Article	Malicious Social Surveillance and Negative Implications in Romantic Relationships among Undergraduates

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Abstract

In the process of normalizing some surveillance dynamics in a society that has become increasingly more accustomed to infringements of privacy, citizens have been provided with a series of tools that allow them to control their peers. Thus, this paper relates interpersonal electronic surveillance to the negative implications that social networks may have for romantic relationships in the Spanish university context by analyzing three main aspects of interpersonal electronic surveillance: user perception and awareness, the types of pernicious social networking practices involved, and their consequences for romantic relationships. To achieve these objectives, a mixed methodology was used. Specifically, an in-person survey involving 311 respondents and two focus groups of seven and eight members, respectively, were conducted. All of the participants were undergraduate communication students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six. Findings from the current study show that the respondents believed that social networks incited jealousy and promoted control and surveillance practices, thus making romantic relationships more conflictive and artificial. However, they tended to blame individual uses more than the inner workings of social networks. For instance, some respondents regretted having resorted to certain practices, while others justified those practices because they had allowed for the detection of infidelity-related behaviors. In short, in a context in which social surveillance is now the norm, the monitoring and control of partner profiles was generally accepted even though the respondents called for more education about social networking in order to curtail these pernicious practices and to maintain healthier romantic relationships.

Introduction

Interpersonal surveillance and control practices have become especially ubiquitous with the hegemony and democratization of mobile communication and hyperconnectivity. With the necessary tools now at hand, individuals seem to have subsequently been encouraged to become spies (Andrejevic 2005: 479). In this context, accessibility has emerged as a key factor in the process of transforming the way in which people relate to each other. The horizontality (Albrechtslund 2008) of surveillance and peer-to-peer monitoring (Andrejevic 2005) practices have become widespread over the past decade, finding one of their best allies in social networks.

Besides involving an unquestionable revolution in communication dynamics, social networking sites (hereinafter SNSs) have consequently evolved into a source of personal and private information. In fact, they can be regarded as a determining factor in relationship development in terms of surveillance. Thus, this paper focuses on the confluence between two main research issues: interpersonal electronic surveillance and the negative implications that social networks may have for romantic relationships. Specifically, it analyzes the insufficiently explored Spanish context from different perspectives: user perception and awareness, the type of pernicious practices involved, and their consequences for romantic relationships.

Social Surveillance, SNSs, and Romantic Relationships

From a theoretical and empirical perspective, the ubiquity of interpersonal surveillance and control practices has been widely studied to identify and analyze in depth the characteristics of these dynamics. Concerning the horizontality of surveillance practices, different terms underlining their *lateral* (Andrejevic 2005), *participatory* (Albrechtslund 2008), *interpersonal* and *electronic* (Tokunaga 2011), *social* (Marwick 2012), and *mobile* (Ngcongo 2016) nature have been coined.

According to Andrejevic (2005: 479), so-called "lateral surveillance" or "peer-to-peer monitoring" emerges "in a climate of perceived risk and savvy skepticism," in which citizens resort to certain practices in order to obtain information on their friends, family, and "prospective love interests." From Andrejevic's (2005: 479) point of view, these are practices that emulate and amplify the top-down forms of monitoring typical of government strategies in a social context in which "everyone is to be considered potentially suspect, all are simultaneously urged to become spies." In this context of peer-to-peer surveillance, Andrejevic goes on to highlight two characteristics of the contemporary version of lateral surveillance. Explicitly, these are "the use of covert investigation as an alternative/substitute for debunked discourse... and the democratization of access to the technologies and strategies for cultivating investigatory expertise" (Andrejevic 2005: 481–482). Thus, the technology available to users becomes a key element in the surveillance and control that they exercise over their peers. This surveillance and control is justified by the apparent need and responsibility to safeguard one's own security in a network environment dominated by potentially false appearances (Andrejevic 2005: 482).

Specifically, Andrejevic (2005: 488) defines lateral surveillance "as the use of surveillance tools by individuals, rather than by agents of institutions public or private, to keep track of one another" before dividing the objects of this practice into three categories: romantic interests, family, and friends or acquaintances. Likewise, he identifies different levels of surveillance, ranging from Googling new acquaintances to the acquisition of surveillance cameras, monitoring software, or even portable lie detectors (Andrejevic 2005: 488–489). Moreover, as Andrejevic rightly observes, the online services currently available to users allow them to perform background checks and to re-territorialize mobile communications, among other sophisticated options. In short, these are practices whose proliferation should not only be explained from the perspective of technological development but also from the perspective of the risks that they pose for our societies—societies in which, given the general climate of suspicion, "we are invited to become spies—for our own good" (Andrejevic 2005: 493).

