"You Liked That Instagram Post?!" An Experimental Study on the Impact of Instagram Likes on Negative Emotions and Behaviors in Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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During adolescence, engagement in romantic relationships and social media are both high. Research with adults indicates that social media can elicit jealousy and conflict within relationships, yet little research investigates these associations among adolescents. The current study utilized a between-subjects experiment to investigate the effects of one’s romantic partner hypothetically ‘liking’ an Instagram post on negative emotionality and behaviors ($N = 713; M_{age} = 13.73$). Expectancy violation theory (Burgoon & Jones, 1976) acted as the guiding theoretical framework to examine violations of relationship-specific expectancies for online behavior. Results indicated that adolescents whose partner ‘liked’ an Instagram post from someone who was the same gender as the participant (gender match) felt more upset and jealous compared to adolescents whose partner ‘liked’ a post from someone who was a different gender from them (no gender match). A mediation model indicated these negative emotions mediated the association between a gender match and investigative behaviors (i.e., looking to see if their partner ‘liked’ other posts from the individual), such that a gender match was associated with higher negative emotions which in turn was associated with higher investigative behaviors. Findings suggest that adolescents perceive these individuals as threats to their relationship and their partner ‘liking’ Instagram posts from these individuals violates their expectancies, eliciting negative emotions and behaviors. Future research should further investigate the complicated interactions that adolescents experience on social media within the context of their romantic relationships as these types of events may occur frequently and may negatively impact emotional wellbeing over time.

Keywords: adolescence, social media, romantic relationships, negative emotions, jealousy