Social Media’s Role in Romantic Partners’ Retroactive Jealousy: Social Comparison, Uncertainty, and Information Seeking

Jessica R. Frampton and Jesse Fox

Abstract
Social media often have a dark side in romantic relationships. Affordances such as persistence, association, and visibility can promote romantic jealousy and the salience of relationship threats, including ex-partners. Retroactive jealousy occurs when a person feels upset about their partner’s romantic history even though ex-partners are not actively interfering in the current relationship. Interviews (N=36) probed how participants felt social networking sites (SNSs) promoted and mitigated retroactive romantic jealousy. Furthermore, we examined the consequences of these experiences. Participants indicated that SNSs lead to retroactive jealousy via social comparison, digital remnants, and relational uncertainty. In addition, participants used SNSs to gather information or monitor their partners. These information-seeking activities allowed them to disparage a romantic partner’s exes; avoid direct, interactive information seeking about exes; and digitally fact-check information the partner disclosed. Some participants reframed information about the ex-relationship or actively avoided SNSs to reduce retroactive jealousy. Although SNSs may be used in an attempt to mitigate retroactive jealousy, our findings suggest this strategy may backfire in some cases.

Keywords
social media, social networking sites, romantic jealousy, social comparison, affordances, romantic relationships

In many cultures, individuals are romantically or sexually involved with several different partners throughout their lives. Emerging adulthood, which occurs post-adolescence in the late teens and twenties, is a period in which individuals typically experience multiple romantic or sexual relationships (Arnett, 2014). After a relationship ends, however, it still has the potential to influence new relationships. New partners may respond negatively to their significant others’ romantic or sexual histories (Lancaster, Dillow, Ball, Borchert, & Tyler, 2016; Robards & Lincoln, 2016). Indeed, people often avoid discussing past sexual experiences or romantic relationships with their partners to prevent jealousy (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2011; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

Romantic relationships are defined as mutual, ongoing interactions typically characterized by affection, closeness, and physical intimacy (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). In Western societies, romantic relationships are most commonly dyadic and, over time, defined by exclusivity (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008); in this way, third parties with romantic or sexual intentions may jeopardize a couple’s relationship.

To date, researchers have conceptualized romantic jealousy as thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in reaction to perceiving a third-party threat to one’s romantic relationship (see Bevan, 2013, for a review). This threat is usually conceptualized as an active threat to the relationship itself wherein a rival (perceived or actual) is currently attempting to pursue a romantic partner or vice versa (e.g., Dijkstra & Buunk, 2002; Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001). Although the conceptualizations of jealousy as a response to a perceived active threat to the relationship itself may represent the majority of cases, they often do not include cases of jealousy involving rivals or threats from the past.

White and Mullen (1989) suggested that jealousy may occur in the absence of an active, current threat to the relationship itself. They noted that a rival could “damage qualities of the primary relationship without necessarily threatening or actually ending the relationship” (White & Mullen, 1989, Ohio State University, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jessica R. Frampton, School of Communication, The Ohio State University, 154 N Oval Mall, 3047 Derby Hall, Columbus, OH 43210, USA.
Email: frampton.22@osu.edu

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p. 10) and that jealousy could occur when there is “a loss of a sense of uniqueness or specialness about the relationship” (White & Mullen, 1989, p. 10). Thus, an individual may feel jealous after discovering information about a romantic partner’s past if that information makes the current relationship seem less special in some way. Consistent with interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), such information about the partner’s past relationship may establish a comparison level with which to evaluate the current relationship.

Literary criticism and popular press writers coined the terms retroactive jealousy (e.g., Ben-Zeév, 2013; Scrimgeour, 2015; Stockill, 2013) and retrospective jealousy (e.g., Ben-Zeév, 2013; Guignery, 2006) to refer to jealousy directed at the past. Retroactive jealousy occurs when a partner feels jealous when thinking of a rival who actively interfered in the current relationship at some point in the past (Fox & Frampton, 2017). George might experience retrospective jealousy thinking about how Biff tried to steal his girlfriend Lorraine years ago in high school. Although Biff is no longer interfering in George and Lorraine’s relationship, at one time, Biff actively threatened the relationship. Retroactive jealousy, the focus of this study, occurs when a person feels troubled by their partner’s previous romantic or sexual relationships that existed before the current romantic relationship began. The partner’s exes or perceived rivals never actively interfered in the current relationship in the past, and they are not actively interfering in the relationship in the present (Fox & Frampton, 2017). For example, Jane listening to her spouse Kris talk about going to a dance with a high school girlfriend might evoke jealousy, even if Kris no longer has contact with the high school girlfriend and met Jane years after ending that relationship.

Although retroactive jealousy is commonly discussed in popular press articles and books, there are fewer empirical studies that examine jealousy about the past. One notable exception is Anderson et al.’s (2011) exploration of why romantic partners avoid discussing past sexual experiences and relationships. They found that participants avoided this topic because it triggered comparisons with past lovers, made them feel less close to their current partner, made the current relationship feel less special, and evoked jealousy. Subsequent research built on Anderson et al.’s study by examining communicative events that evoke retroactive jealousy. Findings indicate that this type of jealousy occurs in response to events such as people comparing their current romantic partners to ex-partners, people saying something positive about ex-relationships or ex-partners to their current partner, people sharing information about sexual experiences they had with past partners, and people viewing traces of their current partner’s past relationships such as old love letters (Frampton & Fox, 2018). Along the same lines, Robards and Lincoln (2016) described how one of their participants deleted old photos of herself with an ex-partner off of Facebook because her current boyfriend became upset when he viewed the images. Although they did not use the term retroactive jealousy in the explication of this experience, their description of how the boyfriend searched through old albums and became upset when he viewed an “archived version” (p. 8) of the participant reflects the presence of retrospective jealousy. Given the evidence that information about past relationships and ex-partners can evoke negative emotional responses in new partners, further research is needed that examines concepts such as retrospective jealousy.