For his part, Albrechtslund (2008) uses the term "participatory surveillance" in his approach to the horizontal practices developed within the framework of online social networking. In particular, he highlights the traditional negative perspective from which surveillance on Web 2.0 domains has been analyzed, a perspective that connects this surveillance to concepts such as Big Brother and the panopticon. To his mind, this approach does not seem to be in line with current online social networking practices. Instead, he opts for a "participatory" concept, in the positive and empowering sense of the word, "to develop the social and playful aspects [of] surveillance," thus distancing himself from more alarmist positions and analyses (Albrechtslund 2008).

Continuing with the particularities and differences of the aforementioned definitions of surveillance, for Tokunaga (2011: 706), "interpersonal electronic surveillance (IES) is characterized as surreptitious strategies individuals use over communication technologies to gain awareness of another user's offline and/or online behaviors." Specifically, Tokunaga (2011: 706) uses an all-encompassing label that includes other terms used to designate a type of horizontal surveillance between "contacts of all sorts, including romantic partners, close friends, family members or business associates." In this type of surveillance, "the personal information is accessed using profiles on SNSs, bulletin boards, personal webpages, online diaries, keystroke loggers, and other electronic devices" (Tokunaga 2011: 706). For Tokunaga (2011: 707), in the context of SNSs, four of their fundamental characteristics (accessibility, multimediation, recordability and archival, and geographical distance) "conspire to form an ideal forum for exercising surveillance."

As with Tokunaga (2011) and other authors such as Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) and Joinson (2008), Marwick (2012: 378) delves into the concept of "social surveillance" to highlight certain practices deriving from Web 2.0 and its resources: technologies "designed for users to continually investigate digital traces left by the people they are connected to through social media." For Marwick (2012), social surveillance is based on the prevailing binomial of watching/the desire to be watched, one of the main reasons for using SNSs. To her mind, one of the ways in which social surveillance differs from normal surveillance is that "it requires conceptualizing power as intrinsic to every social relationship, as micro-level and de-centralized" (Marwick 2012: 379). In this conceptualization, power takes place between individuals and is developed in a consensual and reciprocal, rather than in a one-way and hierarchical, fashion. However, despite the obvious differences from more conventional modes of surveillance, certain social surveillance practices do lead to "panoptic-type effects" (Marwick 2012: 379). As opposed to consensual and reciprocal forms of observing what is voluntarily shared (or exhibited), stalking or creeping strategies are also implemented, and these strategies should be assessed from less naïve perspectives.

Finally, in his study of mobile communication privacy management in romantic relationships, Ngcongo (2016: 58) refers to the so-called "mobile surveillance" in romantic relationships as a "recent type of lateral surveillance" that occurs "as mobile phones play an increasingly fundamental role in how youth romantic relationships develop and are maintained." And all of this happens in a context in which "systematic surveillance became a routine and inescapable part of everyday life in modern times and is now, more often than not, dependent on information and communication technologies (ICTs)" (Lyon 2007a: 449). This is an environment in which, for Ngcongo (2016: 58), the mobile phone has been established as a symbol of the digital age. Moreover, the accessibility and hyper-connectivity of smartphones and their multiple apps have enhanced the possibilities of mobile communication and, as a result, exacerbated privacy management issues and risks in terms of surveillance and control.

On the whole, these concepts designate specific attributes that make SNSs a necessary object of study. On sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, citizens assimilate particular habits, and stalking and creeping have become the norm (Trottier 2012). There are also many other negative uses and implications that reveal the most pernicious side of SNSs, as highlighted in a number of relevant studies (e.g., Bevan, Ang, and Fearns 2014; Chou and Edge 2012; Shelton and Skalski 2014). For example, Fox and Moreland (2015) explore a series of relational and psychological stressors associated with Facebook use, such as a lack of privacy and control, social comparison, jealousy, or relationship conflict and deterioration. Stressor such as these, as well as extreme practices like digital bullying or peer shaming, reveal the dark side of SNSs and their impact on people's day-to-day lives.

