

The Impact of Technology and Social Media on Intimacy and Trust in Modern Relationships

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Abstract—The rapid integration of technology and social media into daily life has redefined the nature of intimacy and trust in romantic relationships. This study aimed to examine the influence of digital habits—specifically social media usage, texting frequency, and exposure to digital infidelity—on emotional intimacy and trust. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative survey data from 60 couples (N = 120 individuals) aged 20–50 years across metropolitan and semi-urban regions with qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. Standardized instruments, including the Relationship Satisfaction Scale and Dyadic Trust Scale, were administered alongside custom-designed surveys and questionnaires. Results indicated that higher social media use was significantly associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and emotional intimacy. Couples who reported experiences of digital infidelity scored markedly lower on trust, highlighting the destabilizing effects of ambiguous online behaviors. Conversely, boundary-setting around technology use emerged as a protective factor, with couples who implemented clear rules reporting higher satisfaction and trust. The qualitative narratives corroborated these findings, emphasizing both the connective and disruptive roles of digital media in daily relational exchanges. Together, these results suggest that while technology facilitates connection, unregulated use can strain intimacy and erode trust. The study concludes that conscious boundary-setting and open communication about digital habits are crucial strategies for fostering resilience and stability in modern relationships.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital technology and the widespread usage of social media platforms have fundamentally altered how individuals develop, maintain, and enjoy romantic relationships. Over the last 20 years, social networking sites, cellphones, and instant messaging applications have flourished, creating previously

unheard-of opportunities for contact and communication. These innovations have redefined not only the pace and frequency of interaction but also the very expectations partners hold about availability and responsiveness in relationships. As a result, intimacy and trust are increasingly being negotiated in both physical and digital spaces, blurring traditional boundaries of relational experience. Relationship expectations, limits, and displays of intimacy and trust have all altered as a result of the technology revolution, as has the frequency and speed with which couples communicate. The effect of technology on romantic relationships is complicated. On the one hand, digital tools allow geographically distant spouses to remain emotionally connected through real-time conversation, multimedia exchange, and virtual demonstrations of affection. Couples can use social media platforms to publicly confirm their relationships, discuss milestones, and keep each other up to speed on their everyday lives. These activities can enhance emotional attachments, particularly in long-distance relationships or in situations when in-person encounters are limited. At the same time, the public nature of such exchanges can create pressure to curate idealized versions of relationships, sometimes leading to comparisons, insecurity, or conflict. Thus, while digital platforms expand the avenues for connection, they also introduce new layers of complexity in how intimacy and trust are expressed and perceived.

However, the same platforms that foster connectedness may also strain relationships. Relationship satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and conflict have all been related to excessive screen time, "technoference" (the interruption of face-to-face encounters induced by technology use), and "phubbing" (phone snubbing). Furthermore, the

accessibility and anonymity of digital environments have facilitated new sorts of infidelity—often referred to as "digital infidelity"—. These include sexting, emotionally intense private chat, and reestablishing touch with ex-partners. Even seemingly trivial online behaviors, such as liking or commenting on certain postings, can undermine trust over time and create jealousy or suspicion. Such behaviors blur the line between harmless interaction and betrayal, making it difficult for couples to agree on shared definitions of fidelity in the digital age. Consequently, unresolved ambiguities around online conduct often serve as a catalyst for conflict and erosion of relational security. Social media also presents the concept of relational surveillance, in which partners watch one other's online activity. While some amount of openness might build trust, excessive surveillance may cause tension and hostility. These conflicts are exacerbated by the public-private ambiguity inherent in social media: intimate aspects of a relationship can be published with an audience, sometimes without mutual permission, generating concerns about privacy and boundaries. This tension often forces couples to negotiate new norms around disclosure, transparency, and privacy in order to preserve mutual respect. In many cases, the lack of clear boundaries online amplifies misunderstandings, leaving partners vulnerable to mistrust and misinterpretation.

The impact of technology on relationships is neither uniform nor universally experienced. Cultural norms, generational differences, and relationship stages all influence how couples integrate digital tools into their lives. Younger couples, for example, may smoothly integrate online and offline contact into their daily routines, viewing digital connection as an organic extension of their relationship. In contrast, older couples may perceive such exchanges as secondary, if not invasive. Similarly, individuals from collectivist cultures may interpret public displays of affection online differently than those from individualist backgrounds, potentially shaping both perceptions of intimacy and definitions of trust. In recent years, couples therapists and counselors have observed an increase in technology-related issues during sessions. Disagreements over screen time, arguments stemming from online encounters, and suspicion of digital conduct are becoming common topics in couple therapy. These problems underscore the critical need to understand the mechanisms by which technology

promotes and inhibits intimacy and trust in order to offer appropriate solutions and advice. By systematically examining these dynamics, research can equip practitioners with evidence-based strategies to address technology-driven conflicts in therapy. Such insights not only enhance clinical interventions but also empower couples to develop healthier patterns of digital engagement in their everyday lives.

