

THE ILLUSION OF HAPPINESS: INVESTIGATING THE PHENOMENON OF “FAKE HAPPY MARRIAGES” IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract. Social media plays a significant role in contemporary society, surpassing traditional media like radio and television. Nevertheless, its impact becomes pronounced when individuals exceed reasonable engagement limits. These platforms encourage sharing personal moments using manipulation tools that alter the appearance of pictures, creating an illusion of perfection. Consequently, this portrayal on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp can influence perceptions, fostering an unrealistic ideal of a happy marriage and life. So, this study investigates the phenomenon of “fake happy marriages” in contemporary society through social media and to see what tools or apps are usually used by the couple to show their happy marriage using the self-representation theory from the sociological perspective. This study used the qualitative method of one-to-one interviews, which involved eight informants including four males and four females using the purposive sampling method. The findings showed the couples represent themselves to the media by concerning society's worldview and expectation in terms of representing themselves as an ideal married couple even though it's different from their real life. Other than that, people will create fake happy moments to fill the loneliness and protect the relationship from being sniffed out by family and friends. The motive of this fake happy marriage is to arouse jealousy or admiration for other people like ex-couples and scandals.

Keywords: Fake Happy Marriage; Social Media; Contemporary Society; Self-Representation Theory; Loneliness

Abstrak. Media sosial memainkan peranan penting dalam masyarakat kontemporari dengan mengatasi media tradisional seperti radio dan televisyen. Namun begitu, kesannya menjadi ketara apabila individu melebihi had penglibatan yang munasabah. Platform ini menggalakkan perkongsian momen peribadi menggunakan alat manipulasi yang boleh mengubah penampilan gambar, mencipta ilusi kesempurnaan. Akibatnya, gambaran di platform seperti Facebook, Instagram dan WhatsApp boleh mempengaruhi persepsi, memupuk momen yang tidak realistik bagi perkahwinan dan kehidupan yang bahagia. Jadi, kajian ini menyiasat fenomena "pemalsuan kebahagiaan dalam perkahwinan" dalam masyarakat kontemporari melalui media sosial dan untuk melihat apakah alat atau aplikasi yang biasanya digunakan oleh pasangan untuk menunjukkan perkahwinan bahagia mereka dengan menggunakan teori perwakilan diri dari perspektif sosiologi. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah kualitatif iaitu temu bual satu lawan satu yang melibatkan lapan informan termasuk empat lelaki dan empat perempuan menggunakan kaedah persampelan bertujuan. Penemuan menunjukkan pasangan itu mewakili diri mereka kepada media dengan mengambil kira pandangan dunia dan jangkaan masyarakat dari segi mewakili diri mereka sebagai pasangan suami isteri yang ideal walaupun berbeza dengan kehidupan sebenar. Selain itu, orang ramai akan mencipta pemalsuan kebahagiaan untuk mengisi kesunyian dan melindungi hubungan daripada dihidu oleh keluarga dan rakan-rakan. Motif pemalsuan kebahagiaan dalam perkahwinan ini adalah untuk menimbulkan rasa cemburu atau kagum terhadap orang lain seperti bekas pasangan dan skandal.

Kata kunci: Pemalsuan Kebahagiaan dalam Perkahwinan; Media Sosial; Masyarakat Kontemporari; Teori Perwakilan Diri; dan Kesunyian

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, social media has transformed into a significant catalyst for obtaining and disseminating information across various domains, including business, entertainment, science, crisis management, and politics (Hruska & Maresova, 2020). Social media refers to internet-based communication channels, including social networking websites and microblogging platforms. These platforms enable users to establish online communities for sharing various content such as information, ideas, personal messages, pictures, and videos (Webster's Dictionary, 2023). Social media encompasses a range of interactive online platforms that enable users, either individually or collaboratively, to create, curate, and share content generated by users (Davis, 2016). As a form of new media, social media provides a platform for individuals to interact and socialize with others, extending beyond traditional communication functions. It features user-generated content that facilitates and encourages interaction among users (Vianty & Umarella, 2024). Social media plays a significant role in contemporary society, surpassing traditional media like radio and television (Hollenbaugh, 2021).