The repercussions of these SNS uses for romantic relationships have become the subject of a prolific field of study. Regarding control and surveillance, Rus and Tiemensma (2017) have recently performed a theoretical review of the literature that demonstrates this growing interest. In addition to work on electronic surveillance (Tokunaga 2011, 2016) and cyberstalking (Marcum, Higgins, and Nicholson 2017), this literature should also include work on other relevant roles that SNSs play in romantic relationships. In this regard, Facebook has drawn a great deal of attention (Fox and Warber 2014), not only due to its role in romantic relationship maintenance (Stewart, Dainton, and Goodboy 2014) and/or development (Fox, Warber, and Makstaller 2013) but also owing to the consequences of using the site during relationship termination or dissolution (LeFebvre, Blackbun, and Brody 2015; Tong 2013) and during post-breakup recovery (Marshall 2012).

Similarly, the use of SNSs in romantic relationships can also connect with other relevant psychological and relational issues, such as uncertainty (Fox and Warber 2014), loss of trust in one's partner (Fox and Moreland 2015), infidelity-related behaviors (McDaniel, Drouin, and Cravens 2017), social comparison, envy, or jealousy (Marshall et al. 2013; Muise, Christofedes, and Desmarais 2009; Utz and Beukeboom 2011). This last issue, explored by Elphinston and Noller (2011) in the context of the so-called "Facebook intrusion," also allows for the study of dramatic consequences on other social networks. For instance, the selfie culture and other specific uses of Instagram may correlate with negative romantic relationship

outcomes (Halpern, Katz, and Carril 2017; Ridgway and Clayton 2016). Likewise, Twitter use influences negative outcomes and conflict, such as infidelity and even divorce, as analyzed by Clayton (2014) via an adaptation of the methodological framework developed in a prior Facebook study (Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith 2013).

The Current Study

According to the Spanish Statistical Office, 91.1 percent of users between sixteen and twenty-four years old use the internet several times a day, thus representing the main age segment of users (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2018). Generation Z (sixteen to twenty-three years old) is, together with millennials (twenty-four to thirty-eight years old), the demographic cohort that uses SNSs most often. Mobile phones are the devices most frequently used for accessing SNSs, with a penetration of 95 percent (IAB Spain 2018). Furthermore, according to the joint report released by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2019), in Spain, the proportion of active users of SNSs and of those accessing them with their mobile phones is 60 percent and 52 percent, respectively. In terms of age, 14 percent of the social audience is aged between eighteen and twenty-four years old, 24 percent between twenty-five and thirty-four years old, and 23 percent between thirty-five and forty-four years old, with practically no differences between sexes.

In Spain, there has been little research to date on surveillance in romantic relationships. Nevertheless, several studies have been performed about partner abuse and violence committed through the internet and smartphones, especially among young people and even from a more theoretical perspective (see Gámez-Guadix, Borrajo, and Calvete 2018).

For instance, the study performed by Borrajo et al. (2015) on cyberdating abuse among teenagers found that it was associated with other forms of violence such as offline dating violence or cyberbullying. These authors also pinpointed two main factors related to online dating abuse—although, as they themselves admitted, these factors were not representative of the Spanish population. These two factors were: direct aggression and control/monitoring, anticipating a distinction between violence and control that has also been explored by other Spanish authors (e.g., Muñiz Rivas et al. 2015; Muñiz 2017). The direct aggression factor involved "deliberate behaviors that are intended to harm the partner, such as threats, insults, or private information dissemination (including photos or videos) and identity theft (e.g., creating a fake partner profile in a social network with the intent to cause harm) through electronic means" (Borrajo et al. 2015: 363). Alternatively, "the components called Control/Monitoring include behaviors related to surveillance or the invasion of privacy of the partner or former partner, for example, control of the last connections to messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp) or using personal passwords" (Borrajo et al. 2015: 363). For their part, Nardi-Rodríguez et al. (2017: 380) found that devaluation and control techniques, including "namely checking girl-friends' mobiles or networks," were widely observed in other couples by the respondents, who recognized these practices as an important warning sign of intimate partner violence. An interesting point is that the respondents attributed these practices to other couples but not to themselves. According to Borrajo et al. (2015), this is due either to a sort of social desirability or simply to the fact that it is easier to detect conflicting behaviors in other people.