The present study addresses this need by exploring the relationship between technology use, intimacy, and trust among couples in the contemporary digital landscape. Specifically, it investigates the extent to which social media usage patterns, texting habits, and exposure to digital infidelity correlate with perceived intimacy and trust levels between partners. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study not only quantifies these associations but also captures the lived experiences of couples through qualitative narratives, offering a comprehensive understanding of technology's dual role in modern romantic relationships. The findings are expected to add to both academic research and practical counseling practices. They seek to provide culturally appropriate strategies that promote healthy digital participation while minimizing possible relationship damage. As technology advances, continuous study in this area will be critical to ensuring that digital tools improve, rather than impede, the foundations of intimacy and trust that sustain long-term, successful relationships.

Operational Definitions

Technology Use: It refers to the frequency, duration, and type of digital communication between romantic partners, including but not limited to social media engagement (e.g., posting, commenting, liking), instant messaging (e.g., WhatsApp, Messenger), voice and video calls, and the use of multimedia sharing platforms.

Social Media Usage: Engagement with online social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and similar applications, encompassing activities like posting, commenting, liking, messaging, and browsing.

Intimacy: A state of emotional closeness and connectedness between individuals, characterized by mutual affection, trust, understanding, and open communication.

Trust: The belief in the reliability, integrity, and honesty of another person, including confidence in their intentions and behavior.

Technoference: The disruption of interpersonal interaction caused by the use of technological devices during shared time or conversations.

Phubbing: The act of ignoring or giving less attention to someone in favor of using a mobile phone or other digital device.

Digital Infidelity: Engaging in online interactions or activities that breach the exclusivity or boundaries of a romantic relationship, such as emotional or sexual exchanges with someone outside the partnership.

Relationship Satisfaction: The degree to which an individual feels content, fulfilled, and positively evaluated in their romantic relationship.

Need and Significance of the Study:

The incorporation of technology and social media into daily life has transformed the nature of love relationships. Digital communication technologies, such as instant messaging and video conversations, as well as photo-sharing platforms and dating apps, are increasingly crucial to how couples interact, show affection, and sustain emotional relationships. While these improvements provide unprecedented chances for connection, they also pose new problems that were almost non-existent in pre-digital interactions. This dichotomy emphasizes the significance of thoroughly investigating how technology impacts two critical characteristics of relational health: intimacy and trust. One important need for this research is the increasing incidence of technology-related problems in couple's counseling and therapy. Counsellors are increasingly seeing instances in which conflicts over social media activity, excessive screen time, or suspected digital infidelity are crucial to marital problems. These are not minor difficulties; they frequently overlap with deeper concerns of insecurity, boundary breaches, and emotional estrangement. Understanding these interactions is critical for therapists and counselors to give appropriate, timely, and successful therapeutic interventions.

Existing research, while extensive in Western contexts, has limitations in its applicability to diverse socio-cultural environments. Relationship expectations, communication norms, and perceptions of trust vary significantly across cultures. The lack of extensive study in non-Western contexts leaves a vacuum in understanding how cultural frameworks

influence couples' digital interactions. Without such knowledge, counseling practices may be culturally incongruous or ineffective. This study intends to overcome this gap by concentrating on a larger and more diverse participant pool, therefore contributing culturally relevant insights to the field. Another level of relevance is the changing nature of technology itself. Digital platforms are not static; they change quickly, bringing new features that might alter patterns of online activity. Ephemeral messaging, encrypted private conversations, and algorithm-driven content suggestions, for example, have created new relationship possibilities, both positive and harmful, that did not exist a decade ago. Studying these emerging technologies in real time is crucial to ensuring that relationship science keeps up with technological advancements.

