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Research Article

Keywords: Digitally mediated communication, romantic relationships, emerging adulthood, online jealousy, online control, qualitative research

Posted Date: July 1st, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10125758/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Digitally Mediated Romantic Relationships Among Italian Emerging Adults: a qualitative study

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Abstract

This study examines how Italian emerging adults make sense of digitally mediated communication within romantic relationships. Using a qualitative emergent-design approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 participants aged 18–24 living in Italy (M=6; F=11). The interviews were analyzed through a reflexive thematic analysis approach, combining inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning. The results show that social media and messaging platforms are not merely practical tools for maintaining contact, but central relational environments in which intimacy, visibility, recognition, jealousy, trust, and boundaries are continuously negotiated, as the romantic bond itself becomes partially externalized through visible forms of extimacy. Rather than carrying fixed meanings, social digital traces such as likes, stories, response times, and archived content become relationally significant through situated processes of interpretation shaped by context, expectations, and prior experiences. Our findings further indicate that jealousy, control, and intrusiveness are best understood not as isolated phenomena, but as interconnected relational processes as, for instance, former romantic experiences. Overall, the study highlights digitally mediated interaction as a crucial arena in which contemporary romantic relationships are constructed, interpreted, and contested.

Keywords: Digitally mediated communication; romantic relationships; emerging adulthood; online jealousy; online control; qualitative research.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all participants for sharing their experiences and perspectives during the interviews. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Introduction

Romantic relationships among adolescents and young adults increasingly develop in constantly active and interconnected digital environments, where there is high availability of interaction and “social digital traces,” such as notifications, messaging, online statuses, stories, and likes, which have become structural for initiating, maintaining, and managing intimacy (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Fox & Warber, 2014; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Communication via social media can intersect with positive relational functions, for example, maintaining the bond, yet they can also enable coercive or controlling dynamics and intensify the experience of jealousy (Emond et al., 2023; Reed et al., 2015, 2017). In fact, the role that specific options available for mediated communication play in the context of couple relationships is still controversial. On the one hand, experimental research shows that seemingly everyday platform behaviors, such as liking an Instagram post, can evoke jealousy and motivate digital abuse responses, suggesting situated and context-sensitive appraisal processes (Quiroz et al., 2024). On the other hand, longitudinal evidence identifies bidirectional associations between social-media jealousy and offline intimate partner violence, leading to reciprocal spillovers between digital and in-person contexts over time (Emond et al., 2023).

Moreover, qualitative research provides deeper insight into how control is exercised and justified in youth relationships. Studies describe patterns of isolation, domination, hypervigilance, and emotional manipulation that are often rationalized as expressions of care, reciprocity, or prevention of infidelity (Afrouz & Vassos, 2024; De Sousa et al., 2023). These accounts show how seemingly ordinary platform routines can normalize surveillance and boundary overstepping, with significant psychosocial consequences.

However, much of the existing literature on online jealousy, cyber dating abuse, and social media dynamics in romantic relationships has been predominantly quantitative, focusing mainly on prevalence estimates, correlational patterns, and associated risk factors (Li et al., 2023; Martínez-Soto & Ibabe, 2024; Rocha-Silva et al., 2021). While these approaches provide important evidence regarding the diffusion and predictors of these phenomena, they tend to offer more limited insight into how such dynamics are interpreted, experienced, and negotiated within everyday relational interactions in digitally mediated contexts.

This could represent a limitation when it comes to examining the phenomenon in depth. Addressing this limitation, thus, should require a closer examination of digitally mediated interactions, which are organized around persistent and visible communicative traces whose interpretation becomes central to the construction of relational expectations, trust, and boundaries (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

From this perspective, indeed, what is at stake is not only what partners do online, but how these actions are interpreted within specific relational contexts. This makes it necessary to move beyond descriptive accounts that implicitly attribute relational outcomes solely to technological affordances, and instead focus on the processes through which meaning is constructed in interaction.

Such an emphasis on interpretation highlights the need for a theoretical framework capable of accounting for how meaning is constructed within socially and culturally situated interactions. From a sociocultural perspective, these processes of meaning-making are understood as inherently mediated by cultural tools and interactional contexts. In this sense, digital technologies do not simply transmit information but they function as cultural mediators that shape how individuals interpret, negotiate, and make sense of relational experiences (Ligorio, 2025). This view is consistent with the cultural-historical tradition, which conceptualizes psychological processes as emerging through mediated social interaction within specific cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Veresov, 2010).

This perspective has methodological implications, as it requires research approaches capable of capturing the processes of meaning-making as they unfold within specific interactional contexts. Within this frame, relational dynamics can be understood not as direct outcomes of technological features, but rather as processes that emerge from the interaction between individuals, meanings, and mediated environments. At the same time, technological determinism—that is, the assumption that digital platforms directly produce relational outcomes such as jealousy or control—should be avoided. Online environments can, instead, be understood as privileged contexts in which pre-existing relational dynamics become more visible, persistent, and open to interpretation in everyday interaction.

Building on this premise, it becomes necessary to unpack the situated mechanisms through which jealousy and control emerge, intensify, and are negotiated in everyday digitally mediated practices. Such complexity of relational mechanisms is particularly relevant in contexts such as Italy, where previous quantitative studies have already identified persistently high patterns of online control and jealousy (Pasikowski et al., 2024; Bruno et al., 2025).

The project development

The present study focuses on the Italian context by exploring how online intimacy, jealousy, and control are triggered, amplified, and negotiated in daily life. The study is part of a broader international project on romantic relationships among young adults in Europe (Italy, Spain, Poland, and the Netherlands), initiated in the peri-pandemic context, when intensified use of social media and messaging apps reconfigured how relationships are initiated, maintained, and managed (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). According to Arnett (2000, 2004), this phase is

characteristic of industrialized societies where traditional transitions to adult roles—such as stable employment, marriage, and parenthood—are increasingly delayed. Emerging adulthood is marked by several key features, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a sense of being “in-between” adolescence and full adulthood. During this period, young people actively explore possibilities in areas such as love, work, and worldviews, while gradually developing long-term commitments and adult responsibilities. Compared to adolescence, emerging adulthood is associated with greater autonomy and personal decision-making, yet individuals often do not perceive themselves as fully adult until they achieve markers such as financial independence and responsibility for others. Therefore, we believe that interviewing people in this age group gives us the opportunity to trace the dynamics of the phenomenon we are interested in, given that it is a phase of life characterized by a certain mobility.

The initial phase of our project was quantitative and results underscored the roles of current partnership status, relationship satisfaction, and ambivalence, with Italy showing higher online jealousy/control and lower online intimacy (Pasikowski et al., 2024).

With a second short longitudinal study (Italy, Poland, Spain; new sample, $n \approx 115$), we observed overall stability, with increasing online jealousy in Italy (Bruno et al., 2025).

In this study we adopted a qualitative, emergent-design approach and we focused exclusively on Italian data to delve into the cultural and relational mechanisms underlying the notably high levels of online jealousy and control emerging in this country..

The methodological approach of this research follows this trajectory: we started with a validated questionnaire; from the analysis of the results we outlined an interview outline; analysis of the initial interviews revealed elements which had not been previously considered so we introduced new questions. This process was repeated for several cycles until we obtained a set of questions that allowed us to gain a dynamic and multidimensional view of the phenomenon being investigated (Saldaña, 2016).

For instance, with the initial interviews we only collected age and gender as biographical data, as analysis advanced, prior relationship history (presence/absence of previous romantic relationships) was added; subsequently, relationship modality was noted to differentiate primarily co-located relationships from those primarily online-mediated, with long-distance arrangements recorded when present. At the current stage, qualitative methods have been adopted to examine processes of meaning-making and the complex relationships between context, experience, and development. This perspective is rooted in the cultural-historical tradition derived from Vygotsky (1978) and emphasizes the importance of understanding human development through the analysis of social situations and lived experiences. According

to this aim, our methodological approach overcomes the simple detection and description of behaviors to search for meanings constructed within specific social and cultural contexts.

Objectives and Research Question

The general aim of this research is to unpack the mechanisms underlying the quantitative patterns already observed in previous research, in particular about online intimacy, jealousy emergence and management, control practices in mediated everyday life as well as trust, boundaries, and commitment negotiation. Online communication will be investigated to explore how digitally mediated communication in romantic relationships is interpreted and negotiated. It also examines how social media and messaging platforms intersect with these relational dynamics and become embedded in the ongoing negotiation of the relationship.

