

Consumption of Public Display of Affection (PDA) Content and Its Impact on Personal Happiness and Relationship Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

While abundant research focuses on the perspective of people who create or post Public Display of Affection (PDA) content, little attention is given to the impact of PDA on other social media users who are consuming these contents. According to the social comparison theory, these types of content shown in social media may induce feelings of envy and dissatisfaction in one's romantic relationship. Therefore, this study focused on determining the impact of PDA consumption on personal happiness and relationship satisfaction. A quantitative research design was used where 73 participants were recruited. Of the 73, 34 of them are in a relationship while the remaining 39 are single. The inclusion criteria are: (1) Malaysian, (2) aged 19 to 39 and (3) has at least one social media account. Frequency analysis revealed that a vast majority of social media users have moderate to high level of consumption of PDA content. However, a deeper crosstab analysis showed that most single people tend to have high levels of PDA consumption while most people who are in a relationship tend to have moderate levels of PDA consumption. Simple linear regression revealed no significant impact of PDA consumption on both personal happiness and relationship satisfaction. This study shows there is a high consumption of PDA content in social media yet no impact on personal happiness and relationship satisfaction is proven. This could indicate that social media users are having healthier emotional regulations while strolling through the contents available on social media.

Keywords: personal happiness, public display of affection, relationship satisfaction, social media, young adult

INTRODUCTION

Public Display of Affection (PDA): PDAs are physical acts of intimacy that are made in front of others. Holding hands or hugging are relatively moderate shows of intimacy, while more passionate gestures include touching, such as kissing and groping (Miller, 2013). In this era, without a doubt, social media has become a huge part of our lives, and people are showing PDA not just in real life but also in social media. It is important to take a step back and understand that social media also has its own negative aspects that

could affect us in a certain way. In this case, many individuals nowadays feel unhappy and at times ungrateful for their lives due to the things they often see online. Some individuals could evoke feelings of envy and jealousy from watching other people enjoying their lives in the way that they wanted.

Bayer et al. (2020) claimed that numerous studies suggest a connection between social media use and social comparison processes. Tukachinsky and Dorros (2018) found that

exposure to romanticized media representations is linked to lower relationship satisfaction, a weaker commitment to marriage and increased relational conflict. Making an upward social comparison to a friend's relationship that is perceived as superior might lead some individuals to develop negative interpretations of their own relationship, which may then lead them to feel less satisfied with their relationship as a result (Holte, 2022). In this context, people in relationships would compare their own relationship to those romantic photos in social media. For people who are single, they would compare those lives full of affection to their own lives without a romantic relationship which would affect their levels of happiness.

Hence, this research focuses on answering the following research questions:

1. What is the level of PDA consumption among social media users who are single and in a relationship?
2. What is the impact of PDA consumption on personal happiness and relationship satisfaction

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Li and Wang (2022), people often display and stage out their daily lives on social media to create a seemingly perfect romantic relationship. The public and individuals may associate these idealized depictions with real-life intimacy. Social networking sites (SNS) users often publicly showcase their affection for their loved ones on their accounts and a study from Utz and Beukeboom (2011) found that couples particularly enjoy displays of affection like this. Tandon et al. (2021) suggested that sharing one's relationship status on social media may be seen as a public display of affection and a declaration of the couple's exclusivity to their social group, whilst proven to be connected with relationship satisfaction.

However, Li and Wang (2022) further explained that the public display of affection may also cause feelings of jealousy among other couples, as social media offers users information that makes it possible them to stay in touch with their friends, it also creates a strong foundation for jealousy and peer comparison, which is the effect and adjustment people make when they perceive social media as a stressful environment. In a study from Li and Wang (2022) found out that mainly college students are more likely to develop negative self-evaluations and low self-esteem when exposed to this stressful environment for an extended period of time, which ultimately results in life dissatisfaction.