This study is also relevant as a preventive measure. The findings, which reveal patterns of technology usage related to decreased intimacy or degraded trust, can inspire educational campaigns directed at couples, newlyweds, and even those preparing for long-term relationships. Such programs might assist partners in establishing healthy digital boundaries, developing reciprocal transparency practices, and identifying early warning signals of technology-induced strain. Finally, the research holds policy-level implications. As technology companies shape the digital spaces in which relationships take place, findings from this study could help to shape platform features that encourage healthy relational behaviors, such as improved privacy controls, content moderation to reduce interpersonal conflict, and prompts that promote mindful usage.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Erikson's psychosocial theory (1950) identifies young adulthood (roughly ages 18–40) as the stage of Intimacy vs. Isolation, wherein forming close romantic bonds is a central developmental task. Success yields strong committed relationships, while failure leads to loneliness. In this context, intimacy involves trust, closeness and mutual support, as Erikson emphasized the challenge of achieving "twoness" after first developing a stable sense of self. Attachment theory builds on this: Hazan & Shaver (1987) showed that early attachment styles carry into

adulthood, affecting romantic bonds . Secure adult attachment predicts greater trust, emotional closeness and satisfaction, whereas anxious or avoidant styles tend to undermine security in relationships . In modern digital life, insecure attachment often manifests as increased social media monitoring or jealousy (e.g. preoccupied/fearful individuals report more online partner surveillance), whereas secure partners tend to exhibit more mutual trust.

Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) further conceptualizes romantic love as composed of three components: intimacy (emotional closeness and bondedness), passion (romantic/physical attraction), and commitment (the decision to maintain the relationship) . These components combine to form different "styles" of love. In the digital age, technology can influence each component – for instance, texting may bolster feelings of intimacy, while easy access to alternatives (social media dating apps) can challenge commitment.

Social Exchange Theory (1959) offers another lens: it posits that individuals continuously weigh the "rewards" (e.g. emotional support, affection) against the "costs" (e.g. time, jealousy) of a relationship . People seek relationships where rewards exceed costs, and dissolve them when costs outweigh benefits . In modern romantic contexts, technology and social media alter this calculus: for example, the ease of finding new partners online can increase perceived alternatives (raising "costs" of commitment) and shift expectations about what behaviors are rewarding or acceptable.

Technology and the Evolution of Relationship Communication

Romantic couples' communication styles have changed dramatically during the last two decades. The development of cellphones, high-speed internet, and an ever-expanding array of social media platforms has enabled the transition from mostly face-to-face encounters to a mix of in-person and digital exchanges. According to Pew Research Center (2021), over 70% of adults use at least one social media platform daily, and messaging applications have become an integral part of relationship maintenance. Stafford's (2010) study on long-distance dating relationships (LDDRs) provides useful parallels for understanding intimacy in digitally mediated relationships. Using interdependence theory, the study found that LDDR partners engaged in more intimacy-

focused communication, selective self-presentation, and conflict avoidance compared to geographically close couples, often emphasizing positivity while avoiding sensitive or premarital topics. While these strategies helped sustain closeness despite physical separation, they also risked leaving important relational issues unaddressed. This mirrors patterns observed in technology-mediated relationships, where couples may rely on texting, calls, or social media to maintain intimacy, but in doing so, may idealize partners, avoid conflict, or under-communicate about long-term concerns. Thus, Stafford's findings underscore how mediated communication—whether due to physical distance or technological platforms—can both strengthen perceived intimacy and simultaneously constrain deeper relational negotiation, shaping how intimacy and trust are constructed in modern romantic contexts.

Technology and Intimacy

Empirical research suggests that digital communication can both enhance and undermine emotional intimacy. Frequent text messaging or video calls can maintain closeness in long-distance relationships. However, recent studies warn of online pitfalls: Lee et al. (2019) found that deep self-disclosure (sharing personal feelings) increased intimacy and satisfaction when done in an offline, private context, but decreased intimacy when the same high-depth disclosure was done publicly on social media . Specifically, participants exposed to "high-intimacy" Facebook-like posts reported lower relationship intimacy and satisfaction than those exposed to low-disclosure posts . This suggests that sharing private feelings online – where they reach many recipients – can erode the sense of special closeness between partners. On the positive side, Vaterlaus et al. (2016) found that couples who engage in supportive and affectionate exchanges online—such as sending thoughtful messages or sharing private jokes—report higher intimacy levels.

Technology and Trust in Relationships

Technology also affects trust. Experimental work shows that even the mere presence of a smartphone can reduce perceived partner trust: for example, a lab study by Przybylski & Weinstein (2012) (cited in Roberts & David, 2016) found that couples who simply had a phone visible during a meaningful

conversation rated their relationship quality and partner trust lower than couples without a phone present. This means that gadget disruptions might convey an implicit message that the phone is more essential than one's partner, eroding trust and connection. More broadly, social media may breed distrust by instilling jealousy and uncertainty. Partners may make comparisons to others' highlight reels or misunderstand equivocal online conduct. McDaniel et al. (2017) found that among married/cohabiting adults, engaging in more social-media infidelity-related behaviors (e.g. secretly chatting with ex-partners) was linked to significantly lower relationship satisfaction, higher ambivalence about the relationship, and greater attachment avoidance/anxiety. In other words, even non-sexual online betrayals predicted poorer relationship quality.