Social media, particularly social networking sites (SNSs), present an interesting context in which to examine retroactive jealousy. SNSs are a subset of social media in which users maintain a personal profile and create visible connections or links to other users, enabling network members to identify each other (boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNSs that are currently popular include Twitter (a microblogging platform), Instagram (a platform wherein users post, view, and comment on photos and short videos), and Facebook (a site wherein users “friend” each other and either publicly or privately exchange messages and share content). These SNSs enable users to post updates and photos that are then archived as part of the user’s profile. As such, SNS profiles often contain considerable information about a person’s past, including their past relationships (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014). Although several studies have investigated the role of current or new romantic relationship threats on social media and feelings of romantic jealousy (e.g., Cohen, Bowman, & Borchert, 2014; Dainton & Stokes, 2015; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009, 2014), these studies have not parsed out how individuals experience jealousy about the past. Retroactive jealousy may be especially common now due to SNSs.

### Partner Monitoring and Information Seeking on SNSs

Perspectives such as the theory of motivated information management (TMIM; Afifi & Weiner, 2004) suggest that if individuals are not satisfied with how much they know about their partners, they are driven to resolve this discrepancy. SNSs provide a novel way for romantic partners to address uncertainty and gather information about each other (Fox & Anderegg, 2014; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walraev, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2016). Tokunaga (2011) identifies four characteristics of SNSs that promote interpersonal electronic surveillance (IES), or digital monitoring, of one’s romantic partner. First, SNSs are easily accessible to anyone with an Internet connection, and information is readily visible through these sites (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). It is easy to join an SNS, and due to the affordance of association (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), it only requires a simple click to access the profiles of your connections or your connections’ connections. Second, information on SNSs comprises various media, including textual messages, photographs, links, and audio or video clips. Given that pictures are considered more credible than words on SNS
profiles, this *multimodality* may add greater authenticity to posted information. Third, SNSs store historical profile information (i.e., they afford *persistence*; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Partners may inspect the target's past posts, photos, or interactions with others to gather more data. Fourth, data may be gathered more surreptitiously than via offline means. Most SNSs afford covert surveillance and do not provide feedback regarding which network members have accessed one's profile. Thus, the target may never know that they are under surveillance by the partner, or how far back the partner is digging into the target's history.

Given these affordances, it is unsurprising that several studies have shown that SNSs are commonly used to monitor romantic partners or ex-partners (e.g., Brody, LeFebvre, & Blackburn, 2016; Dainton & Stokes, 2015; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Fox & Warber, 2014; Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013; Robards & Lincoln, 2016; Tokunaga, 2011). Because SNSs allow both self-generated and other-generated information to be tied to one’s profile via posting, tagging, geo-location, and sharing, there are multiple sources of information conveniently amalgamated in one easily accessible location.

However, this vast array of information may yield negative outcomes. Research indicates that potential relationship threats often arise on SNSs (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Fox et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2013), and the presence of ex-partners may constitute one of those threats. In the wake of relationship termination, it is not uncommon for ex-partners to remain connected on SNSs, even if they are no longer actively communicating (Fox et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2013; Tokunaga, 2011). Even when ex-partners are not connected on SNSs, old photos of the couple and posts about the relationship may remain on their profiles. As the hyperpersonal model argues, individuals tend to selectively self-present information online, leading to an idealized and perhaps inaccurate portrayal (Walther, 2007); thus, both the ex-partner and the former relationship may look far more ideal (and thus more threatening) than they actually are. What remains understudied is how such digital relational histories may also promote uncertainty or jealousy in new romantic partners, especially when ex-partners are not actively interfering in the current relationship. Furthermore, many users acknowledge that they “creep” (i.e., inspect a person’s page without their knowledge to gain information) on their partner’s and others’ profiles to obtain information the partner might otherwise try to conceal (Fox et al., 2014; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Unfortunately, these actions may trigger negative responses, such as romantic jealousy (Dainton & Stokes, 2015).

**Romantic Jealousy and SNSs**

Because SNSs provide a lot of information about an individual’s social network and interactions, it is possible that they may stir up jealousy in relationships (see Bevan, 2013, for a review). Higher levels of Facebook use or involvement with Facebook predict greater romantic jealousy (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Muise et al., 2009) and relational dissatisfaction (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Other studies have shown that certain content on a partner’s SNS profile has the potential to trigger jealous or angry reactions, particularly in women (Cohen et al., 2014; McAndrew & Shah, 2013; Muise et al., 2014).

Given that SNSs can often serve as scrapbooks to one’s life and relationships, it seems viable that the information on a partner’s profile could evoke jealousy about events in the past. For example, as noted above, Robards and Lincoln (2016) described how one of their participant’s boyfriends felt uncomfortable when he looked at images of his partner’s past relationship on her Facebook profile. In addition, if a romantic partner is still linked to an ex on SNSs, this association makes it relatively easy to obtain information directly from the ex-partner’s social media content as well. This information may extend well into the past due to the affordance of persistence, as information posted to SNSs may stay visible for a long period of time (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

Previous scholarship has indicated that experiences of jealousy and uncertainty in relationships may be a vicious cycle (e.g., White & Mullen, 1989). Individuals may seek out their partner’s profile to alleviate concerns about the partner’s exes, but the content they find may trigger greater uncertainty or retroactive jealousy. As a result, the individual may then engage in deeper or ongoing surveillance, which may exacerbate feelings of uncertainty or jealousy (Marshall et al., 2013; Muise et al., 2009). Thus, SNSs may be a consistent trigger of retroactive jealousy, even when the partner is not in direct contact with the ex.

