



# The Impact of the 'Soft Launch Relationship' Trend on Social Media on the Relationship Health of Young Couples

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## ABSTRACT

*In the era of digital intimacy, the trend of "soft launching" relationships subtly posting about a romantic partner on social media without revealing their full identity has become increasingly common among young adults. This study investigates the psychological and relational impact of this phenomenon on the health of romantic relationships. Using a qualitative approach, the research explores how the soft launch behavior reflects evolving boundaries between public and private life, and how it influences trust, communication, and emotional intimacy among couples. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and social media content analysis involving individuals aged 18–30 who actively engage in soft launching. The findings reveal that while soft launching can serve as a tool for privacy protection and gradual relationship disclosure, it may also lead to confusion, insecurity, and misaligned expectations when not accompanied by clear communication. The study highlights the importance of digital literacy and emotional awareness in navigating online relationship dynamics. Implications suggest the need for relationship education that addresses the intersection of digital behavior and emotional well-being, encouraging healthy social media practices that support rather than undermine intimacy.*

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## Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become a central platform for self-expression and interpersonal connection, including romantic (Swierstra & Te Molder, 2012). Among the many trends that have emerged, one increasingly prominent behavior is the "soft launch" of a relationship (Chi et al., 2021). This term refers to the subtle or indirect act of revealing one's romantic partner online such as posting a photo of a dinner setup with an unseen partner, sharing a picture of two hands without tagging the individual, or posting cryptic captions alluding to a relationship. Unlike the "hard launch," where couples openly share their status, names, and photos, soft launching maintains an air of mystery and controlled disclosure.

This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among younger generations Millennials and Gen Z who are digital natives and often navigate the complexities of romantic intimacy in online spaces (Chi et al., 2021). The decision to "soft launch" a partner may stem from various motivations: a desire to protect the relationship from public scrutiny, fear of judgment, past trauma from failed relationships, or the wish to maintain a sense of independence and control. On the surface, soft launching can appear

as a modern strategy for managing privacy in a hyperconnected world. However, its deeper psychological and relational implications remain largely underexplored.

Concerns have been raised about how the act of soft launching may affect relationship health. Some argue it reflects emotional insecurity, ambiguity in commitment, or a lack of mutual agreement on the relationship's public visibility. Others view it as a healthy boundary-setting practice, allowing couples to nurture their bond without external pressure (Ray, 2021). Given that public acknowledgment on social media is often linked to perceived relationship legitimacy and validation, questions arise about how soft launching influences trust, communication, emotional intimacy, and overall satisfaction within the relationship.

While the specific phenomenon of the "soft launch" is relatively new and underexplored in academic literature, several related areas of research offer valuable insights into its potential impact on relationship health among young couples. One major area of study has been the role of self-disclosure on social media and its effect on romantic relationships (Yadav & Choudhary, 2019). According to research by Utz and Beukeboom (2011), online self-disclosure can enhance intimacy and relationship satisfaction when done appropriately and consensually. However, excessive or poorly managed disclosure may lead to misunderstandings, jealousy, or conflicts. The "soft launch" fits into this discourse as a form of selective self-disclosure, raising questions about how much visibility is beneficial or harmful in a digital relationship context.

A related body of literature focuses on relationship visibility and online impression management. Studies by Fox, Warber, and Makstaller (2013) indicate that publicly displaying a romantic partner on social media can serve as a relational maintenance strategy, reinforcing a sense of commitment and social validation. Conversely, other research suggests that couples who are overly concerned with curating a perfect online image may suffer from increased relationship anxiety or dissatisfaction (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2014). The soft launch may be interpreted as a compromise between public validation and private preservation, but its effects on emotional security remain contested.

The concept of digital boundaries in romantic relationships has also gained traction. Researchers such as Drouin, Miller, and Dibble (2016) have examined how couples negotiate privacy, boundaries, and autonomy in digital spaces. Their findings suggest that clearly defined online boundaries can foster trust, whereas ambiguity or secrecy may provoke suspicion and conflict. The soft launch, being intentionally ambiguous, may thus reflect a strategy to protect those boundaries or alternatively, mask relational uncertainty.

