Attitudes Towards Passwords Sharing in Cohabiting Partners

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Abstract

Contemporary communication technology has permeated into the social fabric transforming the ways people interact, consume, and exchange information. The most prevalent way of virtually socializing currently is through social networking sites (SNS). SNS use can also threaten romantic relationships by facilitating infidelity, jealousy, and conflict. Partners may resort to engaging in online surveillance to guard their mate. We surveyed $N = 277$ adults (68.9% women; $M_{age} = 35.19$, $SD = 10.65$) who are living together in a marital or committed relationship with a partner. In a logistic regression analysis we examined whether relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives, social media infidelity-related behaviors (SMIRB), or neuroticism predicted favorable or unfavorable attitudes towards password sharing. After controlling for gender, we found that only SMIRB was negatively associated with attitudes toward password sharing. Those who reported engaging in greater SMIRB behaviors were least likely to endorse password sharing. Implications and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: commitment, social media, SNS infidelity, neuroticism

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The ubiquitous structure of social networking sites (SNS) has made it possible for individuals to connect with others with a mere click. SNS enables users to communicate daily with friends, colleagues, strangers, and family. Romantic partners also use SNS to remain connected throughout the day, increase intimacy, and even communicate relationship problems (Abbasi, 2022). Some partners may be using SNS to seek alternative avenues for romance or even to escape from their primary relationship troubles (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017a). Unsurprisingly then, SNS usage has been associated with low relationship quality, conflict, social tension, jealousy, low commitment, unhappiness, low self-esteem, envy, and divorce (Abbasi, 2019a, Carter, 2016). Therefore, SNS are implicated not only in the escalation and maintenance of romantic relationships but also in their de-escalation. Notwithstanding that committed partners dismiss alternatives (Rusbult, 1980), commitment does not appear to protect some romantic partners against identifying relational alternatives through SNS (Abbasi, 2018a; Dibble et al., 2021; Drouin et al., 2021). Indeed, the proclivity of evaluating the quality of romantic alternatives does not disappear in committed relationships (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). On the contrary, evidence supports that having crushes while in a stable relationship is common and fairly innocuous (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2019).

What would make romantic partners wary of sharing passwords with their significant other? In the contemporary era, partners can easily find romantic alternatives online in the guise of 'friends' (Abbasi et al., 2019). Digital communication with the most desired romantic alternatives is prevalent in both college and non-college samples (Dibble et al., 2021). These communications can range from innocuous/platonic to more aggressively romantic/ sexual

(Dibble et al., 2021). Cohabiting or not, some users deem certain SNS contacts as romantic alternatives (Drouin et al., 2021; Abbasi, 2018a), more like a partner insurance (Wedberg, 2016) or a backup plan (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2019). However, partners living together may have more access to each other's electronic devices, which makes them vulnerable to scrutiny. Therefore, cohabiting partners are more likely to be caught and face serious repercussions if they engage in extra-dyadic communications. Although surveilling the partner's online activity may motivate some password sharing (Bevan, 2018), others volunteer their passwords to demonstrate and/or build trust (Baker & Carreno, 2016). We sought to explore attitudes toward password sharing in a sample of cohabiting adults because password sharing attitudes are uniquely linked with partners demographics and relationship characteristics (Bevan, 2018).

To the extent that one has designs on extra-relational romantic prospects and is using SNS to communicate with them, it is reasonable to assume that one would be averse to sharing their SNS passwords. To our knowledge, research has yet to investigate attitudes toward password sharing among only cohabiting adult partners. Our study extends work by Bevan (2018), who explored relationships between password sharing and account monitoring with relationship satisfaction, online surveillance, and jealousy in adult partners. Commitment may also influence partners' attitudes towards password sharing. We organized our investigation using a highly recognized theory of relationship quality, the investment model of relationships (Rusbult, 1980). The investment model contends that, in addition to relationship satisfaction and quality of alternatives, investment size (i.e., mutual ties) is a main binding force between partners.