Consistent with the emergent qualitative design adopted in this study, the aim is not to test predefined hypotheses but to progressively identify patterns, meanings, and mechanisms underlying participants' relational experiences in digital environments. Accordingly, the research questions are formulated as open and exploratory guides and are refined through the iterative interplay between data collection, preliminary analysis, and progressive focusing.

Therefore, the research question guiding the current study is: *How do digitally mediated interactions shape relational meanings, expectations, and practices within couple dynamics?*

Method

In this study, we implement a qualitative, emergent-design approach. We understand an emergent design as a responsible and documented adaptation of focus, sampling, and interview guides as data collection and analysis progress, emphasizing flexibility with rigor and auditability (Charmaz, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). As argued by Veresov (2014), qualitative inquiry should move beyond simple description and aim to reveal the underlying dynamics of development. Veresov (2010) emphasizes the primacy of research objectives over methodological choices, arguing that the study of complex cultural phenomena requires a coherent set of guiding principles. Central among these is the principle of development, which highlights the need to analyze phenomena in their dynamic evolution, identifying the underlying causes that shape their transformation over time. Complementarily, the principle of category calls for the construction of analytical categories that remain flexible and adaptable, rather than fixed, in order to more accurately capture the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. Further, Veresov (2010) outlines the importance of culturally mediated use of tools. This perspective is reinforced by the principle of tool development, which underscores both the effective use of existing tools

and their continuous refinement to better support contextual analysis. Based on this approach, the researcher's primary task is to understand how psychological processes are initiated, identify their driving force, and support their flow, avoiding viewing them as static or frozen in a specific moment.

Design

An emergent qualitative analysis was adopted, whereby sampling, prompts, and analytic focus were iteratively refined as inquiry progressed. Emergence was framed as purposeful, documented adaptation—rather than looseness—supported by an explicit decision trail to ensure transparency and auditability (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Within this design, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection, as they provided sufficient flexibility to explore participants' meanings while allowing the interview guide to be progressively refined in line with the evolving analytic focus (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

We consider the semi-structured interview guide as a sensitizing scaffold rather than a fixed questionnaire, and iterative refinements to probes and sequencing were permitted when improvements in fit or clarity were indicated; likewise, sampling was adjusted to engage theoretically salient contrasts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Saturation, understood as redundancy in core themes, was used as a pragmatic stopping rule for data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Patton, 2015).

Consistent with the emergent design already described, after each interview a thematic analysis was conducted to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning (themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). All phases composing the thematic analysis, from familiarizing with the interview transcripts to identifying themes, were performed on each interview and were carried out iteratively, informing subsequent revisions of the interview questions. This enabled us to better explore aspects emerging from the data, initially not considered. In this way, we were able to progressively better inquiry the phenomena, using a methodology that allowed us to further refine the questioning.

In line with this rationale, data collection and analysis were conducted in an iterative manner, allowing insights from earlier interviews to inform and refine subsequent data collection. Interpretations derived from early interviews were systematically compared with data from later interviews; in other words, interpretations derived from earlier interviews were systematically compared with later interviews and with emerging codes and themes in order to identify recurring patterns, meaningful contrasts, and analytically relevant variations. These comparisons informed the refinement of later interview prompts and follow-up questions, allowing the research process to progressively concentrate on theoretically relevant aspects

of the phenomenon while maintaining methodological rigor (Patton, 2015; Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Analytic work was conducted through an iterative and reflexive engagement with the data, involving repeated comparison across interviews and the use of analytic memo writing to progressively refine interpretations. Initial codes were generated from participants' accounts, after which patterns were identified within the coded material using insights derived from previous research. Unexpected cases and themes, as well as those that deviated from established understandings, were examined in greater depth. Inductive reasoning supported the generation of initial codes from participants' accounts, while deductive reflection allowed emerging patterns to be considered in light of sensitizing concepts derived from previous research. Abductive reasoning was used to interpret unexpected or contradictory cases and to refine the most plausible explanations. The analysis was conducted by two coders that initially worked independently and they shared their outcomes with other two researchers all involved in the project. At the first round, 70% of agreement was reached but, after confrontation with other coders, 100% of agreement was reached on all the coding, assuring high intersubjective reliability.

Consistent with an emergent approach, inferences from interim analyses were allowed to reshape subsequent inquiry in a controlled manner.

Participants

A total of 17 participants took part in this study, 11 women and six men, residing in Italy and aged 18–24 years. This age target was selected because it represents a distinct developmental stage termed *emerging adulthood*. For descriptive clarity, participants are collapsed in two age ranges: 18–21 years (n = 11) and 22–24 years (n = 6); these counts reflect the iterative accrual of cases over the fieldwork period in line with naturalistic/emergent qualitative practice.

Table 1 synthesizes the characteristics of participants.

Table 1

Characteristics of participants.

Interview ID	Gender	Age	Current status	Previous relationship
P1	Male	22	Dating P2	NA
P2	Female	23	Dating P1	NA
P3	Female	19	dating	No previous relationship
P4	Male	20	dating	Yes

P5	Female	18	dating	NA
P6	Male	23	dating	NA
P7	Female	20	dating	Yes
P8	Male	20	dating	Yes
P9	Female	21	dating	Yes
P10	Female	21	single	Yes
P11	Female	21	dating	Yes
P12	Female	21	dating	Yes
P13	Female	21	single	Yes
P14	Female	21	single	Yes
P15	Male	23	single	Yes
P16	Female	23	dating	No previous relationship
P17	Male	24	dating	No previous relationship

Legend: ID = Identifier; P = participant; NA = Not Available

Participants were recruited voluntarily among university students through dissemination within the researchers' contacts. During recruitment, efforts were made to ensure variation in characteristics relevant to the research aims, including gender, age, current relationship status, prior relationship experience, and relationship modality (e.g., long-distance relationships). In line with convenience sampling strategies aimed at obtaining information-rich cases and maintaining heterogeneity in the sample, the composition of participants was adjusted iteratively as the study progressed (Patton, 2015).

All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and written informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews.

Sampling and analysis proceeded concurrently and continued until no substantially new themes emerged from the interviews. This approach is consistent with qualitative standards of saturation or redundancy (Holloway, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall, 1996) and with discussions of rigor in convenience sampling strategies in applied qualitative research (Ames et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020; Coyne, 1997).

Instruments and Procedure

The main instrument used is a semi-structured interview. The questions composing it were initially inspired by the Cyberdating Q_A (CQA; Sánchez et al., 2015). The six dimensions originally operationalized through items in the CQA—online jealousy, online control, affective/romantic communication, intrusiveness, online intimacy, and online courtship—were transformed into thematic blocks and open-ended questions were elaborated accordingly.

Since the original source of the instrument was in another language, the base statements were translated into Italian and back-translated into the source language to verify semantic equivalence before finalizing the working script (Brislin, 1970; Brislin, 1986; Tyupa, 2011).

Six pilot interviews were conducted to check flow and comprehensibility. In this phase, it was noticed that many questions elicited dichotomous responses; therefore, they were reformulated in a more open way (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2015). The interviews were conducted in presence, in individual format. Information about the study was provided and informed consent was obtained; with authorization, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were anonymized using pseudonyms and managed with security measures in accordance with qualitative best practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews were conducted using the non-directive mirroring technique, inspired by Rogerian therapy, systematically employing echoing, selective non-directive mirroring, reflection of feeling, rephrasing, summarizing, and concluding suspended sentences (Rogers, 1951;). Expressions of interest/acceptance and clarifying questions were added only when necessary, avoiding directiveness (Rogers, 1970). To frame practices and the use of specific social media options, e.g., emojis, voice notes, image sharing, video calls, leaving messages unread. These features justified specific probes on relational modality (co-located, remote, predominantly online-mediated) and visibility norms (e.g., managing photos with ex-partners). The full interview guide is provided in the Online Resource (Online Resource 1).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with detailed, line-by-line coding to identify meaningful features of the data, followed by the development and refinement of themes through an iterative engagement with the dataset.

This process was supported by analytical memo writing (e.g., theme definitions, emerging interpretations, relational maps) and ongoing comparison across interviews and cases, allowing for the progressive refinement of meanings throughout the dataset (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Substantive and analytical decisions were documented in a decision trail and dated memos, contributing to the transparency and trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis proceeded until sufficient depth and richness of the themes was achieved, with diminishing novelty observed in subsequent interviews.

Results

This section presents the findings that emerged from the thematic analysis. The results are organized around four interconnected themes that reflect the relational progression described by participants in digitally mediated romantic life.