Consistent with a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the following research questions emerged from the data while exploring the role of social media in the experience of retroactive jealousy:

*RQ1.* Do social media trigger retroactive jealousy, and if so, how?

*RQ2.* Do people use social media to manage retroactive jealousy, and if so, how?

*RQ3.* If such management occurs, what are the consequences of managing retroactive jealousy via social media?

By exploring these research questions, this study helps fill the gap in literature concerning jealousy about the past. In particular, this study examines whether the affordances of SNSs facilitate both the experience and management of retroactive jealousy. If our findings indicate SNS affordances such as persistence and association enable SNS users to view content that evokes retroactive jealousy, this study would provide further evidence that a current, active threat to the relationship itself is not necessary to evoke jealousy. In
addition, this study will shed light on how people strategically use social media to cope with their jealousy.

**Method**

**Participants**

We recruited individuals with romantic relationship experience ($N=36$) from undergraduate classes at a large Midwestern university to participate in a study about “experiences in romantic relationships” for course credit. This study is part of a broader research program looking into the experience of retrospective jealousy. Participants (15 males, 21 females) ranged in age from 18 to 23 ($M=20.06$, $SD=1.29$) and identified as White/Caucasian ($n=24$), African American/Black ($n=2$), Asian/Asian American ($n=4$), Latino/Latina/Hispanic ($n=1$), or multiple races/ethnicities ($n=5$). In terms of sexual orientation, participants identified as heterosexual ($n=27$), gay ($n=1$), bisexual ($n=1$), or pan-romantic ($n=1$). Six participants opted not to disclose their sexual orientation. The majority of participants were currently in an exclusive romantic relationship ($n=24$); the remainder reported on previous romantic relationships.

**Procedure**

Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the sensitive nature of the topic, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. In particular, we were interested in looking at the phenomenon of retrospective jealousy as a process, whereby responses to situations and problems change over time with changes in contextual conditions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All interviews were conducted on the university campus in a private space. When participants arrived for the interview, they were greeted by the interviewer (the first author) and asked to read the consent form. After consenting to participate in the study, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Before beginning the interview, the interviewer asked if the participant was comfortable being video-recorded ($n=32$). Participants who were not comfortable being video-recorded were then given the option to be audio-recorded ($n=4$).

The interviewer used an interview guide while conversing with participants. We chose to use an interview guide, rather than an interview schedule, because guides are more flexible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The interviewer referred to the interview guide throughout the interview process but added and removed questions as necessary. Sample questions include “How does thinking about/talking about your partner’s exes make you feel?” and “Do you ever look at your partner’s exes’ profiles on social media? Why?” See Appendix 1 for a more detailed interview guide.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated that “the last thing that we as interview researchers want is for our subjects to tell us what they think we want to hear” (p. 202). Accordingly, to avoid response bias, the interviewer asked nondirective questions until participants brought up negative experiences. Moreover, given that jealousy is considered socially undesirable, it was necessary to make participants comfortable discussing their romantic relationships more broadly before broaching a more sensitive topic. While participants were talking, the interviewer engaged in active listening and identified probing questions that would help bring an issue to the surface.

**Analysis**

While interviews were still being conducted, both researchers reviewed the early interviews separately and engaged in conceptual memoing. Then, we discussed our thoughts on the emerging theory. These memos helped guide further interviews until we reached a point of theoretical saturation (Holton, 2007).

The analyzed data included recordings (ranging from 21 to 54 minutes in length, average length 39 minutes) and computer-based spreadsheets in which timestamps and transcriptions of relevant exchanges were recorded for each participant. For the first cycle of coding, we conducted open coding (Saldaña, 2013). During coding, a constant-comparative method was applied to identify, elaborate, and clarify categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These categories were considered both within each participant’s interview and across participants to identify consistencies and discrepancies. We then conducted a second cycle of coding to reorganize and reanalyze the data (Saldaña, 2013). In this round of coding, we implemented axial coding to explore factors leading to retrospective jealousy, the action/interational strategies, the context or intervening conditions, and the consequences of the core phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**Results**

First, we looked at factors leading to retrospective jealousy to determine the role of social media in experiences of retrospective jealousy (RQ1). We also explored the strategies participants suggested for responding to retrospective jealousy. Namely, in our analysis, we paid attention to how social media may be used as a means to manage retrospective jealousy (RQ2). In addition, we explored any contextual and intervening conditions that may influence the use of social media to manage retrospective jealousy. The consequences of using social media to manage retrospective jealousy (RQ3) are addressed organically in the following sections on factors leading to retrospective jealousy, strategies, and contextual/intervening conditions.

**Factors Leading to Retroactive Jealousy**

From the data, three factors leading to retrospective jealousy related to social media: *digital remnants, social comparison,* and *uncertainty.* It is worth noting that a couple of
participants indicated that they simply were not jealous when looking at their partner’s romantic histories on SNSs. Therefore, social media are not a trigger for everyone. However, for the majority of participants, SNSs promoted at least a little bit of jealousy and social comparison. Moreover, and contrary to previous studies (e.g., Cohen et al., 2014; McAndrew & Shah, 2013; Muise et al., 2014), there were no noticeable sex differences in regard to the ways that SNSs seemed to promote retroactive jealousy.