Moving on to sexting practices among Spanish teenagers, Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2018: 176) conclude that, in romantic relationships, cybercontrol is exerted less by boys than by girls, who camouflage this practice with "false" concerns relating to mistrust and jealousy, in line with the ideal of romantic love, while downplaying its importance as a control mechanism. This acquiescence to a certain degree of control via SNSs and mobile messaging, and its association with romanticism, is also observed by Martínez Arrese and Ferrón Zarraute (2019) among postgraduate students taking teacher training courses at the Autonomous University of Madrid. In the same vein, Casero Martines and Algaba Ouled-Driss (2016) also note that the use of SNSs and apps like WhatsApp among undergraduates at the University of the Balearic Islands could be influenced by relationship status—whether the students are single or in a relationship—and, primarily, by the duration of the romantic relationship.

Returning to the use of SNSs and messaging apps in the context of romantic relationships, different public administrations in Spain have published studies and resources for intervention and education relating to teenage relationships focusing, partially or totally, on the risks posed by the internet, SNSs, and mobile apps (e.g., Calvo González and Rodríguez Suárez 2017; Instituto Andaluz de la Mujer 2009).

Lastly, in order to understand the value of research on surveillance and control through SNSs and mobile technology, it is interesting to know what mass media outlets have to say in this regard. For example, they have addressed the ways in which social media can interfere in romantic relationships and whether or not SNSs contribute to break-ups (Portalatín 2013). They have also warned about the possibilities that SNSs offer for controlling partners, especially in the case of the young (Aizpitarte Gorrotxategi 2018). At any rate, the conclusion seems clear in all of these cases: SNSs are facilitators of what have become known as toxic or abusive romantic relationships, but they are not the root cause. Incidentally, a number of companies have also drawn attention to the risks that social networks pose for romantic relationships and have issued recommendations on how to act in an online environment. This is the case with the telecommunications multinational Telefónica, with Movistar's *Dialogando* (Manrique 2018); the dating site eDarling (redaccionedarling n.d.); and the computer security company Kaspersky, which touts its security features as a failsafe way of safeguarding privacy in the event of a break-up (Grustniy 2018).

In light of the above, we believe that there is a need to continue studying SNSs as tools for surveillance and control in romantic relationships, especially in insufficiently explored contexts. From this perspective, this paper follows in the steps of the research conducted by Tokunaga (2011, 2016), Tong (2013), and Fox and Warber (2014), which have served here as a thematic and methodological framework. Specifically, it explores the SNS experiences of communication undergraduates at a Spanish university with three objectives in mind: (1) to assess their perception and awareness of the potentially negative impact of SNS use; (2) to explore the types of pernicious SNS practices that they employ in the romantic relationship context; and (3) to assess the consequences of such practices in this context.

This paper's approach ties in with education on SNS behaviors, emphasizing the importance of privacy setting management (Trottier 2012) and the capacity of those involved to establish relationship maintenance strategies through SNSs and mobile communication (LeFevbre, Blackburn, and Brody 2015; Ngcongo 2016).

Methods

To conduct this study, we implemented a mixed methodology, combining surveys with focus groups. We based the decision to resort to this methodological triangulation on the arguments of previous studies (Fox and Moreland 2015; Mao 2014). Data were collected from May to November 2017. The privacy and anonymity of the respondents were guaranteed in all cases.

Survey: Participants

Of the 313 questionnaires that were filled in, 311 were used in the subsequent analysis, once those with errors had been eliminated. Following a non-probability sampling, the respondents (63.67% female) were all communication students (see also Bryant and Marmo 2009; Ngcongo, 2016; Tokunaga, 2016; Tong, 2013) at a Spanish university, aged between eighteen and twenty-six years (Mage = 20.51; SD = 1.80). Of the respondents, 41.80% (65.38% female; Mage = 20.65; SD = 1.83) were involved in a romantic relationship with an average trust level in their partner of 9.34 (SD = 1.04), measured from 1 to 10. In regards to the habitual residence of the respondents, 1.61% lived alone, 1.29% with a romantic partner, 33.76% with roommates or friends, and 63.34% with their family. This distribution was similar when the subjects were involved in a romantic relationship.