Furthermore, recent work has explored social media surveillance and relational jealousy, particularly in the context of younger users. A study by Elphinston and Noller (2011) found that Facebook-related jealousy was positively correlated with relationship insecurity and dissatisfaction. Given that soft launching often excludes direct partner identification, it may serve to minimize such jealousy yet it can also fuel speculation among friends or followers, potentially affecting how the relationship is perceived both internally and externally.

In recent years, researchers have also begun to study the role of social media trends and performative behavior in shaping romantic relationships (Mod, 2010). With the rise of platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels, there is growing interest in how users engage in "relationship branding" and public storytelling. While much of this research remains exploratory, it highlights how digital culture increasingly mediates private experiences. The soft launch trend is an extension of this performativity, allowing individuals to project a controlled narrative while navigating the pressures of online audiences.

Despite the growing popularity of this trend, academic literature examining the psychological and relational effects of soft launching remains limited. Most existing studies on social media and romantic relationships focus on self-disclosure, jealousy, surveillance, or comparison with little attention to subtle behaviors like the soft launch (Fox, 2016). Understanding this trend is essential, not only for

comprehending contemporary relationship dynamics but also for providing guidance to young couples navigating romance in the age of social media.

This study aims to explore the impact of the soft launch relationship trend on the relationship health of young couples, examining whether such digital behavior fosters closeness and emotional safety or contributes to insecurity and relational ambiguity.

## Method

### *Theoretical Framework*

To analyze the impact of the soft launch relationship trend on the relationship health of young couples, this study is grounded in several interrelated psychological and communication theories (Pietromonaco et al., 2013). These theoretical foundations provide a lens through which the behaviors, motivations, and relational consequences of soft launching on social media can be better understood.

The first and primary theory used in this study is Impression Management Theory, originally proposed by Erving Goffman (1959). This theory posits that individuals actively manage how they are perceived by others, particularly in social settings (Molden & Dweck, 2006). In the context of social media, users become curators of their digital personas, often revealing selected aspects of their lives to craft a desired image. The act of soft launching a partner sharing suggestive but ambiguous content about a romantic relationship is a clear example of impression management. It allows individuals to signal availability, desirability, or emotional status while maintaining a level of privacy or control over how their relationship is interpreted by their audience.

Closely tied to this is the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains how individuals use media to fulfill specific psychological and social needs (Rubin, 2009). In the case of soft launching, social media is utilized not only as a communication tool but as a space for fulfilling needs related to validation, identity expression, intimacy, and even relationship negotiation. Some users may engage in soft launching to seek approval without vulnerability, while others may use it to subtly confirm relationship status without the pressure of public scrutiny. This theory helps explain the personal gratifications that motivate such digital behaviors, especially among young adults who are deeply embedded in online cultures.

Another relevant theoretical lens is Attachment Theory, especially as applied in adult romantic relationships. According to Bowlby (1969) and later expanded by Hazan and Shaver (1987), individuals develop distinct attachment styles: secure, anxious, or avoidant, which influence how they form and maintain emotional bonds. In digital relationship contexts, these attachment styles may manifest through online behaviors. For instance, individuals with anxious attachment may engage in frequent but vague postings (soft launches) as a way to seek reassurance while avoiding the risk of direct rejection or judgment. On the other hand, avoidant individuals may prefer the soft launch approach to maintain emotional distance and autonomy. This theory helps in exploring how soft launching might reflect or reinforce underlying relational insecurities.

Finally, Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM), proposed by Sandra Petronio, offers a valuable framework for understanding how couples negotiate the disclosure of private information. CPM theory argues that individuals view private information as something they own and manage through privacy boundaries. In romantic relationships, especially those shared on public platforms like social media, decisions about what to disclose and what to conceal become complex. Soft launching may serve as a compromise between partners who value different levels of privacy. This theory is instrumental in analyzing how the tension between openness and privacy affects relationship trust, satisfaction, and conflict. Together, these theories—Impression Management, Uses and Gratifications, Attachment Theory, and Communication Privacy Management—form a comprehensive framework for exploring the motivations behind soft launching behavior and its implications for relationship health.