Moreover, many couples now monitor each other's online activity. In a large empirical study, Hertlein & van Dyck (2020) identified that lower relationship intimacy and prior infidelity predicted higher engagement in online partner surveillance. They report that "impaired intimacy, satisfaction, and infidelity in a romantic relationship can fuel interpersonal electronic surveillance (IES), further reducing trust and intimacy". Their analyses (n=259 couples) showed that various relational and Internet-use factors significantly predicted how often individuals "cyber-stalk" their partners. Similarly, Fox & Warber (2014) found that attachment insecurity (preoccupied/fearful style) predicted more Facebook surveillance and relational uncertainty. These findings collectively suggest that technology both offers new ways to maintain transparency and new opportunities for doubt: frequent online monitoring is common, but it tends to arise from and further erode trust when couples feel disconnected.

Clayton, Nagurney, and Smith (2013) link social media use to increased instances of jealousy, particularly when online behaviors are ambiguous or open to misinterpretation. In other circumstances, the public nature of social media interactions can exacerbate relationship stress, with partners feeling forced to publicly express affection or acknowledgement. Gottman and Silver (2015), in their seminal work on relationship functioning, emphasize the importance of establishing trust and maintaining healthy communication as central principles for long-term relationship success. Their framework highlights

how setting boundaries, fostering emotional attunement, and minimizing destructive patterns of interaction can serve as protective factors. Applied to the digital context, these principles suggest that couples who engage in intentional boundary-setting and transparent communication are better able to mitigate the risks posed by technology-related conflicts.

Digital Infidelity and Online Betrayals

Hertlein and Ancheta (2014) define digital infidelity as engaging in online behaviors that a partner perceives as violating the exclusivity of the relationship, including emotional exchanges, sexting, or reconnecting with past romantic interests through private channels. The accessibility and anonymity of digital platforms lower the perceived barriers to such behaviors, increasing their prevalence. Clayton et al. (2013) argue that even non-physical online interactions can be interpreted as betrayal, particularly in relationships with pre-existing trust vulnerabilities. These incidents can have lasting repercussions on emotional security and relationship stability. McDaniel et al. (2017) surveyed married/cohabiting individuals and found that although only a small minority admitted to social-media infidelity behaviors, those who did reported significantly lower satisfaction with their relationship. In other words, even brief online flirtations or private chats with alternatives were connected with increased relationship ambivalence and anxiety. Attachment anxiety influenced gender: anxious people were more likely to participate in online adultery when dissatisfied. These tendencies are consistent with larger findings that emotional affairs (even those conducted online) can be as upsetting as physical ones. In conclusion, the evidence suggests that social media is another avenue for betrayal, and such acts damage trust and emotional stability in romantic relationships.

Technoference and Phubbing

"Technoference" refers to everyday interruptions by technology in couple interactions. McDaniel & Coyne (2016) define it as technology (smartphones, TV, etc.) interfering in face-to-face couple time. In a survey of 143 partnered women, higher technoference was associated with more conflict over technology use, lower relationship satisfaction, and greater depression and lower life satisfaction. In other words, when partners frequently interrupt quality time to check devices, couples fight more and feel less satisfied

overall. “Phubbing” (phone-snubbing) is a specific form of technoferece where one partner ignores the other in favor of their phone. Roberts & David (2016) modeled this process: partner phubbing creates arguments about phone use, which then lower relationship satisfaction. Indeed, their daily-diary study showed that as phubbing increased, phone-related conflict rose, which in turn predicted declines in satisfaction (especially among individuals with anxious attachment). Similarly, a recent (2024) survey of Indian couples found a significant negative correlation between perceived partner phubbing and both relationship satisfaction and trust. (In that study, higher partner phubbing predicted lower trust). Adding further evidence, Abeele, Schouten, and Antheunis (2015) examined the effect of mobile phone use during co-present situations and found that device use during face-to-face interactions negatively influenced impression formation and lowered perceived relationship quality. Their findings reinforce the notion that digital interruptions, even when brief, can undermine relational closeness and diminish the quality of interpersonal connection. More recently, Knausenberger, Giesen-Leuchter, and Echterhoff (2022) demonstrated that phubbing not only undermines perceived relationship quality but also threatens fundamental psychological needs such as belonging, self-esteem, and control, while simultaneously reducing trust and positive mood. These findings indicate that the negative consequences of phubbing extend beyond relational dissatisfaction to core aspects of emotional well-being. Complementing these findings, Krasnova, Abramova, Notter, and Baumann (2016) investigated phubbing among Generation Y users and found that it triggers smartphone-induced jealousy, which in turn leads to relational dissatisfaction and diminished trust. Together, these studies suggest that phubbing creates a complex cycle of neglect, insecurity, and conflict that undermines both intimacy and trust. Extending this line of inquiry, Lestari and Suratmini (2024) identified Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and nomophobia as significant predictors of phubbing behavior among adolescent Instagram users, suggesting that the psychological anxieties tied to constant connectivity may explain why individuals prioritize their devices over relational presence. Similarly, Zhan, Shrestha, and Zhong (2022) found that the relationship between phubbing and