Survey: Procedure and Materials

The questionnaire contained six questions: three with various items measured on a five-point Likert scale and three open-ended items. The answers were collected in person and the results were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0 statistical software.

Frequency of use and perception of SNSs: The respondents were asked how often they used different SNSs and messaging applications (1: "Never" to 5: "Very frequently") and about the ways in which they perceived several of them, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, in terms of the concepts of "surveillance," "control," "jealousy," and "envy" (1: "Nothing" to 5: "Strongly"). These concepts were previously delimited to reduce interpretation. Specifically, the definition of surveillance used here is "the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction" (Lyon 2007b: 14). Based on the work of Burke et al. (2011), control was understood as the act of monitoring partner behaviors through SNSs. Finally, jealousy was defined as "*a protective reaction to a perceived threat to a valued relationship or to its quality*" (Clanton 2006: 411; italics in the original) and envy as "*hostility toward superiors, a negative feeling toward someone who is better off*" (Clanton 2006: 412; italics in the original).

Surveillance in romantic relationships on SNSs: Tokunaga's (2011, 2016) Interpersonal Electronic Surveillance Scale (IESS) was adapted (Tong 2013) to a five-point Likert scale (Fox and Warber 2014) of twenty-five items (Cronbach's $\alpha= 0.92$). In order to examine other specific social surveillance practices relating to SNS use, items such as "I have photographed/recorded videos and/or audio files of my partner without his/her consent" or "My partner has shared my private content without my consent" were included.

Open questions: The respondents were asked to comment on what they had regretted doing on SNSs and whether they had experienced or considered someone else's practices as offensive or intrusive. Besides addressing situations not included in the questionnaire, this allowed for a more qualitative treatment of the data.

Focus Groups: Participants

Communication undergraduate students at a Spanish university aged between eighteen and twenty-six years old, who had not participated in the survey, were recruited for two focus groups: the first with four female and four male participants and the second with three male and four female participants.

Focus Groups: Procedure and Materials

The focus groups were conducted at an on-campus location by a student intern, previously trained by the researchers, and lasted thirty to forty minutes. The audio data were collected with a zoom H4n audio-recorder and nonverbal communication was registered by another two student interns. Using a semi-structured protocol (Outysel et al. 2016; Stonard et al. 2017), discussions revolved around the dynamics of social surveillance and control between the participants and their partners or ex-partners in relation to more specific issues such as surveillance, control, trust, jealousy, and infidelity.

The participants also had the chance to discuss other issues, depending on their relevance to the study. For example, although not considered a social network, WhatsApp was mentioned on several occasions with respect to surveillance and control in mobile communication.

Results

Quantitative Data

Regarding the frequency of use of SNSs and mobile applications, it is important to highlight that Instagram was used considerably more than either Facebook or Twitter (see Table 1), although no statistically significant differences were detected in regards to gender, age, living situation, or relationship.

	Male		Female		With partner		Without partner		Total	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Instagram	4.07	1.43	4.42	1.17	4.22	1.35	4.34	1.24	4.29	1.28
Facebook	3.42	1.41	3.76	1.36	3.71	1.35	3.60	1.42	3.64	1.39
Twitter	3.42	1.50	3.24	1.50	3.11	1.54	3.44	1.45	3.30	1.50

Table 1: Frequency of use of different SNSs (N = 311).

The respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they associated SNSs with the key concepts of "surveillance," "control," "jealousy," and "envy" (see Table 2), all terms previously defined and delimited to reduce interpretation. Specifically, Instagram tended to be associated with these four key concepts; Facebook was identified, above all, with surveillance, while Twitter was seldom connected with any of these terms.

	Facebook		Instagram		Twitter	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Surveillance	3.92	1.21	4.10	1.12	2.81	1.34
Control	3.51	1.25	3.79	1.16	2.50	1.35
Jealousy	2.89	1.22	3.79	1.19	2.05	1.00
Envy	3.46	1.25	4.31	1.00	2.38	1.10

Table 2: Association of terms with the SNSs (N = 311).