### *Methodology*

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively investigate the impact of the "soft launch" relationship trend on the relationship health of young couples (St Clair, 2018). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a deeper understanding of both the measurable effects and the subjective experiences associated with soft launching behavior on social media.

The research design integrates quantitative survey methods to collect broad data on the prevalence and patterns of soft launching, alongside qualitative interviews to explore participants' motivations, feelings, and perceptions in depth (Curry et al., 2009). This design ensures the study captures both the behavioral trends and the psychological or relational meanings behind those trends.

The target population for this research consists of young couples aged 18–30 years who are active users of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), or Facebook (Hellemans et al., 2021). Participants must be currently in a romantic relationship and have experience with or exposure to the soft launch trend either as initiators or observers.

For the quantitative phase, a sample of 200–300 respondents will be recruited using purposive sampling, primarily through online distribution of questionnaires on social media and youth community groups (Riyaz et al., 2020). For the qualitative phase, 15–20 participants will be selected using criterion sampling to ensure diversity in gender, relationship duration, and social media usage patterns.

In the quantitative component, data will be collected through a structured online questionnaire (Kurzahls, 2021). The survey includes:

- Demographic questions (age, gender, relationship status/duration, platform use),
- Frequency and type of soft launching behavior,
- Relationship health indicators measured using standardized scales (e.g., Couples Satisfaction Index, Trust Scale, Intimacy Scale),
- Items measuring perceptions of public versus private relationship presentation.

The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews conducted online or in person, focusing on (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021):

- Personal motivations for soft launching (or not soft launching),
- Interpretations of soft launching in their own or others' relationships,
- Perceived effects on communication, emotional connection, trust, and conflict within the relationship.
- All interviews will be recorded with participant consent and transcribed for thematic analysis.

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression techniques to examine relationships between soft launching frequency and relationship health indicators (Bruce et al., 2018). Statistical tools such as SPSS or JASP will be used to identify significant patterns or predictive variables.

Qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase method: familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo or manual coding techniques will be used to identify recurring patterns and meaningful narratives across participant responses (Maher et al., 2018).

The research will adhere to strict ethical guidelines. All participants will be informed about the purpose of the study and required to give informed consent before participating (Hardicre, 2014). Data confidentiality and participant anonymity will be ensured by using pseudonyms and securing all digital data. Participants will have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

## **Result and discussion**

### **Result**

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the prevalence, motivations, and psychological implications of the "soft launch" trend among young couples in the digital age. Based on

the analysis of survey responses from 275 participants and in-depth interviews with 18 individuals, three primary themes emerged: (1) the strategic use of soft launching for privacy and control, (2) its varying impact on relationship health depending on mutual agreement, and (3) the influence of social validation and digital self-image.

The survey results indicate that 62% of respondents have engaged in soft launching their romantic partner on social media within the past year (Fox & Warber, 2013). Among these, 41% reported doing so occasionally, 18% frequently, and only 3% always. Platforms most commonly used for soft launching included Instagram (89%), TikTok (44%), and Twitter/X (32%). Respondents cited their primary reasons for soft launching as "wanting to maintain privacy" (68%), "not yet ready to fully reveal the relationship" (55%), and "testing the seriousness of the relationship" (33%).