**Digital Remnants.** Generally, participants in our study seemed to express that it was normative for one’s social media presence to have evidence, or digital remnants, of former romantic relationships, and most found this understandable. These digital remnants include items such as old photographs of the past relationship or the ex’s comments and wall posts from long ago. As one male participant (18) stated, “I don’t expect girls to delete pictures of their exes off of social media just ‘cause they’re dating me.” Participants suggested that this persistence, however, may trigger retroactive jealousy. One female participant (21) in our study noted that seeing photographs on social media made the previous relationship seem more real to her: “This is what they looked like. This is something that they did together. It gives you something tangible to think about.” Another participant (20) voiced a similar thought: “It just reminds you that you’re not the only person he’s ever been with.” These digital remnants of a relationship may trigger retroactive jealousy by reminding people that there were other romantic partners before them or making these thoughts or images more visceral.

**Social Comparison.** Every participant in the study mentioned social comparison to partners’ exes as a factor in retroactive jealousy. Participants indicated that SNSs in particular provide ample opportunities for this social comparison. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals can make comparisons in which the target seems superior (i.e., upward social comparison) or comparisons in which the target seems inferior (i.e., downward social comparison; Festinger, 1954). A male participant (21) indicated that obtaining information about a partner’s exes from SNSs led him to upward social comparisons and self-doubt:

They’ll be with people who are huge or really successful, and that doesn’t work out, and you’re like, uh, what are you doing with me? I feel like that guy could have been a lot better. So it makes me feel insecure a little bit.

Several participants suggested that they compared themselves on a variety of dimensions, including academic history, employment, hobbies, and grammar. Although such information may be difficult to obtain through other channels, the affordances of SNSs make this information visible and easily, discreetly accessible. One male participant (22) stated that upward social comparisons to a successful ex would motivate him to “work harder to get more glory” from his partner.

Although several social comparison dimensions were mentioned, the most common point of comparison was physical attractiveness. Almost all participants indicated that they used social media to visually gauge an ex-partner’s physical attractiveness via pictures. Because photos of a romantic partner’s ex may be accessed privately through social media, time can be spent scrutinizing the ex’s appearance and ruminating on the implications. If people perceive a partner’s ex to be attractive, they may feel a higher level of threat and thus a greater degree of jealousy than they would have had the partner’s ex been judged as unattractive. As a male participant (21) stated, “This is going to sound so, like, superficial, but like if he was like a good-looking guy, I would be weirded out, but if he wasn’t, I wouldn’t be weirded out at all.” Indeed, discovering that the ex was unattractive may absolve feelings of inferiority and jealousy. As one female participant (18) said, “If she was a fat lard, obviously I would feel better about myself.” In this way, the multimodality of SNSs allowed participants to engage in appearance comparisons with an ex that could potentially exacerbate or mitigate retroactive jealousy.

Moreover, participants acknowledged that social comparison via SNSs may be exaggerated and contribute to retroactive jealousy. For example, a male participant (18) stated,

Looking at a picture, you could speculate a lot. You could come up with a number of things that aren’t true. Like, if I looked at a picture, I could be like oh, they were about to get married, and they were in Hawaii, like a perfect life. But if I asked her about it, I could get real stuff that actually happened.

Interestingly, participants seemed very aware of the biased nature of selective self-presentation in these environments. As one participant (20) said, “What you get through, like, social media of course is going to be, like, their best photos and the best stuff that they’re doing.” A female participant (19) suggested that jealousy is a likely result of viewing only the best of a partner’s ex: “Social media is all fake, but you know, it’s easier to be like jealous of what they were, maybe. It’d be like, oh, she’s so cool. She travels. She’s got great hair.” Thus, despite the knowledge that what they were seeing was potentially filtered and positively skewed, participants still used this information as a calibration point for upward social comparisons with ex-partners.

Participants also indicated that they made comparisons not just individually to the ex-partner but also to the ex-relationship as a whole. SNSs provided information by which to assess this comparison level. One female participant (23) stated the following: “You know, I think I would be more insecure because I would be comparing myself to that other relationship more.” A male participant (21) suggested he would look at pictures of his girlfriend and her ex because he felt this information could inform his current actions in the
relationship: “It’d just be to see if, like, I’m doing enough to keep her happy now.” Although such instances were rare, this participant’s behavior reflected a means by which jealousy could perhaps enhance the current relationship.

Uncertainty. As SNS users gather more information about their partners’ romantic histories, they may begin to question their own relationship stability with the partner. This uncertainty leads to jealousy, as people worry that their relationship will not live up to a partner’s past relationship or that their partner is not “over” the ex despite a clear end to the previous relationship. For example, a female participant (21) expressed experiencing uncertainty after comparing her relationship to digital remnants of her partner’s old relationship: “What if we’re not that happy? What if we don’t take pictures like that?” For the majority of participants, viewing the digital remnants of previous relationships across SNSs heightened feelings of uncertainty and contributed to retroactive jealousy.

Strategies for Managing Retroactive Jealousy

We identified two types of strategies for managing retroactive jealousy via social media. Offensive strategies served to mitigate retroactive jealousy via seeking more information about a romantic partner’s exes on SNSs. Defensive strategies intended to avoid retroactive jealousy entirely, either by reframing jealous thoughts or avoiding information on SNSs that might evoke jealousy. Both offensive and defensive strategies appeared to be common regardless of sex.