satisfaction is mediated by loneliness and moderated by empathy, indicating that individual differences in emotional capacity shape how strongly phubbing erodes relational well-being. Key empirical findings on technoferece/phubbing include: Women reporting more daily technoferece also reported more couple conflict and lower satisfaction, phone interruptions predict arguments (“cell phone conflict”), which mediate the effect on satisfaction, and individuals with anxious attachment suffer more from being phubbed, experiencing higher conflict levels. Overall, the study implies that excessive technology use during partner interactions not only depletes quality time, but also symbolically conveys misplaced priorities, undermining closeness and trust, in turn affecting well-being.

Online Surveillance and Privacy

Technology enables extensive electronic surveillance of partners. Studies show this behavior has identifiable antecedents and consequences. For example, Hertlein et al. (2020) demonstrated that lower satisfaction and past infidelity in a relationship can drive a partner to monitor the other online (through social media or apps), often as a maladaptive coping strategy. Their work indicates that distressed couples may turn to surveillance rather than open communication, which only compounds mistrust. Theological theories offer context: from a social-exchange view, surveillance could be seen as a (misguided) attempt to reduce uncertainty (a “cost”) by gathering information (a “reward”), but it often backfires by provoking conflict and resentment. 9 In practice, common surveillance behaviors include checking partner’s location apps or social accounts. Surveys by Hertlein and others suggest that roughly one-third of individuals track their partner’s social media, and a similar proportion cite technology-related suspicion as a breakup factor. Such surveillance has a double edge: while it may give temporary reassurance, it frequently indicates underlying trust concerns. Consistent with this, Fox & Warber’s study noted that those high in uncertainty or insecure attachment are especially prone to online surveillance.

Cultural and Generational Considerations

Much of the extant research has been undertaken in Western settings, which limits generalizability. Cultural norms play a significant role in how partners understand online conduct. In collectivist countries, public shows of affection online may have different

connotations than in individualist settings, and privacy limits may be handled differently inside relationships. Furthermore, age disparities come into play; younger individuals, who have grown up with digital media, frequently incorporate it easily into their love life, whereas older persons may perceive such connections as extra or even invasive. According to research, socio-cultural expectations might influence the emotional weight assigned to online activities. For example, the lack of public acknowledgement on social media may be viewed by some as a lack of dedication or pride in the relationship, whilst others may cherish privacy.

Gaps in literature

Gaps in the research include limited investigation of cultural differences in how technology influences relationships. The majority of research has been undertaken in Western environments, leaving unresolved the topic of how collectivist and individualist cultures deal with digital intimacy and trust. Furthermore, when new platforms arise, the long-term influence on relationships is an unexplored field. This study expands on previous research by concentrating on closeness and trust, while also stressing cross-cultural insights and practical applications.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives:

Problem Statement: How does technology influence intimacy and trust in modern relationships?

To explore how digital habits (e.g., social media usage, texting) influence emotional intimacy and trust in relationships.

To identify strategies couples use to navigate technology-related conflicts.

Hypotheses:

Higher social media usage correlates with lower levels of emotional intimacy in couples.

Frequent exposure to "digital infidelity" is associated with diminished trust in relationships.

Couples who set clear boundaries around technology usage report higher relationship satisfaction.

Research Design

The present study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the impact of technology and social media on intimacy and trust in romantic

relationships. The quantitative component involved the use of standardized scales and structured questionnaires to identify statistical associations between digital habits, intimacy, and trust. The qualitative component utilized a semi-structured interview guide to capture participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives, thereby providing a deeper contextual understanding of the phenomena under study.

Participants:

The sample comprised 60 heterosexual couples (N = 120 individuals) between the ages of 20 and 50 years. Participants represented diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, with couples drawn from both metropolitan and semi-urban settings. The inclusion criteria required that participants:

Be in a committed romantic relationship (dating or married) for a minimum of one year.

Be regular users of smartphones and at least one social media platform.

Provide informed consent to participate in both the survey and, where selected, the interview.

Exclusion criteria included couples in therapeutic interventions specifically for technology-related conflicts, in order to minimize potential bias. Participants were recruited through online advertisements, social media postings, and snowball sampling.

