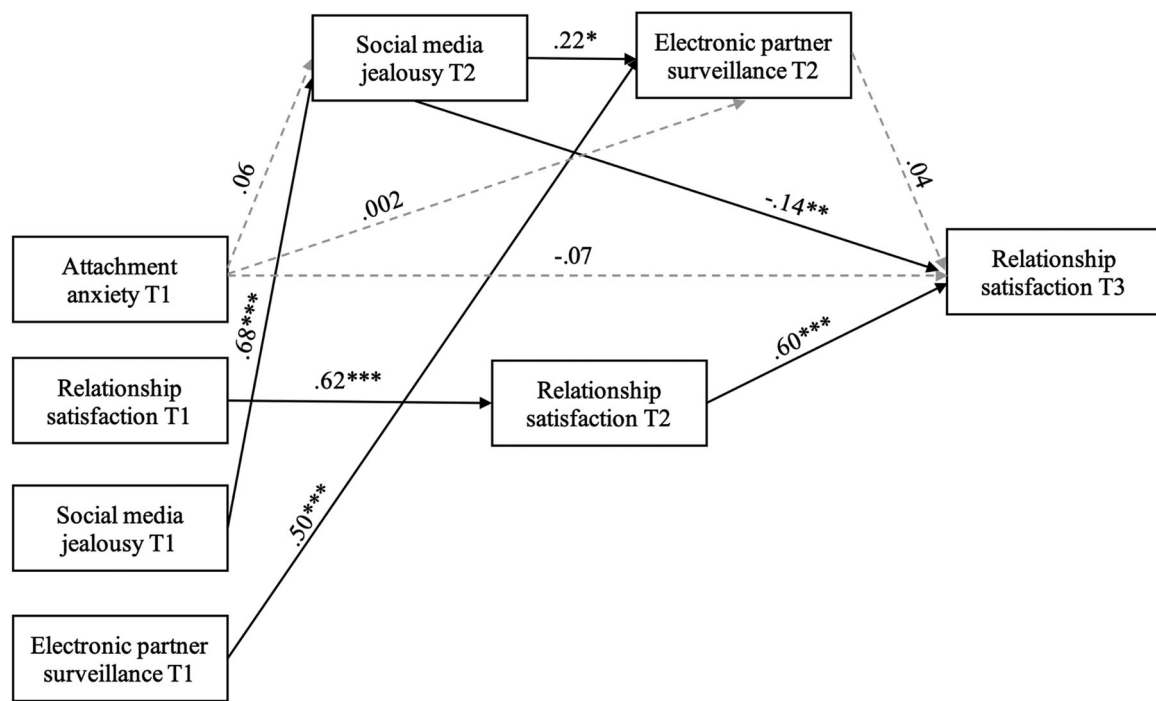


FIGURE 1 | Longitudinal mediation model of the role of social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance (T2) in the association between attachment anxiety (T1) and relationship satisfaction (T3). Note: $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$. Standardized coefficients are used. Nonsignificant associations are illustrated with dotted light gray arrows. Covariances are omitted to simplify the figure.

4 | Discussion

The overarching goal of this study was to examine social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance as contemporary mediators of the negative association between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction. In a sample of young adults in a romantic relationship, these associations were examined across three time points that spanned over 2 years. Although the proposed mediation model was not supported, other hypotheses were partially supported. First, we found a direct association between attachment anxiety at T1 and relationship satisfaction at T3 (H1). This association, however, was no longer significant once social media jealousy and electronic partner surveillance were factored in. Second, social media jealousy at T2 was positively associated with electronic partner surveillance at T2 (H3), and finally, in partial support of our hypothesis (H4), social media jealousy at T2, but not electronic partner surveillance, was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction at T3.

4.1 | Attachment Anxiety and Relationship Satisfaction

Our findings are in line with past knowledge regarding the negative association between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction (Candel and Turliuc 2019 for a review). They further replicate this association longitudinally and provide additional empirical support for the attachment framework among young adults' romantic relationships. For individuals with higher attachment anxiety, when doubts about their partner's love arise, they are inclined to become overly clingy, intrusive, or angry to maintain their significant others' closeness and affection (Mikulincer and Shaver 2003, 2007, 2016). These

proximity-seeking strategies are nevertheless linked to their own and their partner's lower relationship satisfaction (Candel and Turliuc 2019). Although our findings provide support for the link between attachment anxiety and relationship satisfaction, this association was no longer significant when accounting for social media jealousy and electronic surveillance, suggesting that more proximal factors, such as jealousy related to a partner's social media content, may be more salient. This highlights the particular importance of modern factors linked to social media use, and more specifically, social media jealousy, when examining relationship satisfaction in young adulthood.