Offensive Strategies. Participants indicated that one of the main ways to manage retroactive jealousy is to gather as much information as possible about a partner’s ex. For example, a female participant (18) was curious about knowing. If I went the whole time without knowing, I probably don’t help the situation, but I guess I just think it would make me feel better if I knew. Even if it’s like I found out stuff that would hurt me, eventually I would still feel better about knowing. If I went the whole time without knowing, I could just wonder about, like, imagine worse stuff had actually happened. (Male, 20)

No matter the outcome, SNSs can provide the much-wanted information about a partner’s former romantic relationships. A further analysis of the data revealed that participants turn to social media to gather information for three distinct reasons: to disparage a partner’s exes; avoid direct, interactive information seeking; and digitally fact-check.

Disparaging Exes. Participants suggested that when they are jealous about a partner’s romantic history, they search for the partner’s ex on social media to find things to dislike about the ex. Paralleling the claims of White and Mullen (1989), once SNS users find something to dislike, they engage in downward social comparison for the purposes of self-enhancement. One participant (21) stated that she often searches for things to dislike about a partner’s ex with a group of friends:

. . . in some scenarios, they’ll be really pretty, but then you’ll also have like a group of girls who are like, “oh my god, her nose is weird.” Your best friend is like, “she looks weird” to sit there and comfort you.

Another participant (20) indicated she searches for negative aspects of her boyfriend’s former romantic partners to make herself feel better:

If she was ugly, I wouldn’t care. I’d be like, LOL, bye. But if they were, like, pretty, I’d obviously try to be like, oh my god, like find something wrong, even though there isn’t, just to make myself feel better.

Searching for things to dislike about a partner’s ex was not always a successful strategy; sometimes participants struggled to find unlikeable or unattractive characteristics to disparage. For example, one participant (20) remarked,

Do her Instagram captions scream like, “Oh, she’s a raging cokehead,” or do they scream like, “I’m a really nice girl who loves her family and puppies, and I’m super athletic. Like, look at me climb this mountain.” And then you’re like all right, well, it’s going to make it a lot harder to hate you.

In such cases, failed attempts at downward social comparison do not mitigate, and could in fact exacerbate, experiences of retroactive jealousy.

Avoiding Direct, Interactive Information Seeking. The data also revealed that due to the affordances of visibility, association, and persistence, SNSs can provide information about a romantic partner’s exes that a person may not feel comfortable asking the partner for directly. In terms of uncertainty reduction, SNSs enabled users to avoid interactive strategies and instead gather information through the passive strategy of observation (Berger & Bradac, 1982). A male participant (19) noted, “On Facebook it has, like, where he went to school, family members, like, just things like that—weird questions if you, if I would have asked my girlfriend about it, she’d be like ‘why are you asking that?’” Similarly, a female participant (20) suggested, “Social media is like the discreet
way to kind of figure that out on your own without having to interact and like directly approach someone.” However, another participant (21) was more skeptical of using social media to obtain information about a partner’s ex: “It kind of lets you satisfy nagging curiosities without having to actually ask somebody, which is maybe a bad thing, because if you’re really curious, and you really want to know, you should probably ask that person.”

Digital Fact-Checking. Some participants indicated that they did ask their partners directly about previous romantic relationships. However, they did not trust their partners’ responses, so SNSs provided an opportunity to verify the accuracy of that information. One participant (20) noted how the affordance of association provided him with the opportunity to fact-check, as he could investigate his girlfriend’s ex-boyfriend by accessing his page:

She’ll tell me stuff that she would feel comfortable sharing and what she imagines that wouldn’t bother me, so it would be a lot more filtered. But if I went to their [the ex-boyfriend’s] profile, there wouldn’t be any [girlfriend’s name] filter . . . cause he doesn’t know I’m looking at his profile.

Another participant (19) provided a similar sentiment:

I wanted to see how they presented themselves, because obviously he has a way of, like, describing how she is, and I have, like, people who know who she is . . . but I wanted to see what she is like actually.

In essence, participants indicated their romantic partners may provide a biased set of information about their ex-relationships, so participants trusted other sources (the exes’ SNS pages) to fill in gaps of knowledge or correct for skewed information.

Defensive Strategies. Two defensive strategies for managing retroactive jealousy emerged from the data. Specifically, participants reported attempts to cognitively reframe information about a partner’s ex to eliminate jealousy. In addition, some participants desired to avoid information about the ex entirely.

Reframing. Several participants described reframing jealous thoughts by telling themselves that their partner’s former romantic relationship is “in the past” and that they “can’t change the past.” Some explicitly employed social media in their reframing strategies. One male participant (21) struggled to see why his girlfriend wanted to be in a relationship with him because of downward social comparisons he had made based on her ex’s social media presence. He studied his girlfriend’s interactions with her ex on social media from the start of their relationship to its end; that way, in addition to seeing them happy, he could also “see what went wrong, at what point it started to fall apart.” Seeing this evidence of the deteriorating relationship helped him to reframe the situation, mitigate some of his jealousy, and see the ex as less of a threat.