Han (2022) explained that according to the social comparison theory by Festinger (1954), people usually look for benchmarks to compare themselves in order to evaluate their progress and place in life. The social comparison theory consists of two different elements, upward comparison and downward comparison. In this study, we will focus more on upward comparison, whereby people would compare themselves to those who are better off than they are. Van de Ven and Zeelenberg (2018) further explained that envy has an upward perspective and concentrates on both what the other person has and what one lacks. Zeelenberg (2018) also added that social comparison for which one person lacks a desirable quality that the other person possesses is the basis of envy, which concludes that envy is driven by upward social comparison. Warrender and Milne (2020) claimed that individuals who engage in upward social comparison are more prevalent on social media and prone to have lower self-esteem.

Based on the research of Verduyn et al. (2020) social comparison serves as a vulnerability element whereby people who tend to compare themselves to others (as opposed to people who do not) by viewing other users' profiles or browsing Facebook's newsfeed, experience stronger drops

in self-esteem and higher levels of depression, in fact, the study by Verduyn et al. (2020) found out that individuals experiences higher feelings of loneliness and stronger drops in positive emotions often occur after using Instagram.

According to Satici et al. (2021) individuals who are psychologically troubled because of too much social media consumption are unlikely to listen to their partner's emotional requirements since they are preoccupied with resolving their own issues, which could decrease relationship satisfaction. Fincham et al. (2018) claimed that individuals who are sensitive to negative effects of romantic relationships and who can stop these feelings as soon as possible often feel satisfied with their relationships

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social comparison theory by Leon Festinger (1954) is described as the natural tendency to use other people as indicators of how we are doing in comparison to them or of how we ought to act, think, and feel. The choice of the comparison target includes upward, the superior other whereas downward, the inferior other and the comparison's outcome are crucial to the social comparison process (assimilation versus contrast). When a comparison is made upward or downward, assimilation specifically refers to how the comparer's self-evaluation shifts towards the comparison target, becoming more positive. Contrast, on the other hand, describes how the comparer's assessment of themselves shifts away from the comparison target, turning more negative after an upward comparison and more positive after a downward comparison. When the comparison dimension is significant to oneself and the comparison target is comparable to oneself, social comparisons are often more likely to occur (Verduyn et al. (2020).

In relating this theory to the current study, individuals that spend their time watching content and news feeds of others that are considered desirable may create positive or negative effects of

an upward comparison. By nature, we often idolize others for something they have that we might not have, an example would be seeing other couples on social media writing an appreciation post about their partners. This could create a negative effect comparison as to why their respective partners never engage in this type of display of affection that would elevate into dissatisfaction in the relationship.

Materials and methods

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research method and descriptive design of a survey study are used in this study to investigate the relationship between public display of affection in social media and relationship satisfaction among young adults.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

Convenience sampling methods was used due to time and resource accessibility. The inclusion criteria are: (1) Malaysian, (2) aged 19 to 39 and (3) has at least one social media account. A number of 73 young adults are participating in this study, consisting of 34 participants in a relationship and 39 single participants. Participants are requested to mark their eligibility checklist on the front page of the digital form distributed prior to signing the informed consent. Participants who are not eligible would be discarded from data analysis. However, no response is discarded as all participants meet the three criteria set.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) by Hendrick (1988) are used in this study. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) comprises general relationship satisfaction, especially in romantic relationships, consisting of 7 items and is designed with a Likert Scale, with '1' being 'low' and '5' being 'high'. The reliability of this questionnaire claims to have moderate to high correlations with measures of marital satisfaction, good test-retest reliability, and

consistent measurement properties across samples of ethnically diverse and age-diverse couples. The Relationship Assessment Scale also claims to have a solid criterion-based validity and the Cronbach alpha for the Relationship Assessment Scale was 0.93.

