



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON MARRIED COUPLES IN LUSAKA DISTRICT, ZAMBIA

Getrude Chansa¹, Dr. T Velmurugan²

DMI-St. Eugene University, Zambia

ABSTRACT :

Social media is increasingly embedded in intimate relationships, yet evidence on its psychological implications for married couples in Zambia remains limited. This study examined the psychological impact of social media use on emotional intimacy and communication, marital satisfaction, and trust-related experiences among married respondents in Lusaka District. A cross-sectional descriptive and explanatory survey was conducted using questionnaire data from 300 respondents. Descriptive statistics were complemented by Spearman rank-order correlations and an exploratory binary logistic regression predicting trust-related account checking. Social media exposure was high: 58.7% used social media at least daily. Quality-time displacement was common, with 84.0% reporting that social media reduced time with their spouse at least sometimes. Most respondents (53.3%) reported that social media never helped them feel emotionally connected, while 41.3% had checked a spouse's social media account because of trust concerns. More frequent social media use was associated with more frequent arguments about social media ($p = .273$, $p < .001$), while reduced quality time was associated with the overall marital-satisfaction influence rating ($p = .435$, $p < .001$). In the multivariable model, more frequent use was associated with higher odds of trust-related account checking (AOR = 2.003, 95% CI [1.389, 2.887], $p < .001$), as was greater suspicion/mistrust (AOR = 1.300, 95% CI [1.083, 1.560], $p = .005$); longer marital duration was associated with lower odds (AOR = 0.587, 95% CI [0.479, 0.719], $p < .001$). The findings indicate that social media is neither uniformly harmful nor beneficial. Its relational significance appears to operate through attention displacement, trust and privacy processes, boundary ambiguity and coping practices. Couple-level digital boundaries, protected quality time and trust-focused communication are recommended. Longitudinal and dyadic research is needed to establish temporal ordering and partner effects.

Keywords: *social media; married couples; marital satisfaction; emotional intimacy; trust; phubbing; Lusaka; Zambia*

1. Introduction

Social media has transformed interpersonal communication by making continuous digital contact part of everyday life. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram can help couples maintain contact, share experiences and access social support, but they can also compete with face-to-face interaction and introduce new sources of jealousy, privacy concerns, monitoring and conflict. Within marriage, the psychological importance of social media therefore extends beyond the amount of time spent online to the meaning that digital behaviour acquires within the relationship.

Existing scholarship presents a dual picture. Purposeful digital communication may sustain connection, particularly when partners are physically separated, whereas intrusive or problematic use may reduce perceived responsiveness and relationship quality. Earlier studies reviewed in the thesis linked partner phubbing and excessive engagement with lower relationship quality and conflict (Roberts & David, 2019; Kar et al., 2017), while secretive online interactions have been associated with threats to trust and fidelity (Drouin et al., 2015). More recent evidence similarly identifies partner phubbing as negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, marital satisfaction, intimacy and responsiveness and positively associated with jealousy and conflict (Ni et al., 2025).

Social Comparison Theory provides one psychological lens for understanding these processes. Exposure to curated portrayals of relationships and lifestyles can create upward comparison, unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction. However, comparison alone may not fully explain marital experiences in digital environments. Attention displacement, ambiguous online boundaries, trust negotiation and surveillance may also shape how social-media activity is interpreted by spouses.

The Zambian evidence base remains comparatively limited. The thesis from which this article is developed identified a need for locally grounded evidence on how social-media use relates to emotional intimacy, communication, marital satisfaction, jealousy and trust among married couples in Lusaka District. This article therefore integrates the conceptual, methodological and empirical components of the doctoral study into a journal-style manuscript.