Instruments:

Digital Habits Questionnaire (DHQ)

The Digital Habits Questionnaire was researcher-developed to assess participants' patterns of technology and social media use within romantic relationships. It included demographic details, frequency of smartphone and social media use, modes of digital communication with partners, and perceived effects of these habits on intimacy, trust, and conflict. Responses combined categorical options, Likert-scale items, and dichotomous questions to provide both behavioral and attitudinal data.

Section A: Demographics

Age: _____

Gender: Male / Female / Other

Relationship Status: Dating / Engaged / Married

Duration of Relationship: _____ years/months

Highest Educational Qualification: _____

Occupation: _____

Section B: Technology Usage Patterns

7. Average daily time spent on smartphone (in hours):

Less than 2 hours

2–4 hours

4–6 hours

More than 6 hours

8. Average daily time spent on social media platforms:

Less than 1 hour

1–3 hours

3–5 hours

More than 5 hours

9. Primary platforms used for communication with partner:

WhatsApp

Instagram

Facebook

Snapchat

Others (please specify) _____

10. Frequency of text communication with partner:

Rarely (once a day or less)

Occasionally (2–5 times per day)

Frequently (6–10 times per day)

Very Frequently (more than 10 times per day)

11. Frequency of video/voice calls with partner:

Rarely (once a week or less)

Occasionally (2–4 times per week)

Frequently (daily)

Very Frequently (multiple times per day)

Section C: Impact on Intimacy and Trust

12. I feel closer to my partner when we communicate digitally.

Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

I feel that social media helps us share important aspects of our relationship.

Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

My partner’s phone or social media use during our conversations affects me negatively.

Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

15. I have experienced or suspected jealousy due to my partner’s social media interactions.

Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

16. We have set clear boundaries about technology use in our relationship (e.g., screen time, social media interactions).

Yes / No

I believe excessive technology use reduces the quality of our relationship.

Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree

18. Have you ever experienced what you would consider “digital infidelity” in your relationship?

Yes

No

If yes, please specify briefly: _____

Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSS)

The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), often referred to as the Relationship Satisfaction Scale (RSS), is a widely used 7-item measure of global relationship satisfaction. Items assess domains such as fulfillment of needs, comparison to expectations, perceived problems, and emotional connection. Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale, with two items reverse-scored. Higher scores indicate higher levels of overall relationship satisfaction. The scale has shown strong reliability and validity across diverse populations.

Items

How well does your partner meet your needs?

A

B

C

D

E

Poorly

Average

Extremely well

In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

A

B

C

D

E

Items

Table 2 *Items in the Dyadic Trust Scale*

Sl. No.	Item	Reverse Scored?
	My partner is primarily interested in his (her) own welfare.	Yes
	There are times when my partner cannot be trusted.	Yes
	My partner is perfectly honest and truthful with me.	No
	I feel that I can trust my partner completely.	No
	My partner is truly sincere in his (her) promises.	No
	I feel that my partner does not show me enough consideration.	Yes
	My partner treats me fairly and justly.	No
	I feel that my partner can be counted on to help me.	No

Scoring Procedure

Reverse-code items 1, 2, and 6.

Add up all 8 item scores (after reversing).

Compute the total score (range = 8 to 56).

Higher scores reflect greater trust in the romantic partner.

Scoring Interpretation

Table 3 *Scoring Interpretation of the Dyadic Trust Scale*

Score	Level of Trust
8-24	Low Trust
25-40	Moderate Trust
41-56	High Trust

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participating couples to explore their lived experiences with technology use in their relationships. The interview guide focused on four broad themes: (a) the role of social media and digital communication in daily relational interactions, (b) conflicts or misunderstandings arising from technology use, (c) perceptions of “digital infidelity” and its impact on trust, and (d) strategies couples employ to manage or

negotiate technology-related disagreements. Probing questions allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences and provide nuanced insights into the interplay between technology, intimacy, and trust.

Opening

Could you describe your relationship and how you usually communicate with your partner?

Theme 1: Technology as a Connector

2. In what ways has technology or social media helped you feel closer to your partner?

3. Can you share an example of a positive experience in your relationship that was supported by technology?

Theme 2: Challenges and Conflicts

4. Have there been times when technology caused misunderstandings or conflicts between you and your partner?

5. How do you feel when your partner uses their phone or social media while you are spending time together?

Theme 3: Trust and Boundaries

6. How do you define trust in the context of digital interactions?

7. Have you and your partner set any boundaries around technology use (e.g., screen time, avoiding interactions with ex-partners)? How effective have these been?