4.2 | Social Media Use and Relationship Satisfaction

Overall, our findings offer evidence supporting that social media use plays a meaningful role in shaping young adults' romantic relationships. Indeed, results demonstrate that social media jealousy at a given time was negatively associated with young adults' relationship satisfaction 1 year later, over and above the well-established contribution of attachment anxiety. These results are consistent with evidence suggesting that jealousy, online or off-line, can be detrimental to relationship satisfaction (Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra 2007; Elphinston et al. 2013; Evasiuk 2016; Aníbal González-Rivera et al. 2022). The current study builds on previous research by demonstrating that social media use can predict changes in young couples' relationship functioning over a 1-year period—a significant contribution beyond prior cross-sectional studies. Moreover, these findings suggest a spillover effect from the digital world into real-life relationship dynamics, highlighting the long-term impact of certain social media phenomena (i.e., digital jealousy).

Although our study calls attention to the important contribution of social media jealousy, it also suggests that electronic partner surveillance is unrelated, at least longitudinally, to relationship satisfaction. This contrasts with previous studies, which showed that online surveillance and similar constructs, such as intrusive behaviors and spying, predicted lower relationship satisfaction (Dainton and Gross 2008; Goodboy and Bolkan 2011; Lavy et al. 2009; Tokunaga 2016). However, results are consistent with other evidence indicating no significant link between electronic partner surveillance and relationship satisfaction (Coundouris et al. 2021; Stewart et al. 2014). Although social media jealousy and surveillance are closely related constructs, as supported by the current finding of a positive association between the two, they nevertheless appear to have a differential link to relationship satisfaction. As an emotional response, social media jealousy might be more directly linked to an individual's level of satisfaction, and more susceptible to elicit conflicts that reduce the quality of the relationship (Aníbal González-Rivera et al. 2022).

Electronic partner surveillance, as a behavior often driven by growing feelings of jealousy (Muise et al. 2009; Tokunaga 2016), might not lead to the same long-term negative association with relationship satisfaction. Indeed, the covert nature of online surveillance, the normalization of this behavior, and the anonymity afforded by online platforms may limit the negative spillover on the dynamic of the relationship and thus, not significantly contribute to satisfaction. Alternatively, the association between electronic surveillance behaviors and relationship satisfaction may be confined to a more limited time frame (e.g., a few days or weeks) and may not extend to 1 year later. Daily diary studies capturing closer time frames may better elucidate the relationship between electronic partner surveillance and relationship satisfaction over time. Despite our findings suggesting that surveillance does not affect relationship satisfaction, this behavior might nevertheless signal some dysfunction within the relationship. In fact, studies have shown that infidelity (past or current), mistrust, and perceived lack of investment or commitment from a partner exacerbate electronic partner surveillance (Hertlein and van Dyck 2020; Tokunaga 2016). Thus, it is important to further delineate the potential impacts of electronic partner surveillance on romantic relationships, beyond relationship satisfaction per se.

4.3 | Long-Term Associations Between Attachment Anxiety and Social Media Use

Our findings did not substantiate the anxiety-jealousy or the anxiety-surveillance associations reported in previous cross-sectional work (Marshall et al. 2013; Muise et al. 2014). As such, the proposed mediation model was not supported. Although preliminary correlational analyses indicated significant associations between these variables, our conservative test suggests that they do not hold longitudinally. From a methodological point of view, longitudinal mediations that include mediators and dependent variables at previous time points are stringent tests that often yield fewer significant associations (Jose 2016).

Beyond these methodological considerations, it is nevertheless likely that attachment anxiety relates to social media jealousy

and electronic partner surveillance only cross-sectionally. This could explain why attachment anxiety was not predictive of social media jealousy 1 year later and that the latter did not act as a significant mediator in our model. Specifically, jealousy, either online or offline, is triggered by a specific situation. Therefore, proximal and situational factors (e.g., exposure to ambiguous content) might be more strongly associated with social media jealousy than a distal trait such as attachment anxiety. Further, other variables may have more predictive power on social media jealousy over time. For instance, one study found that the link between high attachment anxiety and increased Facebook jealousy was partly explained by lower trust toward the partner (Marshall et al. 2013). In addition, imagined scenarios about an absence of dyadic pictures of the couple on social media and privacy settings, which restrict access to the partner's social media account, were linked to greater social media jealousy (Muscanell et al. 2013). Therefore, mistrust toward a partner and lack of open commitment (e.g., a partner not fully displaying the relationship online) could be stronger predictors of social media jealousy than one's attachment anxiety. Similarly, online partner surveillance can be prompted by circumstantial suspicion, a perceived threat to the relationship, or current uncertainty within the relationship (Dainton et al. 2017; Stewart et al. 2014; Tokunaga 2016). Factors such as mistrust or fears regarding online infidelity—signaling insecurity and relationship threats—may better predict later electronic partner surveillance (Marshall et al. 2013; Muscanell et al. 2013) than attachment anxiety.

