

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

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Abstract

Social media has revolutionized modern communication, profoundly affecting daily life, including marital relationships. While technology has enhanced connectivity, its influence on marriage can be complex. This study explores the interplay between social media use and marital satisfaction among Jammu and Kashmiri couples, focusing on communication, trust, and relationship quality. Using a qualitative case study approach with thematic analysis, insights from nine married couples across four districts in South Kashmir reveal varied experiences, highlighting both positive impacts and challenges such as emotional distance and conflict. The findings demonstrate that social media serves dual roles: maintaining family bonds across distances while potentially causing technoferece, trust issues, and addiction when boundaries are absent. Successful couples employ open communication, transparency, and mutual boundary-setting to navigate digital challenges. The study emphasizes the need for balanced social media use within marriages and provides evidence-based recommendations for couples, counselors, and policymakers to foster healthy, resilient relationships in the digital age while considering the unique socio-cultural context of Jammu and Kashmir.

Keywords: *Jammu & Kashmir, Marital dynamics, Social media, Communication, Trust, Conflict*

Introduction

Social media, encompassing platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, has evolved into a ubiquitous facet of modern life since the onset of the 21st century. It serves as a conduit for sharing information and opinions, effectively transforming the world into a global village. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." The definition underscores the interactive nature of social media, facilitating the creation, sharing, and discussion of content among users (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Distinct platforms such as discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and social networks enable instantaneous connections and idea exchanges. Facebook and Twitter stand out among the plethora of social media sites, each boasting over 100 million users (Al-Jabri et al., 2015). Supported by robust technological infrastructures like the internet and computers, social media serves as a reliable platform for online interaction and socialization (Abdullah et al., 2014). As a species inherently reliant on communication and expression, social media has assumed a pivotal role in modern society, superseding traditional face-to-face interactions. But, its influence varies widely among individuals, with mounting evidence suggesting its addictive nature and consequential impact on personal and communal well-being. For instance, studies highlight the dual role of social media in relationships, serving as both a source of support and contention (Gull et al., 2019). Particularly among students, social networking sites have witnessed exponential

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

growth in popularity, catalyzed by increased access to mobile internet services. In regions like Jammu and Kashmir, where mobile services were introduced in 2003, the proliferation of social media among students has been remarkable (Rediff). These platforms have become indispensable tools for communication, with usage patterns indicating a steady rise in addiction among users (Majid, 2019). Indeed, for many, life without internet connectivity, as experienced in Jammu and Kashmir, is inconceivable (Farooq, 2017). The surge in social media usage has raised concerns about internet addiction and its ramifications, particularly among youth in Kashmir. Research suggests a significant negative correlation between internet addiction and psychological well-being, emphasizing the need for awareness and intervention strategies (Rehman et al., 2016).

Review of Literature

The literature on social media have been hailed for bridging communication gaps in romantic relationships, facilitating emotional support and intimacy among couples (Leighton et al., 2021; Lenhart & Duggan, 2014; Joo & Teng, 2017; Wang et al., 2012; Utz, & Beukeboom. 2011). These platforms allow couples to share various forms of content, fostering a sense of closeness even across distances. However, Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2016) identified that motivations for sharing photos online stem from social needs and platform affordances. Conversely, the negative impacts of SNS on relationships are notable. Saleh and Mukhtar (2015) highlighted how excessive online communication can lead to dishonesty and communication breakdowns, while Aydin et al. (2018) and Valenzuela et al. (2014) demonstrated correlations between SNS use and reduced marriage quality, increased relationship troubles, and higher divorce rates. The blurring of boundaries between online and offline relationships, as noted by Hertlein (2012), can lead to negative consequences such as decreased job performance and internet addiction. In addition, Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) warned of the societal repercussions of misusing Facebook, including infidelity and divorce. Rajeev and Jobilal (2015) and Galvin et al. (2015) emphasized how spending excessive time on SNS can lead to neglect of family relationships and promote jealousy or cheating. Also, misinformation on profiles can lead to conflicts in romantic relationships (Aydin et al., 2018). Nonetheless, amidst these negative aspects, SNS still offer avenues for emotional expression and enhanced interpersonal relations within families (Galvin et al., 2015; Joo & Teng, 2017). Thus, while SNS offer opportunities for connection and expression, their misuse can have detrimental effects on romantic relationships, necessitating a balanced approach to their use. After reviewing the literature, it is clear that although research has recognised the detrimental effects of social media on people's lives, especially when it comes to marriage, the majority of these studies have employed quantitative approaches. Still, there is a significant study vacuum concerning the effects of excessive social media use on marriage dynamics in Jammu and Kashmir. Consequently, in order to close a large vacuum in the literature, the study attempts to fill it by qualitatively investigating the influence of social media on marital dynamics.