Social media platforms are purposefully crafted to enable interaction among users, making this aspect one of the most prominent features across all types of social media (Aichner et al., 2021). Nevertheless, its impact becomes pronounced when individuals exceed reasonable engagement limits. These platforms encourage sharing personal moments using manipulation tools that alter the appearance of pictures, creating an illusion of perfection. Consequently, this portrayal on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp can influence perceptions, fostering an unrealistic ideal of a

happy marriage and life (Konlan, 2023). According to Tsao et al., (2021) social media has swiftly evolved into a vital communication tool for generating, distributing, and consuming information.

While Appel (2020) said social media can be conceptualized in several ways. From a practical standpoint, it encompasses a range of software-based digital technologies typically available as applications and websites. These platforms offer users digital environments where they can exchange various forms of content or information within online social networks. In addition, Nigyastuti (2021) state social media is characterized by user-generated content (UGC), where users, rather than editors or traditional media institutions, create and disseminate content. Social media has emerged as a crucial communication tool for governments, organizations, and universities, facilitating the dissemination of vital information to the public. Many studies have leveraged social media data to identify and monitor outbreaks of infectious diseases, as well as to analyse public attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions (Tsao et al., 2021). Nowadays, social media and the Internet have significantly impacted various aspects of human life, including the institution of contemporary marriage. A growing number of individuals are utilizing social media platforms to meet and connect with others, and some of these connections have even resulted in the selection of life partners and subsequent marriages (Zihad, Chaitee, & Rahman, 2021).

Problem Statement. Marriage is a complex social institution that plays a significant role in people's lives. It is often seen as a symbol of commitment, love, and partnership. However, not all marriages are happy and fulfilling. According to Hushim Salleh a Marriage, Industry, and Motivation Specialist, almost 70% of happy couples on

social media are the ones with the most problems in their relationship. Many people like to share beautiful moments for their followers to see on Facebook and Instagram but actually, many of them are miserable in their marriage (Nur Alwani, 2023). Engaging in online interactions via social networking sites (SNS) has become a ubiquitous aspect of the lives of internet users nowadays (Abbasi & Dibble, 2021). Conversely, social network expressions of affection, termed as a public display of commitment, manifest through actions such as liking photos, posts, or sharing shared jokes. The act of liking content serves as a virtual approval while posting pictures of a significant other on social media signals commitment to the wider online audience (Farrugia, 2013).

Ultimately, changing the relationship status online not only signifies the official status of the relationship but also acts as a deterrent to potential flirtation from others (Mod, 2010). According to Konlan, Abdulai & Ibrahim (2023) their research found that the prevalence of Social Networking Sites (SNS) has been linked to an increase in divorce rates and heightened dishonesty within couples. Additionally, these platforms have evolved beyond mere information conduits, exacerbating tensions in relationships. On the other hand, social media is used for online infidelity behaviors. It was reported that the married couple's online infidelity behaviors include sharing personal details, engaging in flirting, sexting, and developing feelings of love for someone else (Helsper & Whitty, 2010). Online infidelity behaviors like sexual online behavior, cybersex, exchanging sexual self-images, and using online pornography can be perceived as infidelity by relationship partners (Vossler, Andreas & Moller, 2020).

In addition, people use social media or SNS for chatting, liking, sharing personal details, engaging, updating status, and online infidelity, but not all that has been shown in

media was a reality because people are more inclined to display only the good side of themselves. This situation also happens in marriage institutions where people tend to cover their bad relationships in public but are more comfortable giving positive expressions such as loving couples and supporting each other to the world using their social media. Social media can be a platform that brings solutions to them to escape from problems and negative views of people around them. So, this research will explore how married couples use their social media to express themselves publicly to make people believe the term a happy marriage that they create according to society's expectations.

Research Objective. This study investigates the phenomenon of “fake happy marriages” in contemporary society through social media. In addition, this study will identify the tools or apps usually used by the couple to show their happy marriage through social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marriage is an important institution that will form a socialization agent and be a center of child development. Other than that, marriage can be a support system to their partner and also family. This support system can bring a good relationship and satisfaction among the couples. Marriage is represented as a harmonious relationship between two individuals and has high expectations from society. These expectations will become a burden, especially to those people who have problems in their relationship but still want to save the marriage for any kind of reason such as children, feelings, family, and career. So, to cover all these kinds of problems that she/he has in their relationship, they need to be more careful in representing their marriage to make others believe, especially through social media.