DATA COLLECTION

Table 1 Reliability index for variables (N = 73).

| | Items | N | M | SD | α |
|------------------------------|-------|----|-------|------|----------|
| Public Displays of Affection | 8 | 73 | 14.77 | 5.09 | 0.898 |
| Happiness | 7 | 73 | 30.39 | 3.18 | 0.667 |
| Satisfaction* | 7 | 34 | 30.39 | 3.18 | 0.667 |

Participants were given an online survey, which includes an adopted questionnaire by Hendrick (1988) called 'the Relationship Assessment Scale'. The online survey link was distributed through emails as well as the 'WhatsApp' platform. As the participants agreed to participate in our online survey, they were given a link that directs them to the Google Form website that has been prepared. Upon receiving the survey, participants should be able to access Section A of the survey, which was the introduction page whereby the purpose of the study was mentioned, followed by an informed consent form.

If participants agree to proceed, participants were required to tick the 'I agree and I understand' tick box that is provided as it is crucial for the participants to understand that it is within their free will to participate in this study and shall withdraw at any time if they want to. After ticking the box, participants should be directed to the Section B of the survey that contains the demographic questions such as gender, age and institution to maintain the objectives of our study, which is to compare between the two genders, male and female. After completing the demographic section, the survey was redirected to Section C, which was the crucial part of the study as it contains the Relationship

Assessment Scale (RAS) by Hendrick (1988). The final part of the survey was the debrief sheet to provide participants with the conclusion for participating in this study along with a little note to express gratitude for participating in this study and a contact number of the person in charge of the study in case of further information or any mistakes that occurred in answering the survey given.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected were analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The study used Pearson's correlation coefficient for the first objective to see if there was a relationship between public display of affection in social media and relationship satisfaction, whereas the independent sample t-test was used for the second objective in order to find the gender differences in relationship satisfaction.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

An informed consent was provided upon receiving the questionnaire to this study where it states the purpose and potential benefits and risks of the study. Voluntary participation was mentioned whereby the participant should tick 'I Agree and I Understand' in the provided box if they agree to participate in this study, however, participants are able to withdraw from the study at any given point.

Confidentiality was maintained as it is important to acknowledge that researchers have no right to breach and share the personal data receive upon this study and anonymity was also maintained by only collecting data information that researchers are not able to identify the participants such as age, gender and institution.

FINDINGS

Table 2 Participant demographics.

| | | Total (N = 73) | | In a relationship (N = 34) | | Single (N = 39) | |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|------|----------------------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Gender | Male | 24 | 32.9 | 8 | 23.5 | 16 | 41 |
| | Female | 49 | 67.1 | 26 | 76.5 | 23 | 59 |
| Employment status | Yes | 48 | 65.8 | 24 | 70.6 | 24 | 61.5 |
| | No | 25 | 34.2 | 10 | 29.4 | 15 | 38.5 |
| Student | Yes | 35 | 47.9 | 16 | 47.1 | 19 | 48.7 |
| | No | 37 | 50.7 | 18 | 52.9 | 19 | 48.7 |
| | Missing | 1 | 1.4 | | | 1 | 2.6 |
| Education | Post-graduate | 17 | 23.3 | 10 | 29.4 | 7 | 17.9 |
| | Under-graduate | 46 | 63 | 22 | 64.7 | 24 | 61.5 |
| | Pre-University | 10 | 13.7 | 2 | 5.9 | 8 | 20.5 |
| No. of children | None | 63 | 86.3 | 24 | 70.6 | 39 | 100 |
| | 1 | 8 | 11 | 8 | 23.5 | 0 | 0 |
| | 2 | 2 | 2.7 | 2 | 5.9 | 0 | 0 |
| Social Media Used | Facebook | 50 | 68.5 | 25 | 73.5 | 25 | 64.1 |
| | Instagram | 66 | 90.4 | 37 | 91.2 | 29 | 74.4 |
| | TikTok | 54 | 74 | 23 | 67.6 | 31 | 79.5 |
| | Thread | 20 | 27.4 | 8 | 23.5 | 12 | 30.8 |
| | X | 41 | 56.2 | 19 | 55.9 | 22 | 56.4 |

Table 3 Frequencies of Public Display of Affections (PDA) categories.