Theme 4: Digital Infidelity

8. What, in your view, counts as “digital infidelity”?

9. How would you react if your partner engaged in online behaviors that made you uncomfortable?

Theme 5: Coping and Adaptation

10. How do you and your partner usually resolve disagreements related to technology or social media use?

11. What strategies do you believe couples can adopt to maintain intimacy and trust in a technology-driven world?

Closing

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with technology, social media, and your relationship?

Procedure:

Data collection was conducted in two phases:

Phase I (Quantitative Assessment):

Data collection was conducted in person/virtually with all 60 participating couples. After obtaining informed consent, couples were first asked to complete the self-report instruments individually in a quiet and private setting. Each participant filled out the Digital Habits Questionnaire (DHQ), the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), and the Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS). The administration of questionnaires took approximately 20–25 minutes per participant.

Phase II (Qualitative Interviews):

Following the completion of the quantitative measures, couples jointly participated in a semi-structured interview facilitated by the researcher. Interviews focused on couples' experiences of technology use in their relationships, including benefits, challenges, perceptions of digital infidelity, and strategies for managing technology-related conflicts. Each interview lasted 25–40 minutes.

The entire data collection process for each couple took between 60 and 75 minutes. Confidentiality was maintained throughout; participants' names were replaced with codes, and all recordings and data were stored securely. Participation was voluntary, and couples were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Informed Consent Form

Title of the Study:

The Impact of Technology and Social Media on Intimacy and Trust in Modern Relationships

Principal Investigator:

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Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that aims to explore how technology and social media influence intimacy and trust in romantic relationships. The findings may help researchers and clinicians better understand technology-related challenges couples face in maintaining closeness and trust.

Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

Complete a questionnaire that includes demographic details and standardized measures (Relationship Satisfaction Scale, Dyadic Trust Scale, and Digital Habits Questionnaire).

Take part in a semi-structured interview with your partner, where you will discuss your experiences of technology use in your relationship.

The total time commitment will be approximately 45–60 minutes per couple.

Risks and Discomforts

The study does not involve any physical risk.

Some questions may make you reflect on sensitive aspects of your relationship, which may cause mild emotional discomfort. You are free to skip any question you do not wish to answer.

Benefits

While there may be no direct personal benefit, participating in the study may give you an opportunity to reflect on your relationship.

The study will contribute to research on intimacy, trust, and digital habits in romantic relationships.

Confidentiality

All responses will remain confidential and will only be used for academic research purposes.

Your name or identifying details will not appear in any report or publication.

Data will be stored securely and accessible only to the researcher.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

You may withdraw at any point without any negative consequences.

Consent Statement

I have read and understood the information provided above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Statistical Analysis:

Quantitative Data:

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version XX). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were first computed to summarize demographic information and participants' digital habits. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were examined.

To address the first hypothesis—that higher social media usage would be associated with lower levels of emotional intimacy—Pearson's product-moment correlation was employed between time spent on social media and scores on the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS).

For the second hypothesis—examining whether experiences of digital infidelity were associated with diminished trust—dependent samples t-tests were conducted to compare Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS) scores between participants who reported digital infidelity and those who did not. To test the third hypothesis—that couples who set clear boundaries around technology use, report higher relationship satisfaction—one-way ANOVA was used to assess differences in RAS scores across boundary-setting categories. Where significant effects were found, post hoc comparisons (Tukey's HSD) were applied.

In addition, multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined predictive power of technology-use variables (e.g., social media hours, texting frequency, boundary setting) on relationship satisfaction and trust.

Qualitative Data:

For the qualitative data, interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were developed inductively to capture recurring patterns, which were then grouped into higher-order themes reflecting couples' experiences of intimacy, trust, and conflict in the context of technology use. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all tests.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 60 heterosexual couples (N = 120 individuals), with ages ranging from 20 to 50 years (M = 31.6, SD = 6.8). Average relationship length was 6.4 years (SD = 4.1). In terms of technology use, participants reported an average of 4.3 hours (SD = 1.7) of daily smartphone use, of which 2.6 hours (SD = 1.2) were spent on social media platforms. WhatsApp (94%), Instagram (82%), and Facebook (61%) were the most frequently used applications for partner communication. Approximately 28% of participants acknowledged at least one instance of digital infidelity, while 42% reported having set explicit boundaries around technology use with their partner.

Table 4 *Descriptive Statistics for Descriptive Statistics for Demographic and Technology-Use Variables (N = 120)*

Variable	M	SD	%
Age (years)	31.6	6.8	–
Relationship length (years)	6.4	4.1	–
Daily smartphone use (hours)	4.3	1.7	–
Daily social media use (hours)	2.6	1.2	–
WhatsApp use	–	–	94 %
Instagram use	–	–	82 %
Facebook use	–	–	61 %
Reported digital infidelity	–	–	28 %
Boundary-setting reported	–	–	42 %

Hypothesis Testing

H1: Higher social media usage correlates with lower levels of emotional intimacy.