Finally, partners high in neuroticism are less satisfied with their romantic partners (Abbasi, 2017) because neuroticism predisposes individuals to relationship dissatisfaction (Gattis et al., 2004) and marital disaffection (emotional indifference; Abbasi et al., 2018). They also share more information online than in person, and are more likely to displace their investments with online friends (Abbasi, 2021). Lower relationship investments adversely affect relationship commitment.

Password Sharing

Sharing passwords is not uncommon (Bevan, 2018). Researchers who have examined password sharing focused mostly on adolescents (Baker & Carreno, 2016; Lucero et al., 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Meter & Baum, 2015; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016), and those who examined adults focused primarily on password sharing in workplace settings (Whitty et a., 2015). It is plausible that romantic partners will be wary of sharing passwords if they engage in aggressive romantic/sexual communication with others. Evidence supports that married adults do not actively pursue their most desired alternative even though they identify more alternatives than casual daters (Dibble et al., 2021). Similarly, cohabiting adults could also be treading carefully in regard to communication with the alternatives in fear of losing resources afforded by their primary relationship (shared housing, children, financial security). Partners who suspect infidelity or even experience jealousy may demand or steal passwords to spy on their partner's activities (Muise et al., 2014).

SNS password sharing is considered a type of online surveillance behavior that is employed to learn about someone's activities (Bevan, 2018). People sometimes share passwords with their partner primarily to signal and build trust and to signify that they have nothing to hide

(Lucero et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Some evidence supports that password sharing between adult partners was positively related to relationship satisfaction but was unrelated to jealousy (Bevan, 2018). Researchers also found an inverse relationship between age and password sharing (Bevan 2018; Happ et al., 2016). That is, younger people are more prone to sharing passwords. An explanation could be that password sharing may be linked with risk taking, which is commonly seen in younger populations (Gray, 2016) who are also prone to SNS addiction (Abbasi, 2018b). Researchers found that adolescents consider sharing passwords as a means of showing trust and mutual love (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). For example, teens reported that password sharing can act as an insurance against unfaithfulness (Lucero et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). However, some researchers associate password sharing with distrust and jealousy (Lucero et al., 2014).

Relationship Factors

Relationship commitment directly influences daily behaviors and is the most direct predictor of persistence in a relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998). Theoretically, commitment is influenced by three base factors: relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and mutual investments made in the relationship. Relationship satisfaction refers to the degree of happiness that partners feel in their romantic relationship and is influenced by the extent to which a partner fulfills a person's most important basic needs (Corra et al., 2009; Le & Agnew, 2003). Partners evaluate the quality of available alternatives based on the idyllic SNS profiles that flaunt perfect lifestyles. Quality of alternatives refers to the perceived desirability of the best available alternative to the primary relationship and is based on the degree to which a partner's most important needs could be fulfilled with an alternative (Rusbult et al., 1998). The ideal

representation of others' lives on SNS can sow dissatisfaction and reduce commitment within the primary relationship (Abbasi & Alghmadi, 2017b). Nevertheless, satisfied partners are likely to focus more on the positive aspects than on the negative aspects of their relationship (Bradbury et al., 2000). Investments are resources afforded by the relationship, which would be lost in the event of dissolution (Tropper, 1972). Building on the existing literature, we hypothesized that partners who report higher commitment (H1) and higher satisfaction (H2) will have a more favorable attitude towards password sharing, and those reporting a higher quality of alternatives will have an unfavorable attitude towards password sharing (H3).

Due to the covert nature of SNS interactions, it is not surprising that increased SNS communications with alternatives is associated with increased sexual activity (Banas et al., 2021). Infidelity begins when the first romantic signal is directed to an extra-dyadic partner by a committed partner (Alapack et al., 2005). Infidelity is comprised of extra-dyadic romantic interactions within a dyadic relationship where at least one of the partners engaging in it acknowledges there to be a violation of agreed or implicit boundaries (emotional and sexual; Daines, 2006). Absence of contextual clues and lack of physical presence could potentially turn innocuous SNS interactions into intense emotional disclosures (Helsper & Whitty, 2010), and intimate disclosures solicit reciprocation and facilitate a rapid relationship development (Walther, 1996). Intimacy and self-disclosure are two main components of relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973), both of which can be attained easily with SNS contacts. We hypothesized that partners reporting greater SNS infidelity behaviors will have an unfavorable attitude towards password sharing (H4).