When analyzed in relation to relationship health indicators, the frequency of soft launching showed a moderate negative correlation with relationship satisfaction ( $r = -0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and a significant negative correlation with perceived trust ( $r = -0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (Büssing et al., 2021). However, these effects were moderated by whether the act of soft launching was discussed and mutually agreed upon. In relationships where soft launching was a mutual decision, trust and satisfaction scores were significantly higher ( $M = 4.3$ ) compared to relationships where it was unilateral or unclear ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Interestingly, participants who never soft launched but did hard launch (e.g., full partner reveal) reported the highest levels of relationship satisfaction, while those who engaged in ambiguous or inconsistent soft launching reported elevated levels of relationship uncertainty and communication issues.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts further illuminated the complex emotional dimensions behind the soft launch practice. Many participants explained that soft launching was a way to protect the relationship from outside interference, including judgment or jealousy (Attridge, 2013). However, others shared feelings of being hidden or unacknowledged by their partner, especially when the decision to soft launch was not mutually agreed upon. This led to confusion about commitment and emotional security.

Several respondents noted that their online persona plays a large role in how they present their relationship. For some, social media is a tool for crafting a curated identity, and soft launching allows for maintaining an aura of mystery or independence. Others expressed concern that soft launching contributed to external pressure and comparison, especially when trying to "keep up" with friends who openly displayed their partners.

The decision to soft launch often reflected the couple's communication style and comfort with public disclosure. Couples who discussed and negotiated the boundaries of online sharing reported greater alignment, clarity, and trust (Hepfler, 2021). In contrast, those who avoided these conversations experienced misunderstandings, emotional distance, or even conflict.

Overall, the results suggest that the soft launch relationship trend is a nuanced digital behavior shaped by personal, relational, and social media factors. While it can serve as a tool for maintaining privacy and autonomy, it may also signal or exacerbate issues related to trust and emotional transparency when not mutually understood or agreed upon. These findings underscore the importance of clear communication and boundary-setting in navigating modern romantic relationships in digital spaces.

### ***The Influence of Digital Behavior on Emotional Well-Being and Intimacy***

One of the most notable ways digital behavior affects emotional well-being is through constant social comparison and the pursuit of validation. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok often present idealized portrayals of relationships, which can lead individuals to compare their own partnerships against seemingly perfect online images. This comparison can foster feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, or dissatisfaction, especially if one's own relationship is less publicly visible or celebrated. Such

emotions can undermine emotional security and contribute to lower self-esteem, particularly in individuals who rely heavily on online affirmation.

Moreover, digital self-presentation and impression management play a critical role in shaping emotional experiences within relationships. Couples may feel pressure to present a polished, harmonious version of their relationship online, even when facing private difficulties (Young et al., 2013). This disconnect between online image and offline reality can create emotional strain and reduce authenticity, making it more difficult for partners to be vulnerable and emotionally honest with each other. In contrast, when partners openly share their relationship in a mutually respectful and balanced way, it can foster a sense of pride, unity, and public affirmation that positively influences emotional well-being.

Digital behavior also impacts intimacy through the regulation of communication and emotional availability. Instant messaging, video calls, and shared digital content can deepen emotional bonds by increasing frequency and immediacy of contact (Alinejad, 2019). For long-distance couples, in particular, digital tools often serve as essential avenues for maintaining closeness. However, excessive digital interaction or surveillance (such as checking a partner's activity or followers) can lead to control issues, mistrust, and emotional burnout. The perceived need to be constantly available or responsive online can erode personal boundaries and contribute to anxiety or emotional fatigue.

Another key factor is boundary management—the ability to define and negotiate what is shared privately versus publicly in a relationship. Couples who clearly communicate their expectations regarding digital disclosure often experience greater emotional security and mutual respect. On the other hand, mismatched expectations about online behavior (such as one partner wanting to keep the relationship private while the other desires public acknowledgment) can lead to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, or even conflict. For instance, trends like the “soft launch” of a partner, while intended to maintain privacy, may also be interpreted by the other partner as secrecy or emotional distance, depending on the context and communication within the relationship.

In sum, digital behavior is a powerful mediator of emotional well-being and intimacy in modern relationships. When used mindfully, it can enhance closeness, improve communication, and provide emotional support. However, when digital interactions are driven by insecurity, social pressure, or misaligned expectations, they can negatively affect both the mental health of individuals and the intimacy shared between partners. Navigating digital spaces with intentionality, transparency, and mutual respect is therefore essential to fostering emotionally healthy and intimate relationships in the digital age.