Research Problem

The study examines the nuanced relationship between social media use and marital life in Jammu and Kashmir, with specific attention to trust, communication, and overall marital satisfaction. The research seeks to understand the influence of social media on spousal support and address challenges related to social media's integration in married life.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how social media use affects communication patterns, trust levels, and conflict resolution among married couples in Jammu and Kashmir, with specific attention to both positive outcomes (enhanced connectivity and support) and negative consequences (technoference, addiction, and relationship strain).
2. To identify the key factors that determine whether social media strengthens or weakens marital relationships in the unique socio-cultural context of South Kashmir, including boundary management, transparency practices, and gender dynamics.
3. To develop evidence-based recommendations for healthy social media use within marriages that can guide couples, counselors, and policymakers in promoting digital literacy and maintaining relationship quality in the digital age.

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

Research Questions

1. How does social media use influence marital dynamics in terms of communication quality, trust maintenance, and conflict generation among couples in Jammu and Kashmir?
2. What strategies do couples employ to manage social media boundaries, and which of these strategies are most effective in promoting marital satisfaction versus those associated with relationship problems?
3. How does the specific cultural, political, and familial context of South Kashmir shape the ways social media impacts marriages, and what culturally appropriate interventions can support healthy digital practices among couples?

Study Areas of Interest in Jammu and Kashmir

Jammu and Kashmir, a union territory in northern India, is divided into two administrative divisions: Jammu Division and Kashmir Division. The Kashmir Division comprises ten districts: Anantnag, Pulwama, Kulgam, Shopian, Baramulla, Bandipora, Ganderbal, Budgam, Srinagar, and Kupwara. The study focuses on the southern districts of Kashmir, specifically Anantnag, Pulwama, Kulgam, and Shopian, which are known for their unique socio-cultural dynamics influenced by ongoing conflicts and the pervasive use of social media. According to the 2011 Census of India and recent estimates, Anantnag district has a population of approximately 1,078,692, making it one of the most populous districts in South Kashmir. Pulwama district has a population of about 560,440, with a high density of population and significant youth demographic. Kulgam district is home to roughly 424,483 residents, characterized by its predominantly rural population and agricultural economy. Shopian district has a population of approximately 266,215, making it the smallest district in the study area in terms of population size (Directorate of Census Operations Jammu and Kashmir, 2011; Government of Jammu and Kashmir, 2023). Each district has distinct population profiles that shape marital dynamics and communication patterns among couples. The impact of social media on trust and conflict within marriages in these districts is significant, as it alters traditional communication methods and influences perceptions of trustworthiness among partners. The qualitative analysis will explore how these dynamics manifest in daily interactions and conflict resolution strategies among couples in South Kashmir.

Methodology of the Study

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach. Qualitative research is appropriate because it allows in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena and captures the meanings participants attach to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study method enables detailed examination of contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts (Yin, 2018). This design was specifically chosen to understand the nuanced ways social media affects marital relationships in the culturally unique setting of South Kashmir.

Study Area

The research was conducted in four southern districts of Kashmir Division: Anantnag (population ~1,078,692), Pulwama (~560,440), Kulgam (~424,483), and Shopian (~266,215). These districts represent diverse socio-cultural dynamics within South Kashmir. Anantnag is the largest district in the study area with mixed urban-rural population. Pulwama has high literacy rates and educational institutions. Kulgam is predominantly rural with agricultural economy. Shopian is the smallest district with unique socio-cultural characteristics. All four districts show high rates of social media use despite ongoing regional conflicts (Directorate of Census Operations Jammu and Kashmir, 2011).

Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of married couples residing in the selected four districts. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select nine couples (18 individual participants) who met specific inclusion criteria: legally married for minimum one year, regular social media use (at least 3-4 times weekly), willingness to participate in in-depth interviews, and representation of diverse demographics (ages 25-45 years, varied educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses). The sample size of nine couples was determined by data saturation principle, where similar themes began recurring and new data ceased to provide additional insights (Guest et al., 2006).

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted separately with husbands and wives to ensure free expression without partner influence. An interview guide was developed covering: demographic information, social media use patterns and frequency, effects on spousal communication, trust issues, conflicts arising from use, resolution strategies, and overall marital satisfaction. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes depending on participant willingness and experience richness. All interviews were conducted in Urdu and Kashmiri (local languages) for participant comfort, audio-recorded with written consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Secondary data included review of existing literature and government reports on internet usage in the region.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading and initial note-taking; (2) generation of initial codes by breaking data into meaningful units; (3) searching for themes by organizing codes into potential patterns; (4) reviewing themes against coded extracts and full dataset; (5) defining and naming themes with clear descriptions; and (6) producing the final report with vivid examples. Analysis was conducted manually without software to ensure close data engagement. Two researchers independently coded data and compared coding to ensure reliability, with disagreements discussed until consensus reached.

Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining study purpose, procedures, and rights. Confidentiality was maintained through use of pseudonyms in all materials; real names known only to researchers and stored securely. Anonymity protected by keeping district locations general. Participation was entirely voluntary with explicit right to withdraw anytime without consequences. No incentives were provided that might coerce participation. Audio recordings and transcripts stored securely with access limited to research team, to be destroyed after research completion. Researchers were attentive to sensitive nature of marital discussions, offering to pause interviews if distress occurred and providing supportive resources as needed.

Limitations

The study has several acknowledged limitations. Limited generalizability due to small sample size (nine couples) and purposive sampling technique means findings cannot be statistically generalized to all married couples in Jammu and Kashmir. Self-report bias may occur as data relies on participants' own accounts of behaviors and experiences, which may involve inaccurate recall or social desirability presentation. Cross-sectional design captures only one time point, preventing establishment of causal relationships or tracking changes over time. Researcher subjectivity in qualitative interpretation was mitigated but not eliminated through independent coding and member checking. Translation from Urdu/Kashmiri to English may have lost some linguistic nuances. Selection bias may exist as participating couples may differ systematically from those who declined.

Highlighted Case Studies

Case Study No. 1: Mr. Irshad, a 36-year-old government employee from Pulwama with eight years of marriage and two children, regularly uses Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube for job searching, religious content, and news updates, spending approximately three to four hours daily online mostly in evenings. His wife, a homemaker, feels deeply neglected when he constantly checks his phone during family dinners and relative visits, creating tension as she feels the phone takes priority over family presence. After she clearly communicated her feelings, Mr. Irshad acknowledged the issue and established boundaries including no phone use during meals, demonstrating how technoference can be addressed through open communication and mutual boundary-setting in marital relationships.

Case Study No. 2: Mr. Irshad, aged 40 from Kulgam district, works in a private company and frequently travels for work, having been married for 12 years with three children. He emphasizes social media's benefits for maintaining close contact with distant family members, using daily video calls and instant messaging to connect with parents and siblings living in other parts of India, while his wife similarly uses these platforms for her relatives. Unlike cases with conflicts, this couple views social media positively as it helps them feel connected during separations, and they have

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

established mutual understanding to limit screen time when together, ensuring quality family time while benefiting from technology's connectivity advantages.

Case Study No. 3: Mr. Shafi, a 34-year-old teacher from Shopian married for six years with one child, faced significant marital issues when his wife, also 34 and previously a teacher now homemaker, spent excessive time on Facebook and Instagram connecting with old school friends and following lifestyle influencers. Her prolonged scrolling led to neglect of household responsibilities and their child, causing frequent arguments as Mr. Shafi felt she preferred her virtual world over real family life. Through serious conversation where she acknowledged using social media to cope with stress, they established designated "no phone" times and prioritized family activities, successfully resolving conflicts through open communication and boundary establishment.