Afolaranmi (2020) in their research found that social media and the Internet have significantly impacted various aspects of human life, including the institution of contemporary marriage. A growing number of individuals are utilizing social media platforms to meet and connect with others, and some of these connections have even resulted in the selection of life partners and subsequent marriages. As the prevalence of social media usage continues to increase, couples find themselves spending less quality time together, contributing to a deterioration in marital relationships. Research indicates that excessive engagement with Social Networking Sites is associated with this decline.

In the 21st century, the emergence of digital technology and social media has significantly impacted romantic relationships. Given the inherently global reach of social media technologies, concentrating on social media applications favored by American users does not offer a comprehensive representation of individuals who incorporate social media into their romantic relationships (Ulanova, 2020). Valenzuela, Halpern, & Katz (2014) found from the survey in their research a direct connection between increased SNS usage and factors indicating diminished marriage quality, unhappiness in marriage, facing challenges in the relationship, and contemplating separation. In addition, a counterargument posits that individuals in unhappy marriages might be inclined to use SNS like Facebook and Instagram more frequently because they find it advantageous to them to be a safe platform and more used by their friends and family (Manvelyan, 2016).

The false representation that has been posted through social media brings happiness and self-satisfaction to individuals to gain the positive response and belief of others about the condition of their marriage.

This is because social media has the power to control and influence what people think, and react and also is a large part of society (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Because of this false representation, it is important to understand what photo is usually posted and what gratifications they receive from it.

METHOD

This study used the qualitative method of one-to-one interviews, which involved eight informants including four males and four females using the purposive sampling method with two criteria like: 1) Married couple frequently exposed to social media and 2) The couple has long-distance relationship. The interview takes 45 minutes to 1 hour using the Google Meet application with eight semi-structured interviews as guidelines. This study also uses thematic analysis and forms certain themes including main and sub-themes to answer the research objective.

Self-Representation Theory. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman argues that individuals entering social interactions seek to control the image they project and the impressions others form of them (Josef & Merunková, 2019). Self-presentation, according to Goffman, encompasses both conscious and unconscious strategies to influence others' perceptions, involving not only appearance but also behavior. Goffman's analysis of self-presentation highlights how individuals engage in organized patterns of bodily conduct shaped by the broader social environment, thus attributing social and existential significance to the ways they communicate and interact (Dolezal, 2017).

Goffman's self-representation theory has laid the groundwork for the broader concept of impression management, which explains user behavior and motivation

on social media (Merunková & Slerka, 2019). Research has shown that users are aware that activities, even beyond their personal profiles such as 'liking' a page contribute to the image they curate for themselves (Wallace, Buil, de Chernatony, & Hogan, 2014). Within this theory, Goffman introduces the concepts of 'front stage' and 'back stage' as central to understanding self-representation on social media. The 'front stage' represents the behaviors and personas individuals display publicly, actively crafting an image for an audience. In contrast, the 'back stage' embodies the private, concealed aspects of an individual's life, where one can relax and be authentic without the influence or scrutiny of social expectations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Marriage is a significant social institution, but in some cases, the representation of marriage on social media can be misleading or outright fake. Self-presentation theory, explains how people manage their public impressions and provides a useful lens to understand how and why individuals might falsely represent their marital status on social media. From the data analysis, this study showed that married couples usually use social media not just for fun or to gain knowledge but also as a medium to release their emotional burden from others. Social media gives the married couple the space to relieve their burden and emotional damage. False marriage representation could be motivated by the desire to adhere to cultural or familial pressures, where being married is seen as a status symbol or a marker of stability and success in society.

Through social media, the self-representation theory that has been shown is different from the reality where from the data analysis, there are four categories representing the front page to show the fake happy marriage that have been posted by

photos and descriptions by the married couples in their social media which is celebrations, gifts, leisure, and healthcare. Back stage which is the reality of an unhappy marriage they are divided into scenarios and the sub-themes have three namely: Emotion, Communication Barrier, Lack of Communication, and attention seeker (see figure 1).