Another female participant (20) discussed how she used her own digital remnants of past relationships to reframe her thoughts about SNS photographs of her boyfriend with his ex-girlfriend. She described her experience as the following:

I can look back, and I can like see these photos, and we look great together. We look so happy together. Like, wow, we’re at this awesome event, you know, or we went to a wedding or prom, like whatever corny thing it was. And we look so, like, in love in that photo, and I just know that, like, we weren’t. So, I can like look at that, and I can like look at his Facebook photos, and I can kind of like rationalize the same way. Just because he’s hanging out with that girl or with that girl in that photo, that doesn’t translate to anything. Like if he was still in love with that person, he would still be with that person kind of thing.

Thus, persistent relational remnants, whether on the partner’s page or one’s own profile, may facilitate the reframing of jealous thoughts.

Avoidance. According to selective exposure theories, avoidance of specific media content is a type of coping behavior, as it consists of the purposeful rejection of anxiety-causing information (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). Avoiding SNS information about the ex-partner served as a preventive strategy for some participants. In this case, participants deliberately used SNSs in a way that limited their exposure to information about exes. For example, when asked if she would look up her partner’s exes on social media, a female participant (23) responded, “For me, I would, like, try to steer clear of it, just ’cause I wouldn’t want to compare myself. And if I did, I’d just immediately start comparing myself to her.” Another participant (21) noted, “Yeah, you have a past, but I don’t like to see it. I don’t like to think about it.” In this way, some participants actively avoided SNS information about exes to prevent more jealousy.

Contextual/Intervening Conditions

Participants in this study indicated that there were two factors that influenced whether they chose to manage retroactive jealousy by searching for information about a partner’s ex via social media. Specifically, accessibility limited some participants from gathering information. In addition, social norms determined whether or not participants felt comfortable gathering information via SNSs.

Accessibility. Accessibility refers to the notion that in order to gather information from SNSs, the information must first be available. Information about a partner’s ex may not be accessible on social media, either because the target person does not use social media or their profile is not visible to the searcher. Several participants noted, for example, that Instagram users often go by a handle that may not be tied to their
real name. Therefore, the site is far less searchable than Face-
book, and information is more difficult to access. In addition,
SNSs afford different levels of privacy. Although even pri-
ivate Facebook users often have profiles visible to “friends of
friends,” thus not requiring a direct connection to the target,
private Twitter and Instagram profiles require a direct rela-
tionship for information to be visible. Hence, without the
ability to view the information or without any information to
view in the first place, there is a limit to the use of social
media as a strategy for managing retroactive jealousy.

Social Norms. Participants suggested that social norms may
also guide their use of social media as a strategy for manag-
ing retroactive jealousy. Most participants found creeping on
a partner’s ex to be “normal” or common behavior. One par-
ticipant (19) remarked,

I think in this day and age, it’s like all the girls, like everybody,
even guys, everyone is stalking each other constantly. I just
think it’s this age of social media where people’s information
and pictures are so openly available that makes it just very
tempting to want to know so many things about someone you
don’t know.

Another (21) stated, “I don’t necessarily think it’s right, even
though, like, I’ve done it, but it’s normal nowadays. It’s
something that people do.” Other participants, however, sug-
gested that looking at a partner’s ex on social media would
be “weird” or an invasion of privacy. One female (21) stated,
“i find it distasteful, honestly.” Another female participant
(18) said, “Social media makes me feel like I’m sneaking
around and doing something weird. Like, looking at some-
one’s profile is weird if you don’t know them at all.” Another
(23) remarked that she would not look at her partner’s ex on
social media because “I try not to invade people’s privacy.”
Thus, the degree to which a person finds it socially accept-
able to creep on a partner’s ex may influence whether indi-
viduals use social media strategically to manage retroactive
jealousy.

Discussion

This study explored the role of social media in the experi-
ence of retroactive jealousy. In particular, by examining fac-
tors leading to retroactive jealousy, strategies used to manage
jealousy, and contextual/intervening conditions, we were
able to describe how social media triggers retroactive jeal-
ousy, explain how people use social media to mitigate jeal-
ousy, and identify consequences of managing jealousy via
social media. In the following, we address both the concep-
tual and theoretical implications of our findings.

Researchers theorizing about romantic jealousy have typ-
ically conceptualized jealousy as a response to the perception
of a rival actively threatening and interfering in the current
relationship. Indeed, Bevan (2013) argued jealousy occurs
when a relationship is perceived to be in danger. Broadly, our
findings indicate that jealousy can arise even when a rela-
tionship is not in danger. Participants suggested that they
experienced jealousy despite knowing their partners were
not communicating with an ex and despite being confident
their partners had no intentions of leaving the current rela-
tionship. For example, a male participant (20) explained that
he knew his girlfriend ended communication with an ex long
ago. Yet, he experienced retroactive jealousy. In his words,

[girlfriend’s name] has only been in one other relationship, and
it was in 8th grade, and I still had a hard time. It took me a while
to get over that, even though it was in middle school . . . basically
just, like, wanting her to not have that emotional connection or
physical connection with anyone except for me.

Thus, there is a need to expand jealousy theorizing to con-
sider cases of romantic jealousy wherein there is no active
threat to the relationship itself.

White and Mullen (1989) provide a useful conceptualiza-
tion that may help elaborate such theorizing, as they argued
that jealousy may arise if a sense of specialness is threatened.
In fact, several participants in our study indicated retroactive
jealousy was associated with a threat to the “specialness” of
the relationship (e.g., “It’s not as special because they were
with someone else”; “the idea of her getting fulfillment from
a past romantic relationship would challenge that sense . . .
that I want to be the only one that is currently and, like, ever
in her history giving her joy”; “he was already with seven
other people, and I was like, so I’m just another number”).
From our findings, it appears that retroactive jealousy may
occur because an idealized expectation for romantic rela-
tionships is threatened rather than the relationship itself. Thus,
theories that address expectations in romantic relationships
or romantic relationship schema could shed light onto the
phenomenon of retroactive jealousy and should be incorpo-
rated into future jealousy research.