Study objectives

The study sought to: (1) examine social media in relation to emotional intimacy and communication between married couples in Lusaka District; (2) investigate the relationship between social-media use and marital satisfaction; and (3) explore psychological effects associated with social media, particularly jealousy, trust issues, social support and coping within married relationships.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study design and setting

The study used a cross-sectional descriptive and explanatory survey design in Lusaka District, Zambia. The original methodology identified residential areas including Woodlands, Matero, Chilenje and Chelston as study locations. Because the final dataset contains 300 respondents, the present article reports analyses for those 300 cases and interprets inferential findings as associations rather than causal effects.

2.2 Study population and sampling

The target population comprised married adults residing in Lusaka District who had been married and living with their spouse for at least one year and who used social media. The thesis proposed a combination of purposive eligibility screening and simple random selection. The final analytical sample comprised 300 respondents. The sample was relatively mature: 34.0% were aged 50 years or above, 28.7% were aged 40–49 years, 28.0% were aged 30–39 years and 9.3% were aged 20–29 years. Nearly half (47.3%) had been married for more than 15 years.

2.3 Data collection and measures

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended and ordered-response items covering social-media use, quality time, emotional connection, communication, marital satisfaction, conflict, suspicion, trust, account checking, boundaries and coping. The doctoral methodology also proposed semi-structured interviews; however, the analyses reported in this article are restricted to the quantitative questionnaire dataset because these are the data available for the final statistical analysis.

2.4 Validity, reliability and ethics

The thesis specified expert review and pilot testing to support content validity and proposed internal-consistency assessment for relevant Likert-type items. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity identified as core ethical safeguards. The methodology also specified institutional and local ethical approval. The final article should insert the formal ethics approval body and approval/reference number before journal submission if these details are available in the approved study records.

2.5 Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise demographic characteristics and response distributions. Because the principal analytic variables were ordered categorical measures, Spearman rank-order correlations were used for selected bivariate relationships. An exploratory binary logistic regression examined whether frequency of social-media use, suspicion/mistrust, perceived trust strengthening and marital duration were associated with checking a spouse's social-media account because of trust concerns. Adjusted odds ratios (AORs), 95% confidence intervals and p-values are reported. Statistical significance was interpreted together with effect magnitude and substantive meaning.

3. Results

3.1 Social-media use and respondent profile

Social-media exposure was substantial. Daily users constituted 36.7% (n = 110) and a further 22.0% (n = 66) used social media several times a day; thus, 58.7% used social media at least daily. Occasional users accounted for 36.7%, while 4.7% reported rare use. The high level of exposure established sufficient variation for examining how usage patterns were associated with marital and psychological outcomes.

3.2 Emotional intimacy and communication

Quality-time displacement was prominent. Half of respondents (50.0%, n = 150) reported that social media sometimes reduced quality time with their spouse, 14.7% reported this often and 19.3% always; collectively, 84.0% experienced some reduction from sometimes to always. Perceptions of emotional

disconnection were divided: 32.0% reported feeling disconnected, 32.0% reported no disconnection and 36.0% were unsure. When asked whether social media helped them feel emotionally connected, 53.3% selected never and 12.7% rarely; only 18.0% selected often or always. These patterns distinguish digital connectivity from emotional intimacy.