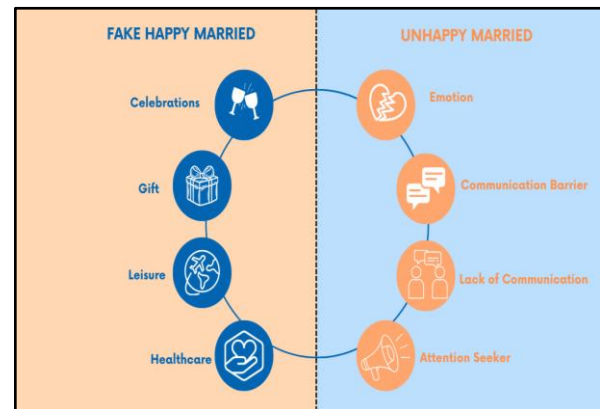


Figure 1. The Phenomenon of Marriages in Contemporary Society

Front stage will be the fake happy married where they use social media to cover the reality of their married life to society. Posting in social media also is a chance for married couples to get away from the bad perception from society about the rumors or imagination about their married conditions because social media can influence society on how we react and create a great visual to make the situation seem real (Kim and Tussyadiah, 2013). So, based on the analysis, the data showed that in every theme or category was the purpose and the right time for them to make the posting. This includes:

Celebration. In the first theme most of the informants state that they post on social media of "Happy Married" as a celebration. Any occasion like birthday celebration, anniversary celebration, and work promotion, they post on instagram to the public, friends, and family. This is because

by representing the celebrations, informants can show the intimacy of a relationship. This is also agreed by other informants:

“..I always post celebration occasions like birthdays and anniversaries. Even though I created that situation, the photo looks real. Insta shows us really intimacy with each other even though my wife is not around,...” (IM 1, 36 years old).

“..My wife is always busy with her work and she forgets about our anniversary or birthday. The family always asks us how our relationship is, so to cover their eyes, I made a post about our anniversary celebration at home. while my wife was working at that time,...” (IM2, 32 years old).

“..I like to share beautiful moments for followers to see on Facebook and Instagram regarding anniversary and birthday celebrations even though the household is in turmoil, I do all of this to highlight that we are fine,..” (IM3, 25 years old).

Gifts. The second theme is gifts in which the informants show pictures or videos about the gifts like jewelry, make up, smart phone, t-shirt/outfit, watch, and shoes, they got from their partners even though the gifts they got were bought by themselves and not bought by their partners. This is also agreed by other informants:

“...I pretended to upload a picture of a gift given by my wife, when I bought the clock as a gift myself. This is a way to cover up that our marriage is having problems,...” (IM5, 28 years old).

“...My wife and I don't follow each other on Instagram, so I can upload anything, including gifts of clothes. I bought the shirt at the shopping mall, then I captioned it "Thank you my dear for buying this shirt for me" even though the shirt was not a gift from my wife. I want my friends to see and know that I'm happy, even if I'm not,..” (IM4, 27 years old).

“...for me i will post jewellery as a gift from my husband but actually that is not mine...sometimes i just go to any gold shops and try it on and take a picture and post like i buy it,...”(IF1, 35 years old).

Leisure. The third theme under Front Stage (Fake happy married) is leisure. Representations of leisure that are always used pictures or videos of fake happy married like personal care such as activities at spa, massage centers, salons, facials, manicures, and pedicures. Apart from that, vacation is also one of the elements found under leisure activities. This explains that there are many informants who pretend to be on vacation with their partner, spend time together, and make love together when in fact the informant is on a business trip. This is also agreed by other informants:

“...I'm always outstation on a business trip around Malaysia, so I'll take pictures that look like we're going on vacation. Even though the picture I uploaded is my own business trip. I just upload pictures like that, because I'm really stressed with family and friends. They are very busy wanting to know if we are happy or not. So I have to show them that we are happy, even though we are not. Which marriage is not hit by a storm,..” (IM3, 25 years old).

“...sometimes when I post the photos in instagram actually my husband was not beside me or hang out with me...just me alone so the photos that I shared will be the place or the environment and just put the hashtag or some description in there to make it real,...”(IF2, 31 years old).