With regard to social surveillance in the context of romantic relationships, the frequency with which the respondents with partners used or experienced different practices was noted (see Table 3). While some of the practices regarded as more "extreme" were hardly ever condoned by the respondents (e.g., sharing their partner's private content online without permission), there were others that respondents admitted to having resorted to on at least one occasion. For example, 86.15% of the respondents confessed to having checked the social media profiles of their romantic partners at least once, while around half of them had read their partner's conversations with other people (and vice versa). Furthermore, it is interesting to compare the general association of different SNSs with the concept of jealousy, as well as the results obtained in relation to direct personal experience

	Male		Female		Total	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
I have asked my partner to justify or demonstrate something on his/her mobile phone	1.68	0.86	1.75	1.08	1.73	1.01
I have photographed/recorded videos and/or audio files of my partner without his/her permission	1.36	0.78	1.61	1.03	1.53	0.95
I have shared my partner's private content online without his/her permission	1.09	0.29	1.13	0.43	1.12	0.39
I have felt jealous or cheated regarding the use of certain mobile apps or SNSs	1.89	1.04	2.04	1.14	1.98	1.10
My partner has asked me to justify or demonstrate something on my mobile phone	1.64	1.01	1.64	0.91	1.64	0.94
My partner has photographed/recorded (videos and/or audio files) of me without my permission	1.48	0.90	1.49	0.98	1.48	0.95
My partner has shared my private content without my permission	1.20	0.67	1.12	0.42	1.15	0.52
My partner has felt cheated or jealous because of issues relating to my use of certain mobile apps or SNSs	1.89	1.09	1.64	0.99	1.72	1.03
I have tried to allay my suspicions about infidelity using mobile apps or SNSs	1.49	0.90	1.56	1.09	1.53	1.02
I often visit my partner's SNS profiles	2.60	1.14	3.12	1.16	2.94	1.17

When visiting my partner's SNS profiles, I read the new posts of his/her friends	1.87	0.94	2.13	1.23	2.04	1.14
I often spend time browsing my partner's pictures on his/her SNS profiles	1.87	1.06	2.11	1.07	2.02	1.07
I pay particularly close attention to news feeds that concern my partner	2.04	1.04	2.53	1.15	2.36	1.14
I notice when my partner updates his/her SNS profiles	2.07	1.12	2.14	1.22	2.12	1.18
I am generally aware of the relationships between my partner and his/her friends on SNSs	2.47	1.22	2.56	1.16	2.53	1.17
If there are messages on my partner's wall I do not understand, I try to investigate on other people's walls	1.44	0.87	1.52	0.98	1.49	0.94
I try to read the comments that my partner posts on our mutual friends' walls	1.33	0.56	1.32	0.68	1.32	0.64
I browse my partner's SNS profiles to see what s/he is up to	1.40	0.75	1.49	0.91	1.46	0.86
I check up on the friends that my partner has on his/her SNS profiles	1.53	0.76	1.74	1.03	1.67	0.94
I know when my partner has not updated his/her SNS profiles for a while	1.89	1.11	2.02	1.25	1.98	1.20
I try to monitor my partner's behavior on his/her SNS profiles	1.64	0.93	1.67	0.88	1.66	0.90
I browse my partner's SNS profiles to see if there is anything new or exciting	1.96	1.02	2.28	1.22	2.17	1.16
I know more about my partner's everyday life by looking at his/her SNS profiles	1.80	1.10	1.44	0.92	1.56	1.00
I read conversations between my partner and other people	1.82	0.89	1.73	1.03	1.76	0.98
I am aware that my partner has read my conversations with others	2.20	1.06	1.72	0.93	1.88	1.02

Table 3: *Social surveillance practices among individuals involved in romantic relationships (N = 130).*

In terms of surveillance to control, noteworthy items included "I have tried to allay my suspicions of infidelity using apps or SNSs" or "I read my partner's conversations with other people." When compared to other practices, these were less frequent. However, it should be recalled that some of them were used sometimes by approximately half of the respondents involved in romantic relationships.

In contrast, there were indeed differences in relation to the level of trust placed in a romantic partner. By and large, with a few exceptions, lower trust levels were associated with more checking up on SNSs or to greater jealousy. Specifically, as can be seen in Table 4, different items correlated inversely with the trust expressed, albeit with medium or low intensity.