Case Study No. 4: Mr. Riyaz, a 36-year-old small business owner from Shopian with 10 years of marriage and two children, developed severe social media addiction initially using Facebook and YouTube for leisure but escalating to six to seven hours daily, severely affecting his sleep, work schedule, mental health, and family relationships. His wife's concerns about his irritability and neglect of children were initially dismissed until he experienced anxiety and depression symptoms linked to excessive use. After seeking professional counseling that helped him understand his addictive patterns, he limited usage to one hour daily and deleted Facebook from his phone, now advocating for professional help and strict limits to prioritize family well-being over digital engagement.

Case Study No. 5: Mr. and Mrs. Dar, newlyweds from Anantnag married for 18 months with both partners working in IT and nursing respectively, faced serious trust crisis when they discovered each other had reconnected with former romantic partners through Facebook and Instagram, with Mr. Dar messaging his ex-girlfriend and Mrs. Dar renewing contact with a former partner. Despite no physical infidelity, the emotional connections caused deep betrayal feelings and marital crisis. Through multiple honest conversations about fears and expectations, they unfollowed and blocked former partners, established password transparency, and created rules about private opposite-sex conversations, successfully rebuilding trust through mutual commitment to transparency and boundary-setting.

Case Study No. 6: Mr. and Mrs. Sajad from Pulwama, married 13 years with three children living in an extended family, faced intense cultural pressures regarding children's education and career choices that conflicted with their own views and caused significant marital stress. Feeling isolated from family traditions, they discovered Facebook support groups for parents facing similar issues, where they found advice, validation, and reduced isolation. Combined with online counseling resources and parenting forums, they learned communication strategies that helped them present a united front to their extended family, demonstrating social media's positive potential as a support system for families navigating cultural pressures and conflicts.

Case Study No. 7: Mrs. Farooq, a 26-year-old newly married woman from Kulgam, noticed her 30-year-old husband's excessive social media use of four to five hours daily was affecting his sleep, energy levels, mood, and their relationship quality. Rather than direct confrontation that might trigger defensiveness, she researched digital wellness strategies online and shared articles and videos about managing social media addiction with her husband. She also actively suggested enjoyable offline activities like hiking and family visits that gradually reduced his screen time. Her indirect educational approach successfully improved his habits without creating conflict, highlighting how social media itself can provide resources for improving life balance and fostering healthy digital practices within marriages.

Case Study No. 8: John, a 32-year-old hospitality worker from Pulwama married five years with one child, is a heavy user of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for news, entertainment, and professional networking, causing frequent arguments with his teacher wife who feels invisible when he constantly scrolls during their conversations. Despite her attempts to discuss his habits, John reacts defensively feeling attacked, and fails to recognize his compulsive checking behavior. This creates a cycle of unresolved conflict where both partners feel misunderstood and resentful, with their emotional connection eroding due to his inability to be present in the relationship, demonstrating how excessive use without willingness to change creates ongoing marital strain.

Case Study No. 9: Mrs. Shafi, a 33-year-old from Anantnag married eight years with two children aged 6 and 4, experiences ongoing frustration with her 37-year-old husband's disruptive social media habits, particularly his late-night phone use in their shared bedroom that wakes the children and prevents him from helping with bedtime routines. While she understands his need to stay connected during work-related travel, she expects full presence when he is home. Despite raising concerns multiple times, he remains unresponsive believing his connectivity needs justify the behavior, leaving her feeling undervalued and creating persistent family harmony challenges that illustrate the

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

difficulty of balancing legitimate connectivity needs with respect for partner concerns and family boundaries. Therefore, the case studies illustrate the dual impact of social media on family relationships enhancing connectivity while causing conflicts when overused. They underscore the importance of moderation, open communication, trust, and professional guidance to foster healthier online habits and family harmony.