Healthcare. For healthcare, usually informan post the photos and description to make the situation like sponsored by their partner or for the leisure and self healthcare for their partner in terms of being good looking. This healthcare purpose includes posting a hashtag about taking care of a

husband with the photo of medicine or preparing foods and also going out to a spa and getting massage therapy. This is agreed by informants:

“...sometimes if I am sick I will post the medicine and put a hashtag about taking care or like my husband was there for me even though my husband is far away and knows I can handle myself better...” (IF5, 29 years old).

“...when I'm sick, I buy McD's porridge then put it in a bowl as if my wife cooked it and upload it to Instagram. I want to show my friends that my wife cares a lot about me and she is very loving. At that time we were having a big fight,...” (IM4, 27 years old).

Back stage will be the unhappy married which denotes the hidden, personal facets of an individual's life. It encompasses behaviors and elements not intended for public display, offering individuals a space to unwind and express themselves without the burden of public judgment. In this data they form four themes namely: 1) Emotion, 2) Communication Barrier, 3) Lack of Communication, and 4) Attention seeker.

Emotion. Emotions are related to physiological and mental changes. Emotion is one of the important aspects of human life which is a reaction to stimuli from outside and within the individual. For this study, emotions are real feelings that married couples experience that are not displayed on Instagram. They feel sad, angry and disappointed in their marriage relationship and their partner. This is because there are elements of emotional abuse such as criticizing, shaming, blaming and manipulating the partner. They are only able to hide everything they feel and show their emotions instead to family and friends, that's one of the reasons why married couples share friendly pictures and videos with their partner

virtually to be used as a cure for sadness. This is in line with the informant's view:

“...the problem of our marriage is, my husband always body shaming me, he says I'm fat, smelly and unattractive (cry). This thing happened after I gave birth to my second child, I couldn't control my appetite...,” (IF2, 31 years old).

“..I feel angry sometimes with my marriage because this marriage is arranged by the family. So whether I want it or not I have to survive for the sake of my family and childrens.., (IM1, 36 years old).

“...I feel lonely even though I live luxuriously, the husband is busy managing business so that my son and I are often left behind,...” (IF3, 36 years old).

Communication Barrier. Communication barriers always happen in marriage and cause breakdown in marriage. This happens because of differences in social and family background. Every couple from different social and family backgrounds will unite in a wedding. It will take time for two different people to live under one roof. Compatibility is very important in marriage because it complements each other completely. Among the communication barriers faced by couples in marriage are different communication styles, not listening to each other, being curious about your partner, hiding feelings, raising your voice, and playing games then blaming the partner. This is in line with the informant's view:

“...In fact, when I lose a game, I will point fingers at my wife. I feel very angry, so what he does is not acceptable in my eyes,..” (IM1, 36 years old).

“...I grew up in a clean family, but when I married my wife she was not good at managing the house, everything was messy and disorganized,...” (IM8, 32 years old).

Lack of Communication. Lack of communication can give a hard time to

handle a difficult spouse. Communication in marriage has been an important factor in relationship satisfaction and affects the effectiveness of the marriage itself. Spousal communication was beyond just meet and greet to each other. The conversation was in many aspects and being shared to get a meaningful relationship and happy married as the ideal concept of happy married. However, from the data, the analysis shows that most of the informants feel empty and lonely because of the lack of communication in their marriage. This situation dragged them to an unhappy situation. Most of their spouses do not pay attention to what they say and sometimes ignore what they need until they feel bored to communicate and just leave the situation hanging. This is in line with the informant's view:

“...I don't know since our early marriage. I already mention and discuss with him what I don't like or he is not supposed to do but he just likes that with himself and does whatever he wants...I feel bored and don't like to talk because he does not listen...sometimes I think he is a different man from the one I met before married...should be the communication can be a solution to our problem but it seem useless plus we are long distance relationship...so more argument than the solutions,” (IF7, 36 years old).

“...Like I said earlier my wife is always busy with work so there is no time to go out together. We only communicate using whatsapp, but sometimes she is really busy and only replies to me after a few hours, sometimes she doesn't reply at all. Usually I'm already asleep then she just comes back home, so it's difficult to communicate physically.” (IM2, 32 years old).

Attention Seeker. The response from the society gives the enthusiasm to the unhappy married couples and this situation makes them to share more posts about their marriage

life again and again on instagram. Other than that the informants agree that they are really desperate to get attention and response from society after posting something on their wall on instagram. So, they will always check the phone to see and give responses too. This statement supported by the informants state:

“...it is funny but yes I do check my notifications and see the instagram apps everytime i touch my phone...of course I always post my daily activity to make people think I'm ok and happy with my life...it makes me happy and I love to do it...” (IF5, 29 years old).