	$r(129)$
I have asked my partner to justify or demonstrate something on his/her mobile phone	-0.45**
I have felt jealous or cheated regarding the use of certain mobile apps or SNSs	-0.47**
I have tried to allay my suspicions about infidelity using mobile apps or SNSs	-0.49**
If there are messages on my partner's wall I do not understand, I try to investigate on other people's walls	-0.33**
I try to read the comments that my partner posts on our mutual friends' walls	-0.24**
I browse my partner's SNS profiles to see what s/he is up to	-0.32**
I know when my partner has not updated his/her SNS profiles for a while	-0.19*
I try to monitor my partner's behavior on his/her SNS profiles	-0.28**

Table 4: *Pearson's r correlation for the use of SNSs between romantic partners and their stated level of trust in each other. *p < .05 **p < .01.*

Qualitative Data: Open Questions

Several respondents specifically stated that they principally regretted stalking and controlling their partners (or ex-partners) on SNSs, using them as a control mechanism (e.g., "paying attention to the photos that their romantic partner *likes*"), and being "needlessly jealous" because of this. In this connection, two subjects, a male and a female, indicated that, although they felt a certain degree of remorse, their surveillance behavior had allowed them to discover that their partners were cheating on them.

Regarding the behavior of others that the respondents considered especially offensive or intrusive, once again, the control between couples and even friends was highlighted. Among other things, respondents criticized their partners for asking them to erase—or directly delete—contacts or photos due to jealousy or for entering their SNS profiles without their consent. However, there was also a twenty-one-year-old girl who complained that her partner was "sometimes very mindful of his privacy on social networks." Likewise, the following comment is particularly interesting because it introduces different ideas about the dangers of SNSs in the context of romantic relationships: "My previous partner used WhatsApp to end our relationship. During these past months I've tried to start another, but the ex-partner of this person has started to harass me on SNSs and on my mobile to such an extent that we've had to put an end to our relationship, due to the pressure exerted on us by his ex-partner" (female, twenty years old).

From a general perspective, and due to their reiteration, the comments that stood out most were those that placed the problem, not in the SNSs, but in the use of the SNSs. This opinion contrasts with others such as, "I think there're many toxic friendships and romantic relationships because of SNSs" (female, twenty-one years old), "Social networks certainly generate a lot of control and toxic relationships" (female, twenty-one years-old), or "Social networks make us behave in a different and more artificial way" (male, twenty years old). So, just as there were several respondents who focused on the poor use of SNSs, there were also others who were inclined to think that certain features of these platforms were responsible for this state of affairs.

Qualitative Data: Focus Groups

In terms of romantic relationships and surveillance and control on SNSs, one of the main complaints voiced by the participants was the continuous supervision to which their partners subjected them, looking for possible updates on Instagram (through "instastories") or the last hour of connection on WhatsApp. They saw this control as something negative, albeit recognizing that it was widespread and could even be seen as innocuous: "Phoning a person every five minutes is crazy, but controlling on WhatsApp is even viewed favorably" (female, eighteen years old).

The participants of the two focus groups agreed that SNSs and mobile devices allowed for a greater and more durable control of partners. "Looking at all the SNSs of their partner on their mobile phone" (female, twenty-one years old), the "partner [taking] the mobile phone to read a conversation with a female friend" (male, twenty-one years old), or knowing their partner's passwords (male, nineteen years old)—allowing him/her to see the other's activity even after a break-up (female, eighteen years old)—are seen as reprehensible practices, but are accepted as part of the "normal" use of these communication tools.

Furthermore, this control was justified when infidelity was suspected. In fact, several participants pointed out that, thanks to the increased control and surveillance provided by SNSs, they had discovered that their partners were cheating on them. They also pointed out that there were couples who, to allay suspicions, shared their passwords, offering their partners the chance to check up on their social media activity.

Finally, there was a general consensus among the participants that, although SNSs could serve as control mechanisms, thus encouraging "certain toxic forms of communication" (female, twenty years old), these were neither good nor bad insofar as the problem lay in their use. They also stressed that there was a need for education and that the healthiest romantic relationships were often those that were least conditioned by SNSs and messaging applications: "My boyfriend lived in another city and it's true that it was useful to stay in contact, but I think one of the things that wrecked the relationship was that incessant communication via WhatsApp, that foolish anger if the other didn't answer… In fact, the problem is we don't know how to use

WhatsApp, which is actually a useful tool, but we're putting it to an unhealthy use" (female, twenty years old).