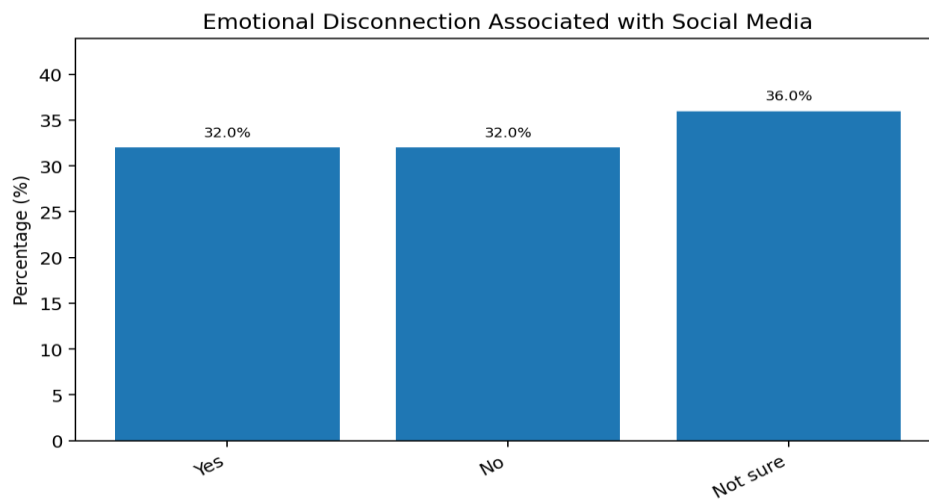


Figure 2. Reported reduction in quality time with spouse

3.3 Marital satisfaction and conflict

The overall marital-satisfaction pattern was heterogeneous. Most respondents rated the influence of social media on marital satisfaction as neutral, and more than half reported no change in satisfaction. At the same time, three-quarters reported that social media had not helped improve marital satisfaction. Privacy and trust issues were the most prominent reported source of dissatisfaction, while positive contributions were most commonly linked to communication and sharing experiences. These findings indicate that the relational consequences of social media are conditional rather than uniformly negative or positive.

3.4 Trust, suspicion, monitoring and coping

Trust-related concerns were substantial. Nearly four in ten respondents reported suspicion or mistrust often or very often, two-thirds indicated that social media did not strengthen trust at all, and 41.3% had checked a spouse's social-media account because of trust concerns. Eighty percent reported having no explicit rules or boundaries for social-media use. Coping was dominated by individual strategies such as limiting time online or ignoring stressful content, while direct discussion and counselling were comparatively uncommon. Most respondents rated their coping mechanisms as ineffective or only slightly effective.

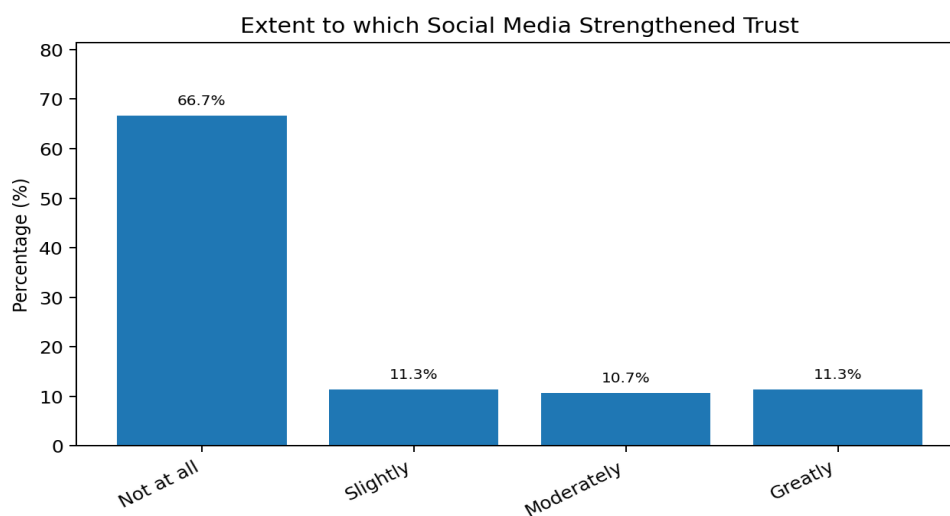


Figure 4. Frequency of suspicion or mistrust associated with social media

3.5 Inferential findings

Selected relationship	Spearman ρ	p-value
Social-media use frequency and arguments about social media	.273	< .001
Social-media use frequency and perceived improvement in marital satisfaction	-.379	< .001
Social-media use frequency and trust strengthening	-.209	< .001
Reduced quality time and overall marital-satisfaction influence	.435	< .001
Suspicion/mistrust and overall marital-satisfaction influence	.270	< .001
Social-media use frequency and distraction during spousal conversations	-.128	.026

Table 1. Selected Spearman rank-order correlations. Signs should be interpreted together with the ordinal category coding.