Neuroticism Personality

Neuroticism is a predisposition towards experiencing negative affectivity (McCrae & Costa, 1997) and stress (Abbasi, 2016), and is also linked with low social support, fear of rejection, and feelings of loneliness (Malone et al., 2012). People high in neuroticism fear being misinterpreted in a face-to-face situation and prefer online tools for communication (Wilson et al., 2010). They frequently use the Internet to develop a sense of belonging, reduce loneliness, and receive social validation (Butt & Phillips, 2008; Marshall et al., 2015). Previous research found that neuroticism is linked with negative affect and Facebook addiction partially mediated this relationship (Abbasi & Drouin, 2019). The tendency towards social media addiction could be because neurotics are more likely to receive social and emotional support online, than in a face-to-face situation (Abbasi, 2021). The social skills model (Caplan, 2005) contends that people who lack social skills feel more comfortable and less threatened in an online environment. The cognitive behavioral model (Davis, 2001) holds that some SNS users harbor maladaptive cognitions, which get intensified by social isolation and eventually develop into maladaptive compulsive behaviors. It is plausible that partners high in neuroticism may be overprotective about their passwords and hold an unfavorable attitude towards password sharing (H5). This association is predicted because of the neurotic individuals' tendency toward relationship dissatisfaction and infidelity-related behaviors (Abbasi et al., 2018).

Method

Participants

Data were initially collected from 311 adults. We excluded $n = 28$ for failing to provide attitudes on password sharing), and an additional $n = 6$ for failing attention checks. This yielded a final sample of $N = 277$ (68.9% women; $M_{age} = 35.19$, $SD = 10.65$) who were cohabiting with a

current romantic partner. Most of the participants for this study were recruited from MTurk (94%; *n* = 260), with the remainder coming from a large United States university's official research webpage (6%, *n* = 17). Average relationship length in the sample was 10.53 years (*SD* = 9.55 years). Most (85%) resided in the United States, 70.8% were married, and 29.9% were in a committed relationship. Most (92.1%) reported their relationship to be heterosexual, followed by bisexual (4.3%), and same-sex relationship (3.6%). The participants resided in 38 different states across the U.S. Participants were mostly White (74.4%), followed by Asian (13.4%), Hispanic (5.4%), African American (4.3%), Native American (1.4%), and African descent (1.1%). Regarding the highest level of education completed, 0.7% reported no high school degree, 10.8% completed high school, 30.3% attended/were attending college (not graduated yet), 13.0% completed an associate degree, 32.1% completed a bachelor's degree, 2.5% had attended or were attending graduate school, and 10.5% completed at least one graduate degree.

Procedure

The study was IRB approved. A survey consisting of demographic questionnaires, modified Facebook intrusion questionnaire (not analyzed in the current paper), and scales related to romantic relationship (commitment, relationship satisfaction, SMIRB behaviors, quality of alternatives) was administered online using the Internet-based SurveyMonkey® platform. The link to the study was also posted on the university's official research webpage, Amazon Turk (Mturk), and SNS (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn) to recruit a wide range of participants, though in the event only participants from the first two sources completed the study. Following the advice of researchers concerned with Mturk data quality (Aguinis et al., 2021), we added attention check questions to filter un-attentive participants. Inclusion criteria were being at

least 18 years old, in a cohabiting romantic relationship, and using SNS.

Measures

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the scales used.

Commitment

Romantic relationship commitment was measured by the seven-item commitment subscale from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). The scale is anchored on a 9-point Likert scale (0 = *do not agree at all*; 4 = *agree somewhat*; 8 = *agree completely*). Items were averaged to get a total score. Example items are "I want our relationship to last for a very long time;" and "I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future" (α = .81).