In regard to SNSs, our findings extend previous research
in two ways. First, although previous research has explored
active threats from current rivals that evoke romantic jeal-
ousy (e.g., an attractive rival posts a flirtatious message to
the partner), our study demonstrates that a rival’s active
interference is not necessary to trigger jealousy experiences
on SNSs. Second, our findings indicate that the affordances
of SNSs facilitate reactive jealousy. Individuals do not
have to rely on interactive strategies for gathering informa-
tion such as directly asking their partners. Information about
former relationships and ex-partners is more accessible and
visible through SNSs than other channels, particularly due to
the persistence and multimodality of content and the associa-
tion of network members. In face-to-face settings, people
often try to control and filter information about their rela-
tional history (Anderson et al., 2011), but it seems that SNS
users may forget that there is an abundance of information
about their romantic histories saved on their social media
profiles. Thus, social media provide romantic partners with
information that may be otherwise unavailable to them. As
Robards and Lincoln (2016) noted, new partners may capitalize on the affordances of SNSs to seek information about past relationships. However, viewing this “archived version” (Robards & Lincoln, 2016, p. 8) of their romantic partners on SNSs may trigger retroactive jealousy.

This access to additional information may have larger relational implications according to several theoretical perspectives. The hyperpersonal model suggests that affordances of communication technologies allow for an optimized presentation of the self to others (Walther, 2007). For example, SNS users are able to control their digital appearances by selectively posting attractive photos of themselves or editing personal information listed on their profiles so that it makes them appear more accomplished, whereas negative information can be concealed. The hyperpersonal model hypothesizes effects on the intended receivers of this information, but our findings indicate that the affordances of SNSs create a wider and perhaps unintended audience. Thus, these selective self-presentations have broader implications than what was originally theorized. In our study, they became the basis for social comparison. Given that many participants reported turning to social media specifically to compare (e.g., “You definitely want to see, like, how she stacks up in comparison to you”), these highly filtered, optimized presentations belonging to a current partner’s ex may trigger upward social comparison. Individuals may feel more jealous or insecure in the current relationship after seeing how “perfect” the partner’s ex appears to be.

Furthermore, interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) posits that comparison level is important to examine in relationships. People evaluate their relationship as a whole based on comparisons to other relationships, and this determines their satisfaction with and commitment to the current relationship. Due to the affordance of persistence, SNS users can make comparisons to relationships that no longer exist, including the past relationships of their current romantic partner. Because these are selectively self-presented (Walther, 2007), these previous relationships may be idealized on SNSs, only showing positive interactions and experiences. Consequently, the apparent happiness of a romantic partner’s prior relationship may trigger upward social comparison and, in turn, retroactive jealousy. In sum, it appears that SNSs may enable individuals’ romantic histories to play a larger role in interpreting the current relationship.

The TMIM (Afifi & Weiner, 2004) explains that people experience discrepancies between a level of certainty they desire and a level of certainty they currently have about particular topics. This discrepancy motivates them to seek information from others depending on various outcome and efficacy assessments. Outcome assessments consist of evaluating the consequences of both seeking and obtaining the desired information. In our study, participants indicated that the outcome of seeking information about a partner’s past via social media was less costly than seeking the same information from a partner face to face. The affordances of searchability, persistence, visibility, and network association made it relatively easy to gather information surreptitiously without alarming a romantic partner.

The TMIM further outlines that efficacy assessments consist of communication efficacy (whether an individual is able to engage in the act of information seeking), coping efficacy (whether an individual is able to deal with the information), and target efficacy (the degree to which another person is able and willing to provide the desired information) evaluations (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). In Afifi and Weiner’s original explication, communication efficacy was depicted as a judgment of an individual’s ability to seek information. Our findings suggest that social media affordances may affect these efficacy assessments as well, as participants were only able to gather information if the site made it visible and accessible to them.

Moreover, our study indicates that judgments of target efficacy may be more complicated than originally supposed. Romantic partners may be unwilling to discuss their past relationships or ex-lovers face to face, but this information may be apparent on social media. Individuals wishing to alleviate uncertainty about a partner’s exes could judge the partner to have low face-to-face target efficacy, but high computer-mediated target efficacy. The addition of warranting cues (DeAndrea, 2014; Walther & Parks, 2002) may also make the information presented on SNSs appear more credible than information obtained face to face in some cases. For example, information obtained from a third party on the site, like a mutual friend, might be seen as more credible than information from the partner’s, or their ex-partner’s, page.

The TMIM also notes that individuals will not always seek information from others. Rather, active avoidance of information or cognitive reappraisal can occur in some cases (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). Our findings support this assertion of the TMIM and further enlighten circumstances in which individuals choose not to pursue more information. Namely, we found that active avoidance and cognitive reappraisal reframing are both defensive strategies, meaning participants actively engaged in these behaviors to prevent the negative outcome of experiencing retroactive jealousy. This conceptualization of offensive and defensive strategies helps illuminate the TMIM by elaborating circumstances in which people choose to seek or avoid information.