The first theme, **Online Courtship**, provides the broader entry point for understanding how social media is used to attract attention, explore compatibility, and initiate or maintain contact with potential partners. Once relational contact is established, the theme of **Online Intimacy and Communication** becomes central, capturing the ways in which partners construct closeness, express emotions, negotiate visibility, and manage everyday interaction through digital media.

Jealousy emerged as a key subtheme, closely linked to the interpretation of digital traces, patterns of responsiveness, interactions with third parties, and the public visibility of the relationship. In turn, **control** and **intrusiveness** emerged as further interconnected subthemes and participants described them as relational developments that could arise when jealousy intensified within digitally mediated intimacy and communication. The findings are summarized in the figure below.

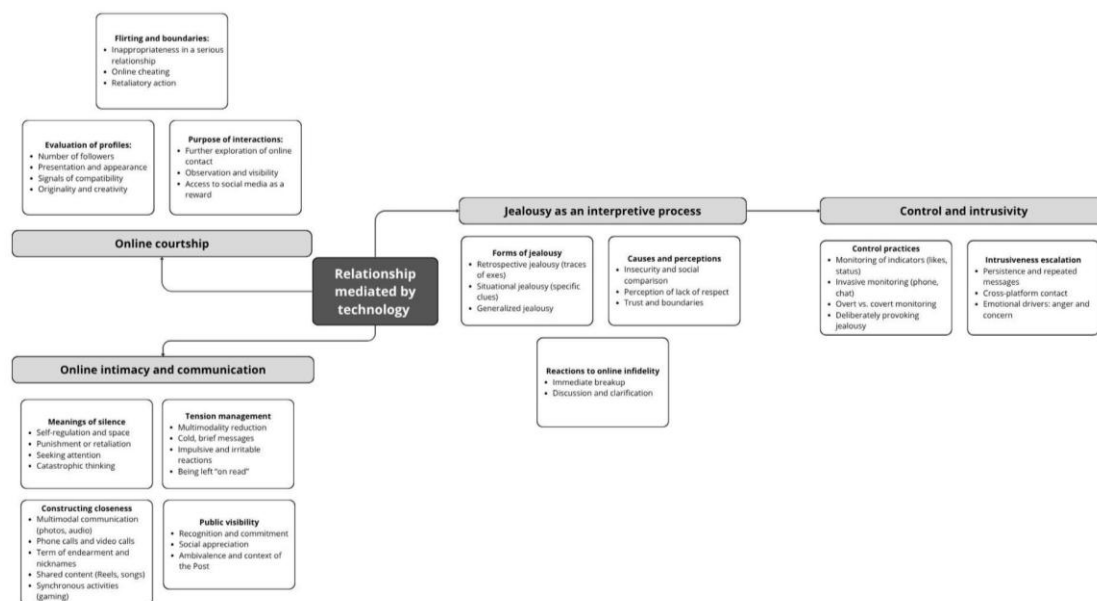


Fig. 1 Representation of the model displaying the main themes emerging from the analysis

Note: Diagram elaborated by the authors on Canva

In what follows, we will go into detail on the topics, with accompanying excerpts selected from the interviews.

Theme 1. Online Courtship

The theme of online courtship refers to the ways participants described social media as spaces for noticing, approaching, and evaluating potential partners. Across accounts, social media is not portrayed merely as channels for direct flirtation, but as environments in which attention could be directed to specific aspects of another person's online presence, where compatibility could be explored and where initial contact could either be initiated or extended after offline encounters.

A first recurrent aspect of this theme concerns the features of online profiles that attracted participants' attention. In two cases, interviewees referred to highly visible quantitative indicators, such as the number of followers. As shown in the following extract, explaining what is the first things the participant notice of the other profiles:

Excerpt

1

"I look at profiles to see if I know them, and then I look at the number of followers because if I see a high number of followers, I say, whatever, this person is famous (laughs)" (P1)

However, this same participant immediately nuanced his interpretation. As detailed in the next extract, actually a large number of followers is not necessarily attractive but it simply it tells that the person is surrounded by attention from others:

Excerpt

2

"Surely if she has a large number of followers, it means that, in any case... she's not famous, but she'll already have a lot of people around her, I think" (P1)

For the 41,18% (N=7) of participants, physical appearance and online self-presentation were the main initial points of attention. Participant n. 10 stated that she would add someone on social media if *"I like him from an aesthetic point of view, so maybe I'll add him on social media"*. Yet appearance was often only the starting point of a wider evaluative process. 58,82% of participants (N=10) look for signs of compatibility among what the potential partner posts, including hobbies, studies, and lifestyle. As shown below, social media made it possible to gather such clues before any deeper relational involvement:

Excerpt

3

"I'll add him on social media so I can see the things he posts, because maybe he has photos of a sport he plays or the university he attends" (P10)

In some accounts, originality and self-produced content were especially important. In eight (47,06%) cases, participants were not only interested in attractiveness or similarity, but also in whether the other person appeared creative, distinctive, or capable of expressing something meaningful through their online presence. This is illustrated in the following extract where one participant linked her interest to another person's work-related content:

Excerpt

4

"Maybe if he does that too [studying fashion design], it could inspire me to follow you and see what you do. Because maybe if he's another person who's active on social media and posts things about his work automatically... 'Oh yes, let's do that' I'll start following you" (P16)

She further clarified this point in the following account. As appears below, what attracted her was the perception that the other person had something singular to show:

Excerpt

5

"Art in general, music... you understand, though, that they have... they have something different to show, otherwise I'm not interested..." (P16)

Taken together, these extracts suggest that online courtship involved a selective reading of profiles in which aesthetic appeal, compatibility, and originality were considered although not always in identical ways.

A second aspect of this theme concerns the purposes for which social media were used in interactions with the other gender. For eight participants (47,06%), social media mainly served to keep in contact. In these cases, platforms were not necessarily the place where attraction first emerged, but a practical means of extending and organizing an interaction that had already become meaningful. This is clearly expressed in the following extract:

Excerpt

6

"If it's because, I don't know, we spent the whole evening together and maybe you say 'Oh, but I had such a good time, let's meet up and make plans' and yes, I'll give you my number so we can plan" (P16)

For two participants, social media were also understood as spaces in which people could observe and be observed, allowing aspects of personality and everyday life to become visible. As the following extract shows, digital visibility is connected to the possibility to get to know each other better.

Excerpt

7

"On social media, people reveal more about themselves, so perhaps it would also be a way to get to know me a little better, to observe me more closely, and therefore also a simpler way to communicate" (P14)

At the same time, providing social contacts is not always described as an immediate or casual step. For three participants (17,65%), this action is considered a relational milestone, reached only after some degree of trust or familiarity had been established. This is particularly evident in the following extract:

Excerpt

8

"I'll give you my Instagram if I know you... so let's say I do it as a reward [...] because I like you or vice versa... like, for example, if I approach a girl and she gives me her Instagram, I take it as a reward... [...] So there's a kind of complicity... because we've obviously talked... if, on the other hand, she comes up to me and says... if the girl comes up and says 'I can give you my Instagram' 'No, no, wait, who are you'..." (P4)

Participants were also asked how they viewed online flirting once a committed relationship was in place. All accounts framed such behaviour as inappropriate and often comparable to offline betrayal. As shown in the following extract, online advances to third parties are considered a clear sign that the relationship itself had been undermined:

Excerpt

9

"For me, it's a kind of betrayal because, if you're my boyfriend and I see you making explicit advances, trying to pick up someone else, I assume that you don't want to be with me anymore, so yes, I see it as a real betrayal..." (P5)

A similar boundary appears in the next extract from interview P16. Here, the participant explained that, even if the other person's flirtatious intention was not immediately clear, once it became evident she terminated the interaction:

Excerpt

10

"Maybe the other person was doing it, I get that, but I never did it with those intentions, so automatically, when I realized that you only wrote to me to get somewhere else, then that's it, no more visualization" (P16)

However, online flirting did not always appear as a genuine attempt to initiate another relationship. In two cases, it was described as a retaliatory act directed at a current or former partner. This is illustrated in the following extract, where one participant admitted flirting online out of spite rather than romantic intention:

Excerpt

11

"I did it because... I enjoyed it when I did it to my ex... OK, it was like I didn't care [...] it was out of spite, not with the intention of..." (P17)

These findings show that online courtship functioned as an initial relational field in which participants used social media to notice others, assess compatibility, and negotiate early forms of contact. Once a romantic relationship was established, however, participants' accounts moved toward a different and broader thematic domain, namely online intimacy and communication, which became the main space where closeness, emotional expression, visibility, and relational tensions were negotiated in everyday couple life.