| | | Total | | In a relationship | | Single | |
|-----|----------|-------|------|-------------------|------|--------|------|
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| PDA | Low | 14 | 19.2 | 6 | 17.6 | 8 | 20.5 |
| | Moderate | 30 | 41.1 | 15 | 44.1 | 15 | 38.5 |
| | High | 29 | 39.7 | 13 | 38.2 | 16 | 41.0 |

Table 4 Regression Analysis Summary for Public Displays of Affection Predicting Happiness (N = 73).

| | B | 95% CI | β | t | p |
|------------------------------|------|----------------|---------|-------|-------|
| (Constant) | 18.4 | [15.67, 22.01] | | 11.85 | <.001 |
| Public Displays of Affection | 0.1 | [-.10, .30] | 0.12 | 0.97 | 0.334 |

Table F Regression Analysis Summary for Public Displays of Affection Predicting Happiness (N = 34).

| | B | 95% CI | β | t | p |
|------------------------------|-------|----------------|---------|-------|-------|
| (Constant) | 30.35 | [17.27, 23.75] | | 18.12 | 0.000 |
| Public Displays of Affection | 0.00 | [-0.10, 0.31] | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.977 |

Table G Regression Analysis Summary for Public Displays of Affection Predicting Satisfaction (N = 34).

| | B | 95% CI | β | t | p |
|------------------------------|-------|----------------|---------|-------|---------|
| (Constant) | 30.35 | [26.93, 33.76] | | 18.12 | < 0.001 |
| Public Displays of Affection | 0.00 | [-.21, .22] | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.997 |

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to determine the impact of PDA consumption on personal happiness and relationship satisfaction. The total participants of this study are 73 young adults with 34 males and 39 females. This study entails convenience sampling method, a non-probability sampling with three different analyses used in this study, which were frequency analysis, crosstab analysis and simple linear regress

H01: There is a significant impact of PDA consumption on relationship satisfaction among young adults.

The results show that there is no significant impact on PDA relationship satisfaction among young adults ($r = -0.37$, $p = .98$). Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

H02: There is a significant impact of PDA consumption on personal happiness among young adults.

The results show that there is no significant impact on PDA relationship satisfaction among young adults ($r = -0.37$, $p = .98$). Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Research found that consuming social media content may cause social comparison. Due to the availability of information online, social media offers a favorable environment for social comparisons to occur. Furthermore, due to the fact that social media users are more frequently exposed to their online contacts' accomplishments rather than their imperfections, notably upward social comparisons are likely to occur as social media makes it easy to present a positive view of one's life (Verduyne et al., 2020). Similarly, portraying one's 'happily ever after' relationship on social media may cause an individual to compare their relationship to the ones they see online which later may produce relationship dissatisfaction in one's relationship. The findings of the current study are proven to be true, where PDA content of social media exposure significantly relates to one's relationship satisfaction.

However, the number of literatures on the negative effects of consuming specific social media content i.e., public display of affection content on relationship satisfaction remains scarce. The insights of this study could provide a better understanding of how to handle this issue

and seek help with the right channel. Therefore, individuals are able to identify the cause of conflict in the relationship and make preventive measures in order to improve one's relationship satisfaction.

An in-depth solution and findings can also be made in order to help individuals that are currently struggling with this issue. Marriage therapy, counselling and other types of therapy can be introduced for those affected and evidence-based solutions can be made to assist on this issue. Several research found that couples counselling effectively lowers relationship conflicts and boosts relationship satisfaction (Kysely et al., 2022). Further research can provide deeper insights and contribute to evidence-based interventions.

Finally, this research helps people to be more aware of the consequences of using social media and overall promote the psychology field by promoting couples therapy in Malaysia. The community in Malaysia demands family counselling to deal with a variety of problems and obstacles in a family. Family-focused services, including family counselling, are greatly needed and should be made available to as many people as possible. Furthermore, family counselling may be a primary necessity for Malaysian society, particularly in addressing a range of social concerns and mental health, since the Malaysian community is now open to the approach of counselling in handling social problems (Noor, 2014).

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