Social media infidelity-related behaviors (SMIRB)

We used SMIRB to measure social media infidelity-related behaviors (McDaniel et al., 2017). The SMIRB is comprised of 7-items. Participants rate their agreement on a 6-point response scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *strongly agree*). Items are averaged for analyses where high scores represent a greater tendency to engage in SMIRB behaviors. Example items are "Sometimes, instead of going to my spouse/partner, I share deep emotional or intimate information with others online" (α = .88).

Quality of alternatives

The quality of relationship alternatives was measured using the 10-item quality of alternatives facet and global items subscale from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). The facet items are included solely to improve the quality and enhance the comprehensibility of global items (Rusbult et al., 1998), therefore, our analyses did not include

the facet items. The response format of the global items is anchored on a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 = *agree completely*). The five global items were averaged to get the total score. An example item is "My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship" (α = .87).

Relationship Satisfaction

We used the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007) to measure relationship satisfaction. CSI-4 is a 4-item scale, with some items designed to utilize a six-point (0 = *not at all true*, 5 = *completely true*), and other items utilizing a seven-point (0 = *extremely unhappy*, 6 = *perfect*), Likert type response format. The responses are summed to get the total score. Scores range between 0 to 21 where higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction. An example item is "Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship" (α = .86).

Attitude Towards Password Sharing

To assess participants' attitudes towards sharing social media passwords within a romantic relationship, we asked the following: "Do you think partners should share their social media account passwords with each other?" Participants responded with *no* (coded as 0) or *yes* (coded as 1).

Neuroticism

The eight-item neuroticism subscale from the Big Five Inventory (BFI) was used to measure the level of neuroticism in the participants (John et al., 1991). This scale utilized a 5-point Likert response format (1= *disagree strongly*, 5 = *agree strongly*). Responses were

summed to get the total score. Example items include, “can be tense,” “gets nervous easily,” and “worries a lot.” Higher scores reflect higher levels of neuroticism (α =.85).

Results

A little under half (n = 132) of our participants reported thinking that partners should share their social media account passwords with each other, while n = 145 did not. As a preliminary analysis, we examined how women and men varied on all of the predictor and outcome variables we expected to use in the planned logistic regression. Table 1 shows that gender was statistically significantly correlated with attitude towards SNS password sharing, SMIRB, quality of alternatives, and neuroticism. Therefore, we controlled for gender in further analyses. We also checked whether the source of participants introduced variance on any of the study variables. A series of independent t-tests indicated that the university participants did not statistically differ from MTurk participants on relationship commitment ($t_{(275)}$ = 0.69, p = .49); relationship satisfaction ($t_{(275)}$ = 1.57, p = .12); quality of alternatives ($t_{(275)}$ = -0.04, p = .97); SMIRB ($t_{(275)}$ = 0.81, p = .42); or neuroticism ($t_{(275)}$ = 0.42, p = .68). Because recruitment source did not introduce variance in any of the variables about which we had hypotheses, we collapsed the sample and no longer consider source.

Table 1 also shows the intercorrelations and descriptive statistics of all variables of interest along with the gender breakdown. Pearson correlations showed that age, commitment and neuroticism were not significantly correlated with attitude towards sharing passwords. However, relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and SMIRB behaviors were all significantly correlated with the attitudes towards sharing passwords. These variables also intercorrelated with each other. To evaluate the hypothesized unique effects of relationship

commitment, relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, SMIRB behaviors, and neuroticism on attitude to password sharing, while also controlling for gender, we used a binary logistic regression. We found that only SMIRB behaviors were associated with password sharing attitudes (Table 2). Although the direction of causality cannot be inferred from this cross-sectional data, we suggest that partners harbor unfavorable attitudes towards password sharing if they have frequent interactions with alternatives, which if left unchecked could develop into online infidelity (Carter, 2016; Helsper & Whitty, 2010).