Theme 2. Online Intimacy and Communication in Romantic Relationships

Across interviews, participants described social media and messaging platforms as central to everyday couple interaction. Analytically, these accounts suggest that digitally mediated communication was not limited to the exchange of information, but became a relational space in which closeness, emotional expression, visibility, and tension were progressively interpreted and negotiated. In this sense, communication and intimacy appeared as inseparable, since the same communicative practices that sustained affection and presence also generated ambiguity, vulnerability, and conflict.

A first aspect of this theme concerns the amount of time spent online. Six participants (35,29%) described digital communication as occasional and secondary to face-to-face interaction, especially when in-person contact was possible. As detailed in the following extract, one interviewee explicitly framed online communication as a substitute used when physical contact was not available:

Excerpt

12

"When possible, of course, we prefer face-to-face contact, so we use online communication when face-to-face contact is not possible" (P5)

Five participants (29,41%), by contrast, described forms of contact that occupied most part of the day, sometimes taking the form of extended or almost continuous exchanges. Across these accounts, intimacy was not defined only by the quantity of communication, but by the variety of media through which closeness was expressed. Indeed, one recurrent pattern was the importance of multimodal communication. 76,47% of participants (N=13) referred to photos, videos, voice notes, emojis, stickers, and gifs as ordinary resources for conveying affection and maintaining a sense of presence. One participant reported that when she missed her partner, she would send *"videos or listen to audio recordings, or often [I send] photos"* (P9). Another participant described everyday acts of sharing as ways of bringing the partner into ordinary life:

Excerpt

13

"If I eat something he likes, I can take a picture of it, or if I see something nice that he might like, I can show it to him" (P10)

Phone calls and video calls were also described as especially important in sustaining intimacy, particularly when partners were physically apart. One participant stated that she communicated *“Through video calls, so I try to compensate for the fact that I’m not physically there”* (P9). A similar idea appears in the following extract, where another participant explicitly contrasted calls with texting, emphasizing that calls allowed him to perceive the partner’s emotional state more directly:

Excerpt

14

“I’m always the one who takes the initiative and calls... I don’t text, because with texting, in the end, she... I don’t see her... I don’t see how she is, so I call her... video call, of course, not just voice...” (P4)

Warm and affectionate language also emerged as a central means of expressing intimacy. 47,06% of participants (N=8) referred to nicknames, declarations of love, and endearing expressions as important markers of emotional closeness in everyday communication. This is clearly shown in the following extract, where one interviewee described the type of responses she regularly received from her partner:

Excerpt

15

“Sweet messages, in quotation marks, like, to answer me he says: okay, my love, okay, my darling, okay, my life, like that” (P3)

A similar idea appears in the next account. Here, the participant explained that affectionate words written online could still function as genuine care, especially when the partner was sad or emotionally down:

Excerpt

16

“When she writes to me saying things like: ‘I’m sad, I’m feeling a bit down’ and I try to write something... maybe something lighthearted, to make her feel better, because these are words that come from the heart... whether I write them on a keyboard or say them in person... they have... I wouldn’t say the same effect, but I try to simulate, emulate the effect they might have in person... sweet words, words more focused on the affection and love I feel...” (P6)

Intimacy was also enacted through the circulation of content that acquired meaning within the relationship. Two participants described sending songs, reels, and short videos as indirect yet emotionally resonant ways of maintaining closeness. For example, a participant explained that she preferred to share *“A song, rather than asking ‘what are you doing?’”* (P10), while another participant reported sending *“Reel, TikTok [...] That reminds us of our relationship”* (P13). As illustrated below, shared content could also be used in moments of conflict to soften tension:

Excerpt

17

“It happened that sometimes when we argued, he would repost things that would soften me up, in a way” (P3)

In addition to messages and shared content, intimacy could also be sustained through synchronous online activities. As shown in the following extract, one participant described gaming together as a way of recreating shared time despite physical separation:

Excerpt

18

"Mainly for activities, for this activity together, or it also occurred to me that... that it's always the case, yes? When we're apart, we look for a way to play, to play together... to play video games together" (P2)

A related aspect of online intimacy concerned the public visibility of the relationship. Participants were asked how they felt when their partner posted photos or videos of the couple online. Most described such sharing positively, although the emotional significance attributed to it varied. One participant was simply pleased by it, while five others (29,41%) interpreted it as a meaningful sign of recognition and commitment. As shown below, such sharing is associated to being publicly acknowledged and valued:

Excerpt

19

"I'm happy because it means that, in addition to wanting to show other people who might be against it that he is happy and comfortable with me" (P12)

She further contrasted this experience with a previous relationship in which she had not been publicly acknowledged online. As detailed in the next extract, this contrast made public posting feel especially significant:

Excerpt

20

"I also think that maybe for the first time someone cares about me. Maybe the [Instagram] story is trivial, let's be honest, but after two years of not being considered on social media, now I feel a little more appreciated and I say, okay, so there's someone who wants to be seen with me, who's happy to be seen with me" (P12)

One participant's account showed that sharing couple-related content was not always interpreted positively. In some cases, its meaning depended on the context and the intention attributed to the act. This becomes clear in the account where it is stated that *"Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes it might bother me"* (P9). When asked to clarify this ambivalence, she explained that *"It would bother me if he posted a photo of us on social media to make peace"* (P9). This account suggests that couple visibility was not meaningful in itself, but acquired different meanings depending on when and why it was enacted.

These extracts indicate that public visibility was not interpreted as a merely superficial online gesture. In many cases, it was understood as a sign that the relationship was recognized, valued, and not hidden from others.

Participants' accounts also showed that digital interaction was highly sensitive to changes in emotional tone. When conflict or discomfort emerged, shifts in communication style became meaningful. As shown below, changes in pace, format, and silence were not treated as neutral, but as communicative signals through which emotions were expressed and interpreted.

A recurrent pattern concerned the reduction of multimodality when something was wrong. 58,82% of participants (N=10) explained that emojis, affectionate symbols, and playful elements tended to decrease or disappear when the emotional tone became negative. This is clearly illustrated in the following extract:

Excerpt **21**

"When he writes in abbreviated form, when he doesn't use emoticons with hearts and things like that, I understand that there is something he needs to tell me or that something has happened" (P9)

In two cases, multimodality did not disappear but changed function, becoming sarcastic or provocative. The next extract described the use of emojis in arguments as part of a more defiant communicative style:

Excerpt **22**

"When you're having a discussion, it's a more serious conversation, which is why emoticons don't work well. Except maybe when you're being sarcastic, that's when you sometimes use them" (P2)

Negative emotional states also affected the pace and form of writing. Four participants (23,53%) described writing rapidly and impulsively when angry, so that the very form of the communication conveyed emotional agitation. As detailed in the following extract, messages written in these moments could later become almost unintelligible:

Excerpt **23**

"If you go back and read them three minutes after the discussion has ended, you won't understand anything, because at that moment you're nervous and writing random things" (P6)

In 88,24% of the cases (N=15), the opposite occurred: messages became shorter, colder, and more restrained. As shown below, a distinction is made between impulsive moments and more serious situations in which emotional distance was conveyed through reduced and colder writing:

Excerpt **24**

"If it's a slightly more serious topic, a slightly more serious situation... let's say that the messages are reduced, let's say the text, perhaps colder and shorter texts" (P6)

Being left "on read" also emerged as a particularly painful form of communication. As illustrated in the following extract, read messages without reply were experienced as distressing because they combined silence with the feeling of being deliberately ignored:

Excerpt **25**

"If you don't want to talk to me, at least tell me, I mean, tell me I can stay an hour, two hours alone, but don't leave me with the message on read..." (P5)

Participants attributed different meanings to the interruption or reduction of communication, both when they themselves withdrew and when their partners did so. In 17,65% of the cases (N=3), withdrawing from online interaction was described as a way of taking time to reflect and self-regulate. This is clearly shown in the following extract:

Excerpt **26**

"When things were getting a bit too toxic, let's say in messages, when a conversation was getting a bit out of hand, I'd say... let's talk later... [...] and I stopped communicating online because [...] it only makes the situation worse" (P6)

In three other accounts, silence was used more reactively, as a form of punishment or retaliation. As detailed below, one participant explicitly acknowledged that she stopped answering because she knew her absence would upset her partner:

Excerpt **27**

"I knew that my absence would bother him anyway, so maybe... I stopped answering his messages, turned off my phone... [...] I knew it would drive him crazy" (P3)