As a last point, it should be noted that when the respondents were asked whether they had felt controlled by their partners or ex-partners on SNSs, or whether they had become involved in such practices, they all started to fidget and giggle nervously. After all, it is easier to report the bad practices of others, especially in pursuit of social desirability when being (audio) recorded in public. Either way, the results of the focus groups confirmed the survey data: SNSs and mobile devices facilitate partner control and surveillance, but technology is not to blame for this. In fact, the participants even suggested that, under certain circumstances, this abuse or misuse could be justified.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Returning to the study objectives regarding the perception and awareness of undergraduate students of the negative impact of SNSs, the following results are striking. Firstly, it is relevant to highlight how many of the participants lay the blame squarely on user practices instead of on SNSs per se. However, this perception contrasts with the general view that SNSs' nature and tools not only facilitated but also fostered dramatic uses and consequences.

Second, and based on the survey and focus group participants' direct experiences, it can be argued that SNSs can facilitate conflictive, artificial, and toxic friendships/romantic relationships. Instagram, for example, is the SNS most associated with jealousy, control, surveillance, and envy. These results tie in with those of previous studies linking Instagram and selfie practices to vanity, narcissism, and negative romantic relationship outcomes revolving around the body and its exhibition (Ridgway and Clayton 2016; Sheldon and Bryant 2016).

The respondents also showed that they were aware of surveillance and control dynamics on SNSs and of these dynamics' distressing repercussions on social relationships. However, some respondents claimed that, due to the fact that these practices were now the norm, they were taken for granted. Moreover, the awareness of some students revealed that they felt guilty about having used SNSs for these purposes. Nevertheless, this remorse contrasted with the arguments offered by others to justify surveillance and control in the case of suspected infidelity. In fact, some even believed that SNSs were positive in this respect.

In the normalization of social surveillance, the monitoring of partner profiles was generally accepted in the analyzed context, to the point that some of the respondents noted that these practices involved the continuous supervision of updates, new comments, or photographs. Furthermore, for around half of the respondents, it was normal to read their partners' private conversations with others and vice versa. As already noted, these control and stalking practices could lead to remorse, inasmuch as the respondents were not only aware of the violation of privacy involved but also that they could trigger and intensify jealousy.

Regarding the consequences of SNS use for romantic relationships, and in accordance with previous studies, there is a logical inverse correlation between certain surveillance practices and the level of trust placed in partners (Fox and Moreland 2015; Fox and Warber 2014). Also noteworthy is the connection between jealousy or feeling cheated on—"unjustified jealousy," according to some of the respondents—and the use of the same SNSs or mobile apps to try to allay suspicions of infidelity, thus establishing a vicious circle. What is indeed remarkable in this regard is that some of the respondents "complained" that their partners were excessively worried about their privacy. In general, it was recognized that the misuse of SNSs could cause annoyance or lead to quarrels and even breakups—sometimes even functioning as a channel for ending the relationship—due either to the practices developed by the couples themselves or to external agents such as ex-partners.

Finally, it is precisely this awareness of the "dark side" (Fox and Moreland 2015) of SNSs that might lead couples to develop mutually beneficial strategies (Ngcongo 2016) such as sharing passwords—a step that

some of the respondents admitted to having taken as a sort of an ill-conceived demonstration of trust and transparency. Other respondents, however, preferred to reduce/limit their social network activity or simply to eliminate their accounts. Solutions of this kind certainly provide food for thought on the privacy and trust issues that impel users to take such drastic steps to minimize risks. In any case, in addition to such strategies, it is noteworthy that the respondents' demonstrated a solid awareness about the need for education in social networking to increase the chances of minimizing toxic relationships and grave repercussions.

Study Limitations and Future Lines of Research

This study has several limitations that should be borne in mind when interpreting the results. First, the results' generalizability is limited due to the university sample. Second, the respondents' experiences with SNSs and mobile communication technology might have been conditioned by the fact that they were communication undergraduates. Third, the key concepts with which the different SNSs were associated (see Table 2) had been previously defined and delimited to reduce interpretation, which may have skewed the results. Finally, the open questions and the focus groups introduced some practices involving interpersonal surveillance and control in which WhatsApp was a common and decisive tool. Although the results reflect the participants' experiences, further theorizing and empirical research are necessary in the context of individual and group messaging apps.

Acknowledgments

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