“...im pretty specific on what i will post on my instagram and usually i will post something that can attract people to give a response on my posting even just a likes or emoji...usually i will post something like go to vacation with my husband with the photo of the rooms and writing sweet description describe my gratitude and loving to my husband to gaining the likes...” (IF7, 36 years old).

“...I will always upload beautiful pictures to attract attention from friends, family and even the public to leave comments. Every content I upload must get a lot of comments, even if the content is fake...” (IM8, 32 years old).

From the analysis we can see that, usually married couples will try their best and put their effort to show others about their life to avoid the negative thinking because the negative self-perceptions may contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction and unhappiness within the marriage. In addition, the tools or apps that are usually used by the married couple to show their happy marriage is usage of social media like Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp stories (see figure 2).

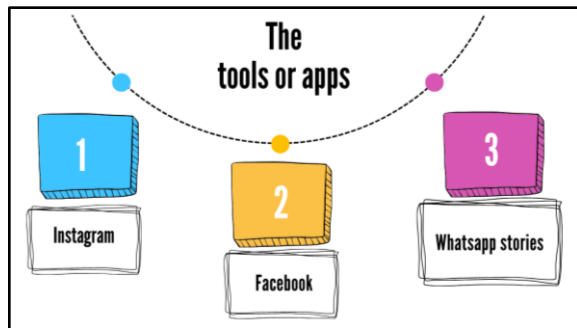


Figure 2. The tools or apps used by married couple

The tools or apps that are usually used by the married couple to show their happy marriage is usage of social media like Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp stories. The reason they used Instagram because Instagram serves as a platform for quickly sharing information through photos or images, accessible to others via a mobile application (Amaliyah & Kussanti, 2024; Ningyastuti, 2021). In addition, the married couples engaging on social media often share diverse posts and engage in conversations surrounding them. This requires considering their partner's preferences, interests, sense of humor, and dislikes to ensure the content resonates with them, ultimately facilitating deeper mutual understanding.

From the data, most of the time married couples will create a fake happy moment with their partner and share it through their social media daily without fail, especially on special days such as birthdays and anniversaries. This fake situation seems to be important to them in terms of making society, especially family and friends, believe and give high respect to them. Other than that, people will create fake happy moments to fill the loneliness and to protect the relationship from being sniffed out by family and even friends. In addition, the sharing of fake happy marriages to arouse jealousy or admiration for other people like ex-couples and scandals.

Sharing photos and descriptions through instagram makes them feel secure and confident to face others. This is in line with the informant's view:

"...usually I must post either a photo with description or without description but emoji to make people dont think too much about my personal life and think my marriage is just ok...so anytime i meet them in family gathering or office they only flash back the photo they see without noticed anything...this situation make me feel ok and confident..."(IF3, 36 years old).

"...I prefer posting "happy moment" on my social media for making people jealous like my close friends, my single friends, and my ex-couples. The reason is that they very busy body and want to know about my life, so I put a fake moment so that they get hurt, (laugh)..." (IF8, 30 years old).

The findings showed the couples represent themselves in media by concerning the society's worldview and expectation in terms of representing themselves as an ideal married couple even though it's different from their real life. Other than that, unhappy married couples will create fake happy moments to fill the loneliness and to protect the relationship from being sniffed out by family and even friends. The motive of this fake happy marriage is to arouse jealousy or admiration for other people like ex-couples and scandals.

CONCLUSION

Happy marriage is a subjective view and concept when it comes from married couples. However, society's expectation about happy marriage is to complete each other and less argumentation. Married couples need to show that they are okay all the time and this situation gives the burden to married couples and puts themselves in a fake happy marriage situation. Most married couples pretend to be

happy because they don't want outsiders to know their problems, especially family and friends. In fact, this couple also feels tormented by the marriage problems they face. Pressure from family and friends caused them to take steps to misrepresent their happy marriage on Instagram. Behind the big smile on the screen, not everyone is enjoying happiness, even some couples are still fighting to defend their marriage before it ends in divorce.

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