4.4 | Limitations and Future Studies

This study has some limitations, and interpretation of its results should be made accordingly. First, our study was conducted among a sample of young adults involved in a romantic relationship, with no data from their romantic partners. Because dyadic constructs such as relationship satisfaction are shaped by the joint contribution of both partners (Cook and Kenny 2005), a dyadic examination of how an individual's level of social media jealousy, for example, is related to their partner's relationship satisfaction is needed. Future studies should seek to examine this study's research questions using a dyadic design with a large sample of couples to test such a complex model. Second, although our study assessed all platforms indiscriminately, it could be interesting to examine the effects of social media use on young couples' romantic relationships by comparing the different platforms. This is especially true as a study demonstrated that Snapchat elicited more jealousy than Facebook (Utz et al. 2015), and as affordances and use motivations vary across platforms (Alhabash and Ma 2017). Third, data from this study relied on self-report measures, which are susceptible to bias such as social desirability. Also, in line with the self-report nature of this study, the longitudinal design and the time frame of certain questionnaires, which prompted participants to consider their experience in the last 6 months, may also be subject to recall bias. Fourth, and despite the longitudinal design of the study, the causal impact of social media use on relationship satisfaction cannot be inferred. In this regard, future studies should employ experimental designs to gain precise knowledge of how social media use can predict relationship satisfaction. Finally, considering the sample of young adults

from the general population, results cannot be generalized to other developmental periods (e.g., teenagers) or populations (e.g., distressed, treatment-seeking couples).

4.5 | Clinical Implications

Young adults have voiced a need for relationship support (Solomon et al. 2021). Given this need, and to foster healthier romantic relationships, clinicians are well-positioned to help young couples mitigate some deleterious impacts of social media on their relationship satisfaction. Initial intake with new couples could systematically explore social media use within the context of the relationship, as well as tensions that may arise because of phenomena related to or exacerbated by digital platforms. Questions assessing social media use (e.g., frequency of use, interactions with former partners, surveillance behaviors), insecurities elicited by partner's social media content (e.g., jealousy, fears of infidelity), and conflicts due to partner's online activity should be carefully explored. When social media jealousy is a significant issue, clinicians should be aware of its potential implications on relationship satisfaction, facilitate open communication about insecurities triggered by a partner's social media activity, and support partners in offering appropriate reassurances when necessary. When addressing electronic surveillance behaviors, clinicians can guide couples in establishing healthy boundaries and mutually agreed-upon rules around social media use, as well as help build greater trust between partners (Hertlein and Ancheta 2014).

Moreover, therapists can help couples delineate what constitutes inappropriate interactions with former romantic partners (e.g., friending an ex-partner or liking a picture of an ex-partner), as these behaviors are significant triggers for online jealousy and heightened fears of infidelity (Clayton 2014; Cravens and Whiting 2014; Muscanell et al. 2013). Still, research shows that many couples rely on implicit rules about technology use and often struggle to discuss issues related to social media (Pickens and Whiting 2020), thus creating relationship tension (Hertlein 2012; Pickens and Whiting 2020). Clinicians can guide couples in setting explicit rules and expectations for social media use, particularly because consensus about digital etiquette lessens risks of technology-related challenges within the relationship (Pickens and Whiting 2020). Further, interventions promoting greater trust within the relationship are important, as distrust toward a romantic partner is linked to greater feelings of social media jealousy (Marshall et al. 2013). Effective interventions to enhance trust within a relationship, be it online or offline, include transparency, open communication, explicit rules regarding appropriate behaviors within the relationship, and quality time with the romantic partner through shared activities (Giacobbi and Lalot 2025; Norton and Baptist 2014). Finally, for individuals with greater attachment anxiety, attachment-focused interventions should explore insecurities around inadequacy of self and fears around loss of a romantic partner to another person on social media. Emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT) is a particularly helpful model given that EFT interventions target deep-seated insecurities by helping individuals with greater attachment anxiety build more secure emotional connection with their romantic partners (Dalgleish et al. 2015). Overall, clinicians

could benefit from developing competencies in interventions related to new media, as these skills are linked to a stronger therapeutic alliance (Owens et al. 2024; Pagnotta et al. 2018). Additionally, these technology-informed interventions are increasingly relevant given the rise in consultations motivated by the negative impact of social media use on romantic bonds (Owens et al. 2024).

5 | Conclusion

With social media platforms being profoundly enmeshed within young couples' lives, our study points to the importance of assessing the long-term links between social media use and relationship functioning. Moreover, the current findings underscore a need to promote critical awareness among youth regarding the potential drawbacks linked to social media use, especially social media jealousy, as it can undermine satisfying romantic bonds. Insights from this study are especially meaningful as young adulthood is a formative period during which essential interpersonal skills for satisfying intimate relationships are acquired (Arnett 2024; Shulman and Connolly 2013). Findings also have clinical implications, which can further help clinicians assist younger couples.

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Endnotes

¹Note that participants from the excluded sample who were not in a relationship at the different time points did not complete questionnaires about social media jealousy, electronic partner surveillance, and relationship satisfaction.

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