Overall, Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 5 were not supported: there was no evidence that these variables were associated with attitude to password sharing. However, findings were consistent with Hypothesis 4: people who had lower scores on the measure of SMIRB behaviors were more likely to espouse a favourable attitude towards SNS password sharing. To quantify the size of this effect, we compared the SMIRB-7 scores of those who endorsed password sharing (M = 1.99, SD = 0.93, n = 132) with those who did not (M = 2.44, SD = 1.02, n = 145), finding a statistically significant difference with a medium effect size ($t_{(275)=}$ 3.86, $p < .0005$, Hedge's g = 0.46).

Discussion

Some people share their social media passwords with their romantic partners for a variety of reasons (e.g., to build trust, be transparent). We grouped participants according to their self-reported favorability toward sharing social media passwords (yes/no) and used binary logistic regression to examine whether the groups could be predicted by relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives, SMIRB, or trait neuroticism. Although attitude toward password sharing was correlated pairwise with satisfaction, SMIRB, and quality

of alternatives, after we controlled for the effects of the other predictor variables, only SMIRB was associated with password sharing attitude. Specifically, those who reported more SMIRB behaviors were less likely to endorse password sharing. Zero-order correlations can be informative, but romantic relationships do not occur in a vacuum. Approaches which account for the levels of other important relationship factors are desirable.

At the zero-order, being more amenable toward password sharing correlated positively with relationship satisfaction, which is consistent with Bevan (2018). However, this relationship fell away when all of the investment model's variables were included in the same equation. Indeed, none of the investment variables predicted attitudes toward password sharing when the others were controlled. Furthermore, the personality attribute of neuroticism also failed to predict attitudes toward password sharing. In our sample attitudes toward password sharing had less to do with relationship dynamics or having a neurotic personality, and more to do with self-reported pursuit behaviors. That is, in our sample the people most likely to be concerned about sharing passwords were those who felt they had something to hide.

Multiple explanations are possible. First, earlier research on password sharing relied primarily on adolescent samples. The adults we sampled may have produced something of a ceiling effect if their longer-enduring relationships have reached maximal limits on variables like satisfaction and commitment. Second, we measured *attitudes* toward password sharing, and these may not be as important to relationship quality as more focused behaviors such as actual password sharing or actual online surveillance. The concept of password sharing is complex and involves not only whether people are open to sharing passwords but also what they do with their partner's passwords (Bevan, 2018).

This possibility is corroborated by our finding that only SMIRB—that is, *infidelity*-related behaviors—were associated with low proclivities toward password sharing. The operational definition implied by the SMIRB measure indicates an awareness in participants that they are engaging in behaviors of which their partners may disapprove (McDaniel et al., 2017). In other words, whether one is amenable or opposed to sharing passwords, in and of itself, may not be diagnostic of relationship satisfaction and commitment. Furthermore, quality of alternatives also did not explain attitudes toward password sharing, perhaps because simply noticing one's alternatives is not the same as acting on those alternatives. Relatedly, high commitment tends to blunt the attractiveness of one's alternatives, so those alternatives do not seem as appealing (McNulty et al., 2018). In this way our findings echo theoretical and empirical distinctions between passively noticing one's relationship alternatives and actively pursuing those alternatives (Dibble et al., 2021). In the end, attitudes toward password sharing owed less to relationship dynamics or being neurotic. Our results suggest that those least comfortable with sharing passwords were largely those who are also behaving in ways they would rather hide.

The investment model (Rusbult, 1980) explains the likelihood that an individual will choose to remain in their (offline) relationship. That the investment model's variables failed to associate with password sharing attitudes underscores the separation of sorts between one's offline relationship and their online wanderings that researchers have observed (e.g., Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Parker & Wampler, 2003). In short, our data are more consistent with a view of the investment model as being most effective when applied to the offline realm. Despite being a workhorse for more than four decades, studies are now needed to determine whether the investment model maintains "good bones" when more and more communicating is done online.