Silence could also be used to attract the partner's attention and elicit care, as it was detected in 64,71% of the cases (N=11). The next extract reports how not replying could function as a way of signalling emotional need:

Excerpt **28**

"Maybe I don't answer him anymore. When I want to get his attention, when we used to argue and I was feeling a bit down and wanted some attention, I did the opposite: I didn't answer him" (P10)

All participants also reflected on how they interpreted their partner's silence. In 17,65% of the cases (N=3), they attributed it to a legitimate need for space and self-regulation. This is illustrated in the following extract, where one interviewee projected onto the partner the same need for time that he himself sometimes experienced:

Excerpt **29**

"Perhaps, just as I need to take my time, you will surely need it too, so I'll just send you a message. When you're ready to talk, when you're available, write to me" (P1)

In 23,53% of the cases (N=4), silence was initially interpreted through external circumstances, such as study, work, or sleep. As shown below, one participant explained that her first thought would often be that the partner was busy:

Excerpt **30**

"Usually, at first, I might think that he is doing something else, that maybe he is studying or sleeping" (P10)

Yet this type of interpretation does not always remain stable. Several accounts (47,06%, N=8) showed how, in the absence of reassurance, silence could gradually give rise to catastrophic thinking. This becomes particularly clear in the following extract:

Excerpt

31

"In my brain, it's like, oh my God, something happened, oh my God, they beat him up, oh my God, they robbed him, oh my God, he lost his phone... um... or other times I thought, oh my God, he's with someone else..." (P16)

Finally, participants often described communication styles within the couple as largely shared. The interviews of the only couple included in the sample were particularly revealing in this respect. Both partners (P1 and P2) reported similar ways of expressing negative emotion, including shorter messages, fewer emojis, capital letters, and sometimes leaving each other on read, although both also recognized how hurtful this could be. They similarly described communication interruption as a way of giving each other space. One of them stated:

Excerpt

32

"In my opinion, it's always better to talk about it in person, so we just say that's enough" (P1)

The other partner confirmed this account in highly similar terms, as detailed in the following extract:

Excerpt

33

"We're trying to... in those moments, give each other some space because we're both a bit like that in that respect, I mean, if we want to be alone at that moment, we want to be alone". (P2)

These findings suggest that online communication was not merely a channel for expressing emotions, but a relational field in which the form, rhythm, and interruption of interaction became meaningful signals that both partners learned to read, negotiate, and sometimes reproduce in similar ways.

Theme 3. Jealousy as an interpretive process within digitally mediated intimacy

Participants' accounts also revealed that digitally mediated interaction could become a source of uncertainty, interpretive tension, and perceived relational threat. In this context, jealousy emerged as a central theme. Participants did not describe jealousy as a fixed or uniform reaction, but as something that varied in intensity, adopted different forms, and was closely tied to how digital interactions were interpreted. More specifically, jealousy took different forms, including more generalized reactions to any online interaction with third parties, more situational forms dependent on specific contextual cues, and retroactive forms linked to former partners and the persistence of digital traces.

A first recurrent pattern concerned the intensity with which jealousy was experienced and acted upon. In four accounts (23,53%), jealousy appeared as a fleeting concern that did not prompt action. This is illustrated in the following extract, where one participant described how his partner's transparency made potentially ambiguous online interactions feel unproblematic:

Excerpt **34**
"Well, yes, it happened, but, I mean, she always... she always told me. I mean, it was always friendly, or at least questions for information, so let's say... there was never any kind of problem in that regard" (P1)

A similar position appears in the next extract, where another participant explicitly minimized the relevance of her partner's online interactions with other women:

Excerpt **35**
"I'm not actually a very jealous person, it wouldn't even bother me if he liked a girl's post, I don't personally give too much importance to this kind of thing" (P10)

In other 11 accounts (64,71%), however, jealousy prompted direct action, such as seeking reassurance or confronting the issue. As shown below, one participant described feeling reassured only after being allowed to read her partner's messages:

Excerpt **36**
"[It happened] A little, but more than anything else, maybe... but it was the first time, I mean, he reassured me, in the sense that he let me read his messages to a friend of his without any problems" (P5)

Participants also described jealousy as something that could change over time. As detailed in the following extract, one interviewee explicitly contrasted the intensity of jealousy in a previous relationship with her present stance:

Excerpt **37**
"In the past, in my last relationship, I was very jealous. Everything bothered me. Over time, as I grew up, I learned to give different weights to things, so I am less jealous about issues that used to bother me a lot. Now I am calmer" (P11)

Jealousy also took different forms. One of these concerns previous partners and the persistence of digital traces, which made aspects of the relational past remain visible in the present for 12 participants (70,59%). This becomes particularly clear in the following excerpt, where one interviewee reacted negatively to seeing stories featuring the ex-partner of her current partner:

Excerpt**38**

"I see it as disrespectful when I'm in a relationship with you and it's a serious relationship. No matter how fond you are of that person, it's not great to go on your boyfriend's profile and see that he still has stories with his ex-girlfriend" (10)

At the same time, two participants introduced nuances into this kind of jealousy. Not all traces of a previous relationship were interpreted in the same way. As shown below in the excerpt, one participant claims the contextualization of memories and images:

Excerpt**39**

"If it were a photo of an event... I don't know, there was... a... there was your graduation... there was a trip... you posted something with a photo in the middle with... with an ex... it's one thing... I mean, because I would think, no matter what, whether you want to or not... it's a memory of that graduation, whether you want to or not, it's a memory of that trip... but if it were a photo out of context, you know? If so... maybe... I wouldn't be too happy about it..." (P2)

Beyond retroactive jealousy, all participants also distinguished between more general and situational forms of jealousy. In 23,53% of cases (N=4), any interaction with the other gender could become uncomfortable, even when it involved minimal online behavior. This is shown in the following excerpt:

Excerpt**40**

"I found likes on other girls' posts and I got jealous" (P3)

In 76,47% of cases (N=13), jealousy depended more strongly on context and interpretation. It emerged only when certain clues were present, such as the suggestiveness of the content or the frequency and familiarity of the interaction. This is illustrated in the following account:

Excerpt**41**

"photos where you could see shapes, breasts, buttocks... let's say it depended on the moment... then I was saying... that... I don't know, possible anonymous questions like TellOnMe [would make me jealous]" (P17)

The same participant further clarified how jealousy depended on specific situational cues rather than mere contact as such:

Excerpt**42**

"If someone writes to M. ... so out of the blue, I say, whatever, I don't care, but then they can't write very often, and maybe they even know each other in person, maybe they see each other, you know..." (P17)

A participant points out the distinction between known and unknown people, suggesting that the identity of the third party shaped the meaning of the interaction:

Excerpt **43**

"It depends on which guys, because she does receive messages, but they are mainly friends that I also know...so it's fine that way" (P1)

In a related way, another participant emphasized that the content of the interaction had to be assessed before judging it as problematic:

Excerpt **44**

"If she receives certain provocative messages, it's obvious that I would be jealous, but she doesn't often receive these types of messages" (P8)

All participants also reflected on what they believed caused jealousy. In 23,53% of accounts (N=4), jealousy was linked to insecurity and comparison, thus locating the source of discomfort partly in the self. This is particularly evident in the following extract, where one interviewee directly connected jealousy to social comparison and feelings of inferiority:

Excerpt **45**

"On social media, people show themselves as they are not in reality, even when they use Photoshop or something else. I have always suffered from comparison, and when this happens, I always end up feeling wrong and inferior because I compare myself to the person he chatted with to see what they are like" (P14)

In 17,65% of accounts (N=3), jealousy was not mainly framed as insecurity, but as a reaction to perceived disrespect. As shown below, one participant considers certain online behaviour as out of place within a committed relationship:

Excerpt **46**

"Maybe if you post a story that I consider a bit out of context when you're engaged, a story where you clearly want to show off, well, I don't find it very respectful" (P10)

A similar moral framing appears in the next extract, where the partner's hypothetical sharing of provocative photos is conceived as exposing something that, in her view, should remain within the couple:

Excerpt **47**

"I would be upset... it would not be in line with my morals, so to speak" (P5)

Jealousy was also linked to trust, particularly in those accounts (29,41%, N=5) where participants emphasized the importance of the partner's ability to reject advances. As shown below, one participant articulated trust in terms of the partner clearly setting boundaries with others:

Excerpt **48**

"She's a pretty girl, so it's normal that she gets approached, but it's also up to her to say... but in fact she tells me herself: 'I'm not interested'" (P6)