In addition, our findings indicate that information seeking may be more complex than originally theorized. Consistent with past research (e.g., Ouwerkerk & Johnson, 2016), participants in our study suggested they had several motives or goals for information seeking on SNSs. Many reported they turned to social media to disparage an ex or digitally fact-check. These goals often led to different outcomes of information seeking. For example, when it was difficult to disparage an ex due to selective self-presentation on SNSs, retroactive jealousy was often exacerbated. Exacerbation seemed less apparent when the ability to digitally fact-check was thwarted through limited accessibility. Thus, our findings suggest that a more nuanced look at the goals of information
seeking may provide a better understanding of information-seeking outcomes in future information management research.

Finally, it is worth noting that none of the participants suggested that they felt closer to their partners or that their relationship was strengthened by uncovering more information about a partner’s exes. This study’s findings do not indicate that learning more about a partner’s romantic history escalates or improves the relationship. This finding runs counter to some of the original conceptualizations of relationship development that suggest that disclosure or deeper information exchange necessarily reduces uncertainty about others (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975) or leads to greater intimacy (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973). Consistent with more recent uncertainty management perspectives (e.g., Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Brashers, 2001), the valence of the information and the threat associated with the information appear to be important moderators in terms of whether or not it promotes feelings of closeness.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

A notable limitation of this study is the sample; although college students were a reasonable choice for this study given their levels of social media use and transitioning romantic relationships, our findings cannot be generalized without further investigation. Experiences of jealousy may vary for older adults or married individuals (e.g., Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2011). Furthermore, participants were predominantly White and US born, and there may be cultural differences in the experiences of retroactive jealousy. Future research should consider other populations to determine if the findings hold true across groups.

This study also limited the discussion of retroactive jealousy to social media’s role in the process of retroactive jealousy. Future research should examine other factors, such as interpersonal communication with a romantic partner, which may affect the experience of retroactive romantic jealousy. Similarly, future studies should make more direct comparisons of information seeking about a partner’s past and jealousy management strategies across communication channels. Research suggests that expressing jealousy to a romantic partner may affect the relationship differently than solely using SNSs to manage jealousy (Bevan, 2011).

Exploring and comparing the affordances of various SNSs would also be a fruitful endeavor. For instance, participants in this study indicated that Facebook and Instagram may differ in the sorts of information they provide (e.g., “On Facebook, I got more of like, um, like personal information, like who he was. On Instagram, it was more like what he looked like, what he likes to do”) and how easy it is to access this information (e.g., “Many people sign their true name on their Facebook, so you can just search for it, and you can find the person”). A more detailed analysis of the affordances of each site would lend insight into how each is uniquely used for information seeking.

In addition, although considerable research has examined how people use computer-mediated communication to selectively self-present in romantic contexts such as online dating, more research is needed on how people engage in selective self-presentation of past relationships online, such as deleting old posts or photographs. Alternatively, this information could be used in a deliberate fashion to spark retroactive jealousy in a current mate. For example, individuals could intentionally leave this evidence on their profiles or they could repost a photo with an ex-partner on the anniversary of an event. Finally, this study focused exclusively on retroactive jealousy. Future work could examine similarities and differences between experiences of retroactive jealousy and retrospective jealousy. Specifically, it is important for future research to parse out differences in how jealousy is experienced with current rivals compared to rivals from the past. Identifying these differences will help illuminate how different types of romantic jealousy affect relationship outcomes, such as satisfaction, conflict, and commitment.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the role of social media in the experience of retroactive jealousy. Specifically, our data indicate that retroactive jealousy may result from digital remnants of a partner’s past romantic relationships, social comparison to a partner’s exes or prior relationships, and uncertainty about the current relationship. In each of these cases, jealousy was a result of information obtained via SNSs, rather than a rival’s active interference in the relationship. Furthermore, participants suggested that SNSs may be used to manage retroactive jealousy via information seeking about a partner’s romantic history or avoidance of such information. Although information on SNSs may help mitigate jealousy in some instances, it also has the potential to exacerbate retroactive jealousy. Given that social media commonly play a role in modern romantic relationships, it is important to consider how these technologies may also be creating a larger role for our past romantic relationships.

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Author Biographies

Jessica R. Frampton (M.A., Clemson University) is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication at The Ohio State University. Her primary research interest concerns communication’s role in the experience of stress in close relationships.

Jesse Fox (Ph.D., Stanford University) is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include the role of technology in interpersonal interaction and relationships, affordances of technology, and prosocial virtual environments.

Appendix I

Interview Guide

1. Are you currently in a romantic relationship?
2. Tell me about your (past) relationship(s).
3. Do you and your partner ever discuss past boyfriends/girlfriends?
4. Do you and your partner ever discuss past sexual partners?
5. How do you recall getting on the subject of exes?
6. What is the outcome of these discussions?
7. How does thinking about/talking about your partners’ exes make you feel?
8. How does thinking about/talking about your partners’ past sexual partners make you feel?
9. Why do you think you feel this way?
10. Is your partner still in contact with his or her exes?
11. Did you feel this way with all of your relationships, or just some of them?
12. At what point did you begin to feel upset about your partner’s exes?
13. Did this feeling ever go away?
14. Did you let your partner know that you were bothered by his or her previous relationships? Why or why not? How did you do this?
15. Do you ever look at your partner’s exes’ profiles on social media? Why?
16. How do you end up on their profiles?
17. Which social media platforms do you use to look up your partner’s exes? Why?
18. What do you look at on their profiles?
19. How do you feel after looking at them?
20. How common do you think it is for people to look up their partner’s exes on social media?
21. Have you ever interacted with a partner’s ex on social media? Why or why not?