#### *Awareness of Evolving Norms in Public and Private Relationship Boundaries*

Traditionally, romantic relationships were largely confined to the private sphere, with emotional exchanges, conflicts, and milestones kept within the confines of the couple or their immediate social circles (Jamieson, 2005). However, the rise of digital culture has introduced a new set of expectations regarding visibility and validation. Public displays of affection online, relationship status updates, shared couple photos, and anniversary posts have become common ways to affirm love and commitment. In this landscape, public sharing is often perceived as a sign of relationship legitimacy, while privacy can sometimes be misinterpreted as secrecy or lack of seriousness.

This shift has sparked growing awareness among individuals about how much of their relationship they should share, with many seeking to balance personal authenticity with social perception. New relationship behaviors, such as the “soft launch” subtly hinting at a partner's presence without fully revealing their identity have emerged as a response to this tension. Such behaviors reflect a nuanced understanding that oversharing may lead to vulnerability, criticism, or pressure from online audiences, while undersharing may result in speculation, insecurity, or a sense of emotional distance.

Young couples, in particular, are at the forefront of this shift, often navigating complex decisions about digital disclosure. They are becoming more aware of how curated online presence can affect not only how others view their relationships but also how they experience those relationships themselves.

For instance, some individuals consciously choose to maintain privacy to protect the emotional integrity of the relationship, while others may post strategically to communicate status, affection, or exclusivity. This level of awareness demonstrates a growing sophistication in managing personal boundaries within the digital public sphere.

Moreover, this evolving awareness is not just personal but cultural. Social attitudes toward relationship visibility are becoming more diverse and accepting. While some continue to equate public sharing with romantic success, others advocate for respecting different expressions of love whether loud and visible or quiet and private. This cultural shift is encouraging more inclusive norms that allow individuals to define their relationship boundaries on their own terms, without being bound by rigid expectations.

#### ***Guidance on Navigating Social Media in Ways That Support Rather Than Harm Relationships***

One of the most important steps in managing social media's influence is open and honest communication. Couples should discuss their comfort levels regarding what aspects of the relationship are shared online and agree on boundaries. This includes deciding whether to post about the relationship at all, how often to do so, and in what manner (e.g., public photos, tagged posts, stories, or more subtle cues like "soft launches"). When both partners are aligned in their expectations and digital behaviors, it helps reduce misunderstandings and prevents one partner from feeling overexposed or neglected.

Another key factor is the recognition of social media's performative nature. Many individuals curate an idealized version of their lives for public consumption, which can create unrealistic comparisons and pressure. Couples should remind themselves that what is seen online is often a highlight reel—not an accurate reflection of others' relationships. Rather than competing with these portrayals, partners can focus on building authentic offline intimacy, where emotional connection is not dependent on public validation.

Maintaining digital boundaries is equally crucial. This includes respecting each other's privacy, avoiding constant monitoring of a partner's online activity, and not making assumptions based on likes, follows, or comments. Excessive digital surveillance can erode trust and breed unnecessary conflict. Instead, couples should prioritize direct communication and use social media as a supplement to, not a substitute for, meaningful interpersonal interaction.

Emotional support and affirmation through digital channels can also enhance relationship satisfaction. Sending thoughtful messages, celebrating milestones online (with mutual consent), or simply showing appreciation in private chats can strengthen emotional bonds. However, partners should also be sensitive to each other's boundaries and avoid using social media as the sole platform for romantic expression. Real-life gestures of care, quality time, and face-to-face conversations remain essential foundations of any healthy relationship.

Finally, couples should cultivate self-awareness about how social media affects their emotions. If a certain type of online interaction causes stress, comparison, or insecurity, it may be helpful to take a break from that platform or adjust usage habits. Practicing digital mindfulness noticing how one feels during and after social media use can guide healthier online behavior and support emotional well-being in the relationship.