Participants also reflected on the consequences of discovering online infidelity. Across interviews, online cheating was generally treated as equivalent to “real-life” betrayal, although different responses were envisaged. In 52,94% of cases (N=9), participants described immediate break-up as the only possible reaction. This position is encapsulated in the following statement:

Excerpt

49

“As if I had discovered betrayal in real life” (P10)

In other six cases (35,29%), participants described a more cautious response, involving clarification and confrontation before making a decision. This is illustrated in the following extract, where one participant explicitly framed online infidelity as a sign that something in the relationship had gone wrong and therefore needed to be understood:

Excerpt

50

“The first thing to do is talk... to understand the reasons that led her to do this, because it surely means that something is wrong between us, so... let's say, the goal is to find out what went wrong, what led her to do this, and then, if necessary, make the... appropriate choices, see the consequences of this choice she has made” (P1)

A final aspect of jealousy concerned the public visibility of the couple itself. Participants were asked how they would react if their partner refrained from posting couple-related content online. Here too, responses varied. Three participants (17,65%) were indifferent or even preferred privacy. One participant stated: *“No, it wouldn't bother me because I'm a very private person, so I'd prefer that too” (P13)*. Other three participants (17,65%), however, linked the absence of couple-related posts to relational dissatisfaction or concealment. As shown in the following extract, one participant explained that this mattered especially when the partner was otherwise very active online:

Excerpt

51

“If they are a very social person who posts a lot, yes, I would feel more than jealous, I would feel annoyed that they don't post about me too. But if they are someone who posts infrequently, I don't see anything wrong with it” (P11)

A more intense version of this position appears below, where the absence of couple-related content was explicitly interpreted as hiding the relationship:

Excerpt

52

“It would have bothered me if he kept me hidden” (P10)

Three participants' accounts therefore suggest that the public visibility of the couple could itself become a site of jealousy, particularly when the absence of shared content was interpreted as concealment, unequal recognition, or lack of commitment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that jealousy was not simply triggered by objective digital acts, but emerged through the subjective interpretation of visible cues, traces, interactions, and absences. Within digitally mediated intimacy, jealousy was thus closely tied to broader issues of trust, respect, insecurity, public recognition, and perceived relational threat.

Theme 4. From jealousy to control

Participants' accounts further showed that jealousy did not remain only at the level of emotion or interpretation. In several cases, it extended into practices of monitoring and verification, giving rise to the subtheme of control. These practices varied in intensity and visibility, ranging from limited checking of readily available information to more deliberate and invasive forms of surveillance.

At the lower end of this continuum, seven participants (41,18%) described paying only occasional attention to the partner's online activity, often presenting this more as curiosity than as active control. This is evident in the following extract, where one participant denied controlling his partner but nonetheless acknowledged moments of mild monitoring:

Excerpt **53**

"I paid attention... When I saw a question [referring to the social media TellOnMe], I saw the story and said, 'I don't know...' But no, in general, I never controlled..." (P17)

Other four accounts (23,53%) described a more active form of monitoring focused on checking visible indicators such as login status, followers, likes, or stories. As detailed below in the excerpt, one participant described regularly observing her partner's online status and follower count:

Excerpt **54**

"On Instagram, I had, let's say, active status, the green dot that certifies that you are active on Instagram, so it would check if he logged in, even when he told me he was going to sleep and gave me access to Instagram. Or, I don't know, I would frequently check how many followers had increased, how many had decreased, things like that" (P12)

At the most intense end of the continuum, in 35,29% of the cases (N=6) control involved highly invasive practices such as checking the partner's phone, reading chats, or accessing private content. This is illustrated in the following extract:

Excerpt **55**

"Before, let's say, I checked his phone several times. Like, I don't know, during the week, it happened two or three times that I checked the phone, but that was because I still didn't trust him, it was at the beginning. But now, I check it once every two or three weeks. I check WhatsApp, just the chats, Instagram, let's say, the direct messages" (P3)

Control also differed in terms of whether it was overt or not. In 47,06% of the cases (N=8), it took place through practices known to, or tolerated by, the partner. As shown in the following extract, one participant described asking directly to see the partner's profile in order to feel reassured:

Excerpt 56

"I would probably ask him to show me his profile so that I could feel more confident, because if he has nothing to hide, I would ask to see it for a moment" (P11)

However, the same participant later admitted that she had also checked a partner's phone secretly in the past, suggesting that control could move between overt and covert forms. In other two accounts, deception was more explicit. As the following extract shows, one interviewee described casually glancing at the partner's phone when they were together:

Excerpt 57

"At most, I can tell you that when we're together, I might glance at his phone" (P16)

A more deliberate and deceptive form of control appears in the next extract, where another participant described creating a fake profile in order to monitor a partner's activity from which she believed she had been excluded:

Excerpt 58

"I created a fake profile because I thought my ex-boyfriend, with whom I was taking a break, had blocked my stories... and so, since he had a public profile, I could see the stories with another profile, in case he had posted them" (P7)

All participants described a form of control in which jealousy was not only managed reactively but actively instigated. In these accounts, posting content was used to provoke the partner's jealousy and thereby regain attention, rekindle contact, or test the relationship. Some interviewees (41,18%, N=7), although were familiar with this practice, rejected it or described it as childish. As shown in the following extract, one participant referred negatively to having been the target of such behaviour:

Excerpt 59

"No, but it was done to me... it was done to me before, and it was something... not in my current relationship, it was done to me before and I saw it as something really... um... stupid, something to really put me to the test" (P6)

Other 10 accounts (58,82%) described this strategy as something participants themselves had used. One participant admitted posting *"a cute photo that might bother him"* (P9) in both current and previous relationships. A particularly clear example appears in the following extract:

Excerpt 60

"I post stories with girls, and as I post stories with girls, I think she gets, let's say, exasperated, let's say, so she contacts me, so we talk again" (P4)

This extract is particularly revealing because it shows jealousy not merely as a feeling to be managed, but as something that could be deliberately activated in the other person in order to re-establish contact and regain relational influence.

Overall, these findings suggest that control can be understood as a relational development of jealousy within digitally mediated intimacy. When jealousy intensified, participants sometimes moved from interpreting digital cues to actively monitoring, verifying, or strategically influencing the partner's behavior.

Although control took different forms and degrees of intensity, some accounts suggested a further escalation in which monitoring and contact attempts became increasingly insistent and boundary-crossing. These accounts are captured in the subtheme of intrusiveness, which refers to persistent attempts to obtain a response or re-establish contact despite silence, distance, or explicit relational boundaries.

A first variation within this subtheme concerned the degree of persistence. In 23,53% of cases (N=4), participants described limited insistence and a relatively clear recognition of the partner's need for space. This is evident in the following extract, where one interviewee explained that after a few attempts, he would stop and wait for the partner to re-engage:

Excerpt

61

"When I see that she's not answering, I try calling her a few times, but then I stop, because... because that's enough, because maybe, just as I need to take my time, she probably needs it too, so I just send her a message. When you're ready to talk, when you're available, text me or call me or let's meet up, whatever you want" (P1)

Other accounts (58,82%, N=10) described more moderate forms of persistence, involving repeated messages and calls until a response was obtained. As shown below in the excerpt, one participant described a pattern of contacting the partner several times in succession when he did not answer:

Excerpt

62

"I send him a few messages asking him what happened and then, if I see that the message still isn't getting through, I call him. [...] I call him a couple of times, but he answers right away when I call him" (P11)

At the most intense end of the continuum, for 17,65% of cases (N=3) intrusiveness involved repeated attempts to contact the partner across multiple platforms, even after being blocked or after the partner had clearly signalled a need for distance. This becomes especially clear in the following extract:

Excerpt**63**

"She blocked me on WhatsApp, so I would try to look for her on TikTok or Instagram, but inevitably, maybe at that moment she needed to be alone... and so... she ended up blocking me there too" (P15)

The same participant described his messages as *"Numerous, relentless"* and linked this persistence to a growing sense of anxiety and obsession, stating that *"The anger grew, and so did the obsession."* This account shows particularly clearly how intrusiveness involved not only repeated action, but an escalation fuelled by unresolved emotional intensity.