Pearson's correlation revealed a significant negative association between average daily social media use

and Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) scores ($r = -.34, p < .01$). This indicates that greater time spent on social media was linked to lower reported relationship satisfaction.

Table 5 *Correlation between Social Media Use and Relationship Satisfaction (RAS)*

Variable	r	p
Social media use (hrs)	-.34**	< .01

H2: Experiences of digital infidelity are associated with diminished trust.

An independent samples t-test showed that participants who reported digital infidelity ($M = 32.4, SD = 6.2$) had significantly lower Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS) scores than those who did not ($M = 40.7, SD = 5.9$), $t(118) = 6.54, p < .001$.

H3: Couples who set boundaries around technology report higher satisfaction.

A one-way ANOVA comparing RAS scores across boundary-setting groups indicated significant differences, $F(2,117) = 4.82, p < .01$. Post hoc analysis revealed that couples with clearly established boundaries reported significantly higher satisfaction ($M = 28.6, SD = 3.4$) compared to those with no boundaries ($M = 25.1, SD = 4.2$).

Table 6 *ANOVA on Boundary-Setting and Relationship Satisfaction Scores*

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	–	2	–	4.82*	< .01
Within Groups	–	117	–	–	–
Total	–	119	–	–	–

Note. $p < .05$.

Regression Analysis.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted with social media use, texting frequency, and boundary-setting as predictors of relationship satisfaction. The model was significant, $F(3,116) = 11.37, p < .001$, explaining 23% of the variance ($R^2 = .23$). Social media use ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$) negatively predicted satisfaction, while boundary-setting ($\beta = .25, p < .01$)

was a positive predictor. Texting frequency was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .09, ns$).

Table 7 *Regression Analysis Predicting Relationship Satisfaction (N = 120)*

Predictor	β	t	p
Social media use	– .29	– 3.42	<.01
Texting frequency	.09	1.02	.31
Boundary-setting	.25	2.87	<.01

Model summary: $R^2 = .23, F(3,116) = 11.37, p < .001$. Note. $p < .01$.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the 60 couple interviews generated four overarching themes:

Technology as a Connector. Many couples described technology as enhancing closeness by facilitating constant contact, particularly in long-distance arrangements. “Even if we are busy, just sending a good-morning text keeps us connected.” (Female, 29)

Technology as a Source of Conflict. Several participants noted disagreements arising from perceived overuse or divided attention during conversations. “Sometimes I feel like I am competing with the phone for attention.” (Male, 33)

Perceptions of Digital Infidelity. Participants varied in defining what constituted betrayal, ranging from explicit messaging to subtle “likes” or interactions on social media. “For me, flirting online is as bad as meeting someone in person.” (Female, 27)

Boundary-Setting as a Protective Strategy. Couples who reported establishing rules—such as no-phone meals or device-free evenings—emphasized improved trust and intimacy. “We decided not to use our phones after 10 p.m., and it’s really helped us talk more.” (Male, 35)

Summary

Taken together, the findings show that technology has a contradictory function in modern relationships. Quantitatively, greater social media usage was related with lower closeness and pleasure, whereas digital

infidelity had a substantial negative impact on trust. Importantly, setting technology-use boundaries appeared as a positive predictor of pleasure, suggesting that proactive relationship management measures might mitigate negative consequences. Qualitative findings reinforced this dual nature: technology was frequently framed as both a facilitator of closeness and a trigger for conflict. Couples' narratives revealed that the perception of digital behaviors—particularly those linked to fidelity—shaped trust and security in the relationship. Furthermore, couples who actively negotiated digital boundaries described more positive relational outcomes, echoing the quantitative results.

Overall, the integration of statistical and thematic data underscores that while technology can enhance connectedness, unregulated or ambiguous use may erode intimacy and trust, making boundary-setting a central protective factor.

Discussion

The present study investigated the impact of technology and social media on intimacy and trust in romantic relationships using a mixed-methods design. The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components illustrate the contradictory character of digital technologies: although they promote closeness and continual contact, they also pose obstacles that might damage intimacy and trust.

Technology and Intimacy

Findings revealed that higher social media use was significantly associated with lower levels of emotional intimacy, as measured by the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). This supports prior research showing that excessive online engagement can displace face-to-face interactions and undermine relational closeness (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013; Jiang & Hancock, 2013). The qualitative data reinforced this conclusion, with many couples reporting that “technoference” disrupted meaningful exchanges. Consistent with McDaniel and Coyne (2016), participants described frustration when partners prioritized digital devices over shared moments