In a more practical sense, our data suggest that couples should not rush to judgment about the commitment levels of their partners simply based on their position on password sharing. Notwithstanding whether one partner truly has something to hide, we do not have evidence that knowing a partner's stance on password sharing is diagnostic of their commitment to the relationship.

Limitations

Our study was largely exploratory and it relied on self-report data, the limits of which are well known. Other limitations include the cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inferences. Partners themselves could accurately answer their motivations for sharing their passwords or not sharing it. Future qualitative research including studies with in-person structured interviews could hold the answer regarding the direction of the associations reported in this study. Also, diary studies can measure if partners are fearful of being caught after engaging in online infidelity or remain in a perpetual state of fear, and whether such fear makes them averse from sharing their passwords. Assuming an ethical experiment could be designed, it would be useful to assign partners randomly to share passwords or not, then follow those couples longitudinally while tracking relationship variables. Perhaps this could be accomplished by having both partners create a unique social media page for the express purpose of the experiment, and which is separate from their pre-existing social media accounts. Additionally, we recruited only one member of the partnership, hence, only the actor effect (and not partner effect) is reported here. Therefore, inferences about the overall relationship quality may be less accurate than when gathered from both partners' responses. Follow up studies could determine

the extent to which our findings replicate with alternate relationship scales and multiple item password sharing attitudes measures.

Moreover, most of the sample reported to be heterosexual, which could be due to social desirability biases. Future research could include a query regarding the gender of the romantic partner with the participant's gender to confirm the reported sexual orientation. All this considered, we believe our data contribute to the literature on password sharing, and we look for future research to build on these findings.

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Table 1. Pearson Correlations Between Variables of Interest.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	--	.03	.02	.04	.10	-.09	-.15*	-.16**

2. Gender (1=M, 2=F)	--	--	.19**	.01	.02	-.19**	-.16**	.27***
3. Attitude towards sharing passwords (0=no, 1=yes)	--	--	--	.13*	.09	-.23***	-.17**	.06
4. Relationship Satisfaction	--	--	--	--	.57***	-.34***	-.27**	-.24***
5. Commitment	--	--	--	--	--	-.47***	-.32***	-.08
6. SNS Infidelity (SMIRB-7)	--	--	--	--	--	--	.45***	.15*
7. Quality of Alternatives	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.06
8. Neuroticism	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Mean	35.19	-	-	19.38	7.05	2.23	3.20	22.68
SD	10.65	-	-	3.97	1.23	1.00	2.15	6.78
Men								
Mean	34.74			19.37	7.02	2.51	3.70	19.94
SD	10.56			3.76	1.25	0.96	2.03	6.07
Women								
Mean	35.40			19.44	7.07	2.10	2.97	23.92
SD	10.71			4.08	1.22	1.00	2.17	6.74

t (men-women)	-.47	-.13	-.33	3.17**	2.65**	-4.68***
Effect size g_{Hedges}	-0.06	-0.02	-0.04	0.42	0.34	-0.61

Note. N = 277; 132 in favor of sharing passwords and 142 not in favor.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression: Predictors of Participants' Attitudes to Whether People Should Share Social Media Passwords with Partners (0 = no; 1 = yes).

	B	*S.E.*	*Wald*	*df*	*p*	*Exp(B)*	*95% C.I. for EXP(B)*
Gender (1 = M, 2 = F)	-0.58	0.30	3.81	1	.051	0.56	[0.32, 1.00]
Relationship Commitment	-0.15	0.14	1.14	1	.29	0.86	[0.66, 1.13]

Relationship Satisfaction	0.06	0.04	2.49	1	.12	1.07	[0.99, 1.16]
Quality of Alternatives	-0.05	0.07	0.63	1	.43	0.95	[0.83, 1.08]
SNS Infidelity (SMIRB)	-0.41	0.16	6.46	1	.01	0.66	[0.48, 0.91]
Neuroticism	0.02	0.02	1.25	1	.26	1.02	[0.98, 1.07]
Constant	0.43	1.21	0.13	1	.72	1.54	

Note. N=277.