All participants also reflected on the emotional forces that propelled such intrusive behaviour. One recurrent driver (35,29%; N=6) was anger for not receiving an answer that generates nervousness and sustains repeated contact attempts. This is illustrated in the following extract from interview P15:

Excerpt**64**

"I was getting nervous, I was in a state of nervousness, which in one way or another I almost had to express, inevitably" (P15)

Another important emotional driver was "worry". In these cases (35,29%, N=6), insistence was not framed primarily as aggression or control, but as an attempt to reassure oneself that the partner was safe. This appears vividly in the following extract, where the gradual escalation from a first message to repeated attempts to reach the partner is described:

Excerpt**65**

"[I sent] The first message, maybe after three hours: 'Can you text me as soon as you're done?' Then maybe another hour or hour and a half goes by, 'Oh, is everything okay?' Then another hour goes by, another hour, and then the call comes... Many times, when this happened, he answered the call, other times it happened when he came home and didn't say anything, that he had fallen asleep, so he didn't answer the call... and then there was more concern than anything else, because you hadn't come home and you hadn't texted me, and then you sent me a message at 7 in the morning, so there was concern, but that only happened once... in fact, in my opinion, it was the worst night of my life..." (P5)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that intrusiveness represented a point at which jealousy, uncertainty, anger, or worry were no longer contained within interpretation or monitoring, but extended into repeated and increasingly insistent attempts to obtain reassurance, regain contact, or overcome the partner's silence. In this sense, intrusiveness appeared as an escalation within the broader field of digitally mediated intimacy and communication, closely connected to jealousy and to the emotional demands generated by online relational life.

Overall, the findings indicate that online courtship, intimacy, communication, jealousy, control, and intrusiveness are best understood as interconnected dimensions of the same relational process, through which partners construct closeness, interpret digital cues, and negotiate trust, visibility, and boundaries in everyday online interaction.

Discussion

The present study explored how Italian emerging adults make sense of digitally mediated communication within romantic relationships and how relational meanings are negotiated in everyday online interaction. Our research question was “*How do digitally mediated interactions shape relational meanings, expectations, and practices within couple dynamics?*” Rather than approaching online practices as isolated behaviors, the emergent design made it possible to reconstruct the relational field within which such practices acquire significance. Read in this light, the findings suggest that digitally mediated couple life cannot be reduced either to a technical extension of offline interaction or to a neutral channel for maintaining contact. It is, rather, a relational environment in which intimacy, presence, recognition, uncertainty, and threat are continuously produced through communication and through the interpretation of digital traces. In this respect, the present study extends prior research not simply by confirming that social media are implicated in jealousy, monitoring, or conflict, but by clarifying how these dynamics are constituted through the situated interpretation of digitally mediated signs within the relationship (Emond et al., 2023; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019).

A first, major implication of the findings concerns the relational status of online communication. Most participants did not describe messaging platforms and social media as merely practical tools for exchanging information. Rather, they portrayed them as spaces through which closeness, affective continuity, and mutual presence are actively produced. At the same time, the findings indicate that digitally mediated intimacy is not exhausted by private exchange. A substantial part of what participants described as meaningful concerned the ways in which the relationship itself becomes publicly visible. Photographs, stories, shared activities, and other couple-related content did not function as superficial embellishments of the bond. They operated as practices through which the relationship was rendered socially legible.

This pattern can be interpreted fruitfully through the concept of extimacy. Skok (2025) defines extimacy as the public externalization of intimacy in search of self-confirmation, acceptance, and social bond formation. Interpreted in relation to the present findings, this concept helps explain why making the relationship visible online carries such strong relational significance. Publicly displaying the relationship was not described simply as exposure or performance. Rather, it often functioned as a mode of recognition; a way of affirming that the relationship exists, matters, and occupies a visible place within one’s social world. In several accounts, being posted meant being acknowledged, not hidden, and publicly affirmed as part of the

other's life. In this sense, our findings extend extimacy from the level of individual self-presentation to the level of the couple. What is externalized is not only the self, but the bond itself.

At the same time, the data show that public visibility does not stabilize meaning. Posting the relationship may signify commitment, pride, and legitimacy, but it may also be read as situational, strategic, or compensatory. Likewise, not posting the relationship may be compatible with privacy, but it may also become legible as concealment, asymmetry, or insufficient recognition. This ambivalence is theoretically important because it shows that visibility is not inherently affirming or inherently problematic. Its significance is relationally produced. Visibility becomes one more sign that must be interpreted in relation to the history of the bond, the expectations organizing it, and the intentions attributed to the act. In this respect, extimacy does not simply refer to the exposure of intimacy, but to a condition in which the relationship becomes publicly readable and is therefore newly open to confirmation, contestation, and doubt (Skok, 2025).

This interpretive centrality of visibility becomes even clearer when the findings are considered from a sociocultural perspective on technology. Ligorio (2025) argues that digital technologies should not be understood as neutral tools for transmitting information, but as cultural mediators that participate in the construction of meaning. This perspective is particularly important for the present study because it helps explain why participants' experiences cannot be reduced either to platform features or to individual dispositions alone. Digital environments do not simply host couple interaction; they shape the conditions under which that interaction becomes visible, traceable, archivable, and meaningful. Likes, read receipts, response times, follower changes, stories, archived photographs, and visible traces of former relationships become part of the interpretive material through which the relationship itself is understood. From this point of view, technology mediates the processes through which relational experience is perceived, remembered, and made sense of.

This reading is consistent with Treem and Leonardi's (2013) discussion of the affordances of visibility and persistence, but Ligorio's contribution allows these affordances to be interpreted within a broader account of sociocultural mediation. What matters is not only that social media make interactions more visible and persistent, but that such visibility and persistence reshape the symbolic environment within which the relationship is interpreted. One of the strongest implications of the present findings is precisely that digital traces may appear objective while remaining relationally indeterminate. They seem to offer evidence, yet they do not speak for themselves. Their meaning depends on how they are read within a specific relational context. This is where Barrett et al.'s (2025) theory of constructed emotion becomes especially productive. Its relevance here does not lie merely in the claim that emotions are context-dependent, but in the stronger proposition that affective meaning is not inherent in isolated

signals. Meaning emerges through situated acts of categorization and interpretation, and variation is constitutive rather than accidental. Applied to the present findings, this means that a delayed reply, a like, a story featuring another person, a retained photograph with a former partner, or the absence of couple-related posts cannot be assumed to possess a fixed relational meaning. The same sign may be read as ordinary, threatening, disrespectful, reassuring, or irrelevant depending on the history of the relationship, the affective climate of the interaction, and the expectations through which it is interpreted. This perspective is crucial because it avoids technological determinism. Social media do not directly produce jealousy, control, or conflict. Rather, they reorganize the conditions under which intimacy, absence, recognition, distance, and exclusivity become visible and therefore interpretable (Barrett et al., 2025; Ligorio, 2025).

From this perspective, one of the central contributions of our findings is to show that digitally mediated couple life is structured by a tension between apparent evidence and interpretive uncertainty. Social digital traces may seem objective, but their relational significance remains open. This helps explain why jealousy assumed such prominence in participants' accounts. Jealousy did not emerge as a discrete emotional response to clearly bounded transgressions, but as a relational process organized around the interpretation of visible cues, communicative absences, and persistent traces. This is consistent with Emond et al. (2023), who identify social media as a prime site for jealousy in romantic relationships because they centralize information about the partner, facilitate contact with former partners and possible rivals, and render many relationally relevant cues visible. Our findings extend this line of work by showing that what becomes threatening is not the trace itself, but its interpretation as signaling attraction to others, disrespect, distance, or relational instability.

Our findings further indicate that jealousy was internally differentiated. In some accounts, it assumed a generalized form, such that almost any interaction with third parties could become troubling. In others, it was strongly situational, depending on the content of the interaction, its frequency, the identity of the third party, or the broader relational context. In still other cases, it was retroactive, attached to former partners and to the persistence of past relational traces. This pattern resonates with Van Ouytsel et al. (2019), who show that young adults perceive digital media as potentially eliciting jealousy, conflict, and monitoring through photographs with others, private messaging, and visible partner activity. Our findings deepen this account by showing that jealousy is not activated simply by the presence of cues, but by the interpretation of such cues. In this sense, jealousy appears less as an immediate reaction to online acts than as a mode of organizing relational threats under conditions of persistent visibility.

The interpretive character of jealousy is especially clear in the way participants connected it to insecurity, social comparison, self-esteem, distrust, and perceived disrespect. In some narratives, jealousy emerged through comparison with third parties, particularly where social

media intensified appearance-based evaluation. In others, it was framed less as personal insecurity than as a moral reading of the partner's conduct: a story, image, or retained trace became problematic not because it proved infidelity, but because it appeared incompatible with seriousness, exclusivity, or respect. This distinction is theoretically consequential. It suggests that jealousy in digitally mediated couple life cannot be reduced either to individual vulnerability or to partner behavior alone. Rather, it emerges at the intersection of self-evaluation, relational trust, and normative expectations regarding what counts as appropriate, respectful, or publicly meaningful within a relationship.