More frequent social-media use was associated with more frequent arguments about social media ($\rho = .273$, $p < .001$). The strongest selected bivariate relationship was between reduced quality time and the overall marital-satisfaction influence rating ($\rho = .435$, $p < .001$). The association between use frequency and distraction during spousal conversations was statistically significant but weak ($\rho = -.128$, $p = .026$), illustrating the need to distinguish statistical significance from practical importance.

Predictor	AOR	95% CI	p-value	Interpretation
Social-media use frequency	2.003	1.389–2.887	< .001	Higher odds of trust-related checking
Suspicion/mistrust	1.300	1.083–1.560	.005	Higher odds of trust-related checking
Marital duration	0.587	0.479–0.719	< .001	Lower odds of trust-related checking with longer duration

Table 2. Selected results from binary logistic regression predicting trust-related account checking.

The overall logistic model was statistically significant, likelihood-ratio $\chi^2(4) = 69.32$, $p < .001$, with McFadden's pseudo- $R^2 = 0.170$. Conditional on the other included variables, more frequent social-media use was associated with approximately twice the odds of checking a spouse's account because of trust concerns. Suspicion/mistrust was also independently associated with higher odds, whereas longer marital duration was associated with lower odds. These results are associational and do not establish temporal ordering or causality.

4. Discussion

The study demonstrates that the psychological significance of social media within marriage is best understood through relational mechanisms rather than through exposure alone. Although social-media use was widespread, outcomes varied substantially. The clearest concerns involved displacement of shared attention, trust and privacy, monitoring, and weak boundary governance. Positive functions were also present, especially communication and intentional connection, but they were not experienced uniformly.

4.1 Emotional intimacy, attention displacement and communication

The finding that 84.0% experienced some reduction in quality time indicates that attention displacement is a central mechanism in this sample. Digital engagement may be psychologically consequential when it competes with moments that would otherwise provide responsiveness, affection and face-to-face interaction. This interpretation is consistent with Roberts and David (2019) and Kar et al. (2017), as reviewed in the thesis, and with the more recent meta-analysis by Ni et al. (2025), which found partner phubbing to be negatively associated with relationship and marital satisfaction, intimacy and responsiveness. The result does not imply that smartphones or social media inevitably weaken intimacy; rather, the timing and relational meaning of device use appear critical.

The high proportion reporting that social media never or rarely helped emotional connection further demonstrates that communication frequency is not

equivalent to emotional intimacy. Digital communication can make contact more immediate, yet intimacy depends on responsiveness and the perceived quality of engagement. This distinction helps explain why couples can be highly connected technologically while still experiencing moments of emotional disconnection.

4.2 Marital satisfaction, conflict and social comparison

The large neutral/no-change group for marital satisfaction is theoretically important because it cautions against technologically deterministic conclusions. Social media was not experienced as a dominant determinant of overall satisfaction by most respondents. Nevertheless, the moderate association between reduced quality time and the marital-satisfaction influence rating ($p = .435$) indicates that specific relational processes matter even when global satisfaction remains stable. The finding supports an indirect pathway in which social media becomes relevant when it alters shared time, responsiveness, privacy or trust.

Social Comparison Theory remains useful because curated online portrayals may encourage upward comparison and unrealistic expectations. However, the Lusaka findings suggest that comparison alone is insufficient. Privacy, trust, quality-time displacement and monitoring were more directly visible in the data. The study therefore extends the theoretical interpretation by integrating social comparison with attention displacement and boundary-governance processes.

4.3 Trust, jealousy and digital monitoring

Trust emerged as one of the most salient psychological domains. The prevalence of suspicion and account checking suggests that digital environments create new occasions for interpreting ambiguous cues and managing uncertainty. The logistic model is particularly informative: use frequency and suspicion/mistrust remained independently associated with trust-related checking, while longer marital duration was protective in the model. This pattern is compatible with a reciprocal trust-monitoring process in which ambiguous online behaviour may stimulate vigilance, while monitoring itself may expose additional ambiguous information.