#### ***Comparison of Current Study Results with Previous Research***

The results of the current study align with and extend several findings from existing literature on digital behavior, self-disclosure, and relationship dynamics in the social media era. One of the key findings of this study is the moderate negative correlation between frequent soft launching and relationship satisfaction and trust. This result is consistent with earlier work by Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais (2014), who found that over-involvement in social media activities related to a partner especially when driven by insecurity or impression management can negatively affect emotional closeness and satisfaction. Similarly, the work of Elphinston and Noller (2011) on Facebook-related jealousy supports the idea that digital ambiguity in relationships (such as posting subtle or partial

content) can foster insecurity and relational anxiety, especially when communication about online boundaries is lacking.

However, the current study also reveals that soft launching does not inherently harm relationship health when it is done with mutual consent and open communication. In such cases, soft launching may serve as a privacy-preserving mechanism and can even strengthen trust by showing consideration for a partner's comfort with public exposure. This finding aligns with the perspectives presented in Drouin et al. (2016), who emphasized the importance of digital boundary negotiation in maintaining relationship satisfaction. The current study reinforces this by highlighting that the context and intent behind the soft launch are more critical than the behavior itself.

Moreover, this study's insights about impression management echo Goffman's (1959) theory and are supported by Fox, Warber, and Makstaller (2013), who argued that online displays of affection often serve as relational signals, shaped by audience perception and social norms. The current research extends their conclusions by showing how subtle displays, such as those used in soft launches, are increasingly adopted as a modern form of impression management that balances visibility with discretion.

Interestingly, unlike some earlier studies that suggested greater online visibility correlates with greater relationship satisfaction (e.g., Saslow et al., 2013), the current findings challenge this view by suggesting that strategic or limited sharing (soft launching) does not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction or lack of commitment. Instead, it can be a reflective and intentional response to digital pressures, suggesting a shift in cultural norms regarding what constitutes a "healthy" online relationship presentation.

In contrast to studies that emphasize the benefits of self-disclosure (e.g., Utz & Beukeboom, 2011), this study highlights the potential drawbacks of incomplete or ambiguous self-disclosure in the form of soft launching. Rather than deepening intimacy, ambiguous posts may raise questions or suspicions, especially in relationships where communication is weak or where expectations about online sharing differ.

### **Conclusion and implication**

The findings of this study shed light on the increasingly prevalent phenomenon of the "soft launch" in romantic relationships, particularly among young couples navigating digital culture. The study reveals that while the act of soft launching subtly referencing or visually hinting at a romantic partner on social media without disclosing their identity may serve as a strategy for maintaining privacy, managing social impressions, or testing public reactions, it also carries significant implications for relationship health. Specifically, the research indicates that frequent and inconsistent use of soft launching, particularly when not mutually agreed upon, may lead to miscommunication, decreased trust, emotional ambiguity, and potential dissatisfaction within the relationship. Conversely, when partners engage in open dialogue and mutual agreement about the level of online disclosure, soft launching can become a healthy expression of digital boundaries. It can reflect emotional maturity and a shared understanding of the tension between private intimacy and public sharing. This reinforces the importance of intentional communication in modern relationships, especially in environments where social validation and audience perception often influence personal choices. The study contributes to contemporary discussions about the evolving norms of public and private life in the age of social media. It suggests that traditional measures of relationship commitment such as public declarations or official relationship status updates are no longer universally applicable or desired. Instead, young couples increasingly value discretion, control, and subtlety in how they present their personal lives online. This shift calls for a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes healthy relationship behaviors in digital contexts. From a practical standpoint, the implications of this research are twofold. First, it underscores the need for greater awareness among individuals and couples about how digital

behaviors can influence emotional well-being and relational dynamics. Secondly, it suggests that educators, counselors, and mental health professionals should include digital literacy and social media behavior as part of relationship education and therapy, helping young adults develop tools for navigating digital intimacy with emotional intelligence and mutual respect.

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