Discussion and Analysis

The case studies provide insight into how social media affects families and individuals in Jammu and Kashmir. Through these stories, the varying impacts of social media are highlighted, from strengthening relationships to contributing to tension and addiction. The cases of Mr. Irshad from Pulwama (Case Study No. 1) and Mr. Irshad from Kulgam (Case Study No. 2) underscore social media's ability to maintain familial bonds and support practical needs like job searches. For example, social media serves as a link for families across distances, offering a way to bridge physical separation and build relationships. According to Fan and Wang (2022), social media's ability to alleviate psychological stress can play a significant role in reducing marital conflicts and improving satisfaction. Similarly, McDaniel et al. (2012) emphasize that online communication can enrich family ties by promoting interactive and fulfilling engagements. On the other hand, excessive social media use can create tension, as seen with Mr. Riyaz (Case Study No. 4) and Mr. Shafi (Case Study No. 3). Mr. Riyaz's story illustrates how excessive social media usage can lead to isolation and anxiety, affecting mental health and family harmony. His experience mirrors findings by Kerkhof et al. (2011), who observed that compulsive Internet use tends to lower the quality of offline relationships and increase conflict. Meanwhile, Mr. Shafi's family faced challenges due to his wife's social media habits, resulting in neglect of family time. These cases reinforce the importance of establishing boundaries around social media usage to protect relationship quality and individual well-being.

In the context of marital relationships, the stories of Mr. and Mrs. Dar (Case Study No. 5) and Mr. and Mrs. Sajad (Case Study No. 6) demonstrate that social media can serve as both a source of conflict and support. Mr. and Mrs. Dar experienced marital tension due to rekindling past relationships on social media. Through open communication and a shared commitment to transparency, they overcame these challenges. It aligns with findings by Singh & Tyagi (2023), which suggest that social media can undermine relationship satisfaction if not used with boundaries and transparency. In contrast, Mr. and Mrs. Sajad turned to online support groups during challenging times, finding validation and community through these groups. Their experience highlights social media's potential as a support system for families facing cultural pressures and conflicts. In addition, the experiences of Mrs. Farooq (Case Study No. 7) and John (Case Study No. 8) underscore the double-edged nature of social media use. For instance, Mrs. Farooq leveraged online resources to encourage her husband to adopt healthier online habits, which ultimately benefited their relationship. Meanwhile, John's struggle with excessive social media led to arguments and a strained marriage, as he reacted poorly to his wife's concerns. These cases illustrate how using social media responsibly can create opportunities for personal growth and relationship stability. The case of Mrs. Shafi (Case Study No. 9) shows the challenges of balancing connectivity with family life. Her husband's social media use disrupts their routine and affects their children's sleep, even though he values social media as a way to stay connected while away. The case reflects the broader struggle couples face in managing social media's positive attributes while maintaining family harmony. Thus, these case studies reveal the importance of balance, open communication, and moderation. By recognizing the benefits of social media in maintaining family ties and offering support, and the challenges it presents in personal and family dynamics, these stories suggest the need for mindful usage that prioritizes well-being and relational health.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has limitations related to its sample size and geographic focus, which may affect the generalizability of findings to other regions or populations. Future research should expand to include diverse demographic groups across broader regions and integrate quantitative approaches to complement qualitative insights. Additional studies on how different social media platforms uniquely impact relationships could also provide further insights.

Conclusion

In the context of Jammu and Kashmir, the study clarifies the complex interactions between social media use and marital relationships. Through qualitative case studies, it is made clear that although social media presents

Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

substantial obstacles, such as addiction and marital conflicts, it also presents opportunity for improving communication and familial bonds. The results highlight how crucial it is to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of social media use, especially when it comes to family dynamics. In order to lessen the negative effects of social media on marital happiness and well-being, the study highlights the necessity of proactive actions including open communication, setting limits, and seeking support. Ultimately, in the face of social media's ubiquitous effect in Kashmiri homes, stakeholders can develop stronger and more resilient marriages by encouraging digital literacy and ethical usage habits.

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The authors declare no other competing interests.

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Social Media and Marital Dynamics: A Qualitative Analysis of Impact on Communication, Trust, and Conflict among Couples in Jammu and Kashmir (UT)

Bilal Ahmad Mir and Sameer Maqbool Wani

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