The findings also align with the thesis literature on secretive online interaction and threats to fidelity (Drouin et al., 2015). However, checking a spouse's account should not automatically be equated with evidence of infidelity. It is more appropriately interpreted as a behavioural indicator of trust concern. Because the design is cross-sectional, it is equally plausible that pre-existing mistrust increases digital monitoring or that existing marital strain affects both social-media behaviour and surveillance.

4.4 Coping, boundaries and relational resilience

The coping findings reveal a mismatch between relational stressors and predominantly individual coping responses. Limiting time online or ignoring stressful content may reduce immediate emotional activation, but these strategies may not resolve shared expectations concerning privacy, acceptable online interaction or quality time. The finding that 80.0% had no explicit social-media rules or boundaries reinforces the importance of negotiated digital expectations. Couple-level coping, rather than individual avoidance alone, may therefore be more appropriate for recurring digital conflict.

4.5 Contribution to the body of knowledge

The study makes a contextual contribution by providing quantitative evidence from married respondents in Lusaka District, an underrepresented setting in the international literature on digital behaviour and intimate relationships. It also makes an explanatory contribution by identifying four interrelated mechanisms through which social media appears to become psychologically consequential: attention displacement, social comparison, digital-boundary ambiguity and trust regulation.

The theoretical contribution is a conditional relational model in which social-media intensity and patterns of engagement constitute the exposure layer; attention displacement, comparison and boundary ambiguity constitute process mechanisms; suspicion, jealousy, trust, conflict and monitoring constitute proximal psychological outcomes; and marital satisfaction and relationship quality constitute more distal outcomes. Transparency, intentional communication, negotiated boundaries and effective dyadic coping are proposed as protective conditions. This model is interpretive and should be tested prospectively rather than treated as a validated causal model.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of matching statistical procedures to ordered categorical data. The use of Spearman correlations and binary logistic regression provides a more defensible analytical approach than treating all questionnaire codes as continuous scales. The study also explicitly separates statistical significance from substantive importance and association from causation, thereby strengthening interpretive transparency.

4.6 Strengths and limitations

The study combines detailed descriptive evidence with objective-linked inferential analysis and provides locally grounded data from a sizeable sample. Nevertheless, several limitations are important. The cross-sectional design prevents establishment of temporal sequence and causality. Measures were self-reported and may be affected by recall and social-desirability bias, especially for trust, monitoring and marital dissatisfaction. Several outcomes were measured using single ordered items rather than validated multi-item psychological scales. The sample was comparatively mature, highly educated and economically active, which limits generalisability to younger, rural or less highly educated populations. Finally, the methodology described interviews, but the present article reports the quantitative dataset only because corresponding qualitative data were not available for integrated analysis.

5. Conclusion

Social media is deeply embedded in the relational lives of married adults in Lusaka District, but its psychological implications are conditional rather than uniformly positive or negative. The most consistent areas of concern were quality-time displacement, distraction, suspicion, privacy concerns and trust-related monitoring. Positive functions, particularly communication and intentional connection, were also present. The findings therefore support a mechanism-based interpretation: digital engagement becomes consequential through how it affects attention, trust, boundaries and coping within the relationship.

For practice, marriage counsellors, psychologists, social workers and community or faith-based marriage programmes should incorporate discussion of digital boundaries, protected quality time, privacy expectations and trust-focused communication. Couples should be supported to negotiate reciprocal expectations rather than relying solely on surveillance or individual avoidance. Future studies should use dyadic longitudinal designs and validated measures of problematic social-media use, partner phubbing, social comparison, jealousy, trust and marital satisfaction to test the proposed mechanisms and establish temporal ordering.

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