The role of former partners is particularly significant in this regard. One of the clearest contributions of the present study is to show that prior relationships remain active in current couple life not only psychologically, but digitally. Archived photographs, accessible profiles, visible stories, and retained content render the past persistently available to present interpretation. This finding is closely aligned with Marshall (2026), who shows that observing former partners on social media is associated with greater jealousy, negative affect, and breakup distress, especially when observation is active and attachment anxiety is high. Although the present study did not focus specifically on post-breakup adjustment, it reveals the same structural dynamic; digital environments do not allow the past to recede cleanly. They preserve it as a set of potentially reactivatable traces. Current relationships are therefore negotiated not only against present interactions, but also against archived histories that remain visible and affectively consequential.

The findings also illuminate how intimacy, trust, and boundaries are negotiated through communicative form. Calls, voice notes, photographs, affectionate language, shared media, reply timing, silence, and interruption all emerged as forms through which affective meanings were both expressed and inferred. This suggests that digitally mediated communication is not simply a vehicle through which intimacy is conveyed; it is one of the principal sites where intimacy is constituted, tested, and destabilized. Availability, withdrawal, attentiveness, and emotional distance become perceptible through communicative form. A delayed response, an abrupt message, the absence of usual emojis, or leaving the partner on read may all become relationally consequential. Under these conditions, trust does not appear as a stable background property of the relationship. It depends on whether partners can stabilize shared meanings around each other's digital conduct and negotiate mutually intelligible expectations regarding responsiveness, visibility, and acceptable behavior online.

Seen from this perspective, the transition from jealousy to control becomes theoretically intelligible. Control did not emerge in participants' accounts as a separate and self-contained phenomenon. Rather, it appeared as one possible development within the same field of ambiguity, threat, and interpretive labor that gave rise to jealousy. When uncertainty intensified and reassurance was not secured, some participants moved from reading signs to checking

them, monitoring them, or verifying them more actively. This pattern is consistent with Emond et al. (2023), whose longitudinal work links social media jealousy with broader conflict and aggression, and with Van Ouytsel et al. (2019), who identify monitoring as one way young adults respond to digitally mediated jealousy. Our findings refine these claims by showing the relational logic through which such practices may become intelligible to participants themselves. Monitoring was not always narrated as overt domination. It was often framed as reassurance-seeking, uncertainty reduction, or an effort to restore interpretive certainty.

This point is crucially contextualized by Atiénzar-Prieto et al. (2025), who argue that technology-facilitated coercive control cannot be adequately understood apart from the relational context in which it unfolds. Their review shows that young people often identify such practices as abusive, yet also justify them in some circumstances as care, concern, or responses to suspected infidelity. This ambivalence is strongly reflected in the present data. Checking, surveillance, and even more invasive forms of monitoring were often embedded in vocabularies of transparency, worry, or relational investment. This does not diminish their coercive potential. Rather, it shows that the meaning of control is itself relationally negotiated. The present findings, therefore, support a contextual rather than purely categorical reading of digital control: its significance lies not only in the act itself, but in the asymmetries, expectations, and affective justifications through which it is enacted.

Intrusiveness marks a further escalation within that same relational process. Here the issue is no longer simply the interpretation of signs or the verification of suspicion, but repeated insistence, intensified contact-seeking, cross-platform pursuit, and difficulty tolerating silence or distance. What is theoretically important is that most participants did not describe this behavior as driven exclusively by aggression. Anger was one affective driver, but so was worry. This complicates any simple distinction between hostile and caring motives.

As Atiénzar-Prieto et al. (2025) suggest, technology-facilitated coercive dynamics are often partly normalized when they are interpreted as signs of attachment or concern. We attempted to clarify how this may occur; intrusiveness becomes possible when the need for response, certainty, or renewed connection outweighs recognition of the other's boundaries. In this sense, intrusiveness is not external to jealousy and control but one possible culmination of the same relational field of threat, uncertainty, and escalating attempts at reassurance.

Taken together, the findings support an interpretation of digitally mediated couple life as a relational field organized by visibility, persistence, and interpretation. Within this field, intimacy is not purely private, but may be exteriorized and publicly legible; communication is not merely expressive but constitutive of how presence, distance, and recognition are negotiated; jealousy emerges less as a discrete emotion than as a central mode of interpreting relational threat; and control and intrusiveness become intelligible as possible developments when uncertainty intensifies and interpretive labor gives way to surveillance or insistence. Trust,

respect, and boundaries therefore do not appear as stable givens, but as fragile relational accomplishments that require continual negotiation. Digital technologies, understood as cultural mediators rather than neutral tools, do not merely add new resources to couple life. They reshape the very conditions under which the relationship becomes visible, meaningful, and affectively consequential. Thus, the current study invites a shift from asking whether digital media affect romantic relationships to asking how contemporary romantic relationships are increasingly constituted through digitally mediated forms of interaction.

Conclusions

This study shows that digitally mediated romantic relationships among Italian emerging adults are shaped through the ongoing interpretation of everyday online practices. Digital traces such as likes, stories, response times, archived photographs, silences, and public displays of the couple do not function as self-evident indicators of commitment, betrayal, recognition, or threat. Rather, they gain relational significance when interpreted in relation to prior experiences, expectations of reciprocity, affective climate, and the norms of recognition established within the couple. This interpretive perspective helps explain the progression identified across the analysis: online communication sustains contact, intimacy, and emotional presence, while the same conditions that make the relationship visible and continuously accessible may also render absence, ambiguity, and third-party interactions relationally consequential.

Within this framework, jealousy, control, and intrusiveness are best understood as connected developments within digitally mediated couple life. Jealousy emerges when visible or absent signs are interpreted as possible threats to the relationship; control appears when uncertainty leads partners to seek verification through monitoring or checking; and intrusiveness marks a further intensification of this process, when the need for reassurance, response, or renewed connection becomes difficult to reconcile with the other partner's boundaries. Thus, the contribution of the study lies not only in identifying online practices associated with romantic relationships, but in showing how these practices become meaningful within situated relational histories and how they participate in the ongoing negotiation of closeness, trust, respect, and limits.

The scope of these conclusions, however, must be considered in relation to the study's design. The analysis focused on a specific qualitative sample of Italian emerging adults, selected because previous phases of the broader project had identified Italy as a particularly relevant context with regard to online jealousy and control. This focus allowed for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and relational mechanisms underlying those patterns, but it also limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other developmental and sociocultural contexts. In addition, the study was based on participants' narrated experiences.

This choice was coherent with the exploratory and interpretive aims of the research, as it enabled access to the meanings participants attributed to their digitally mediated relationships. Nevertheless, it did not capture interactions as they unfolded in real time, nor did it examine how meanings were jointly negotiated by both partners within the same relationship. These limitations indicate clear directions for future research. The next stage of the project should broaden the comparative dimension by extending the qualitative analysis to Polish and Spanish participants, given that previous comparative studies conducted by the authors had already identified relevant cross-country differences in online intimacy, jealousy, and control. Including these national contexts would make it possible to examine more directly how culturally situated expectations, relational norms, and meanings shape digitally mediated couple life across settings. Future studies could also adopt longitudinal and dyadic designs in order to understand how these processes evolve over time and how partners co-construct, contest, or transform the meanings attributed to digital traces within the relationship. Such developments would move the analysis beyond individual narratives and contribute to a more dynamic understanding of how romantic relationships are maintained, challenged, and reconfigured through everyday digital communication.

Statements and Declarations

Fundings

No funding was received for conducting this study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval

Ethical Approval This study was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines and was approved by the Ethics Committee for Scientific Research at the University of Łódź (Resolution No. 20(I)KBBNUŁ/I/2021–2022). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study began.

Informed Consent

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants also consented to the use of anonymized interview data and excerpts for research and publication purposes.

Data Availability

Data obtained from interviews transcripts are available on the corresponding author's upon reasonable request.

Authors Contributions

Author 1 and Author 8 conceived the research, collected the data, outlined the theoretical section and the structure of the manuscript. Author 2 and Author 3 analysed the data and selected the excerpts. Author 3 edited the methodological part and Author 4, Author 5 and Author 6 reviewed it. Author 7 and Author 8 reviewed the whole manuscript. Author 7 edited the manuscript for the submission, in accordance with the journal's requirements, coordinated the submission process, and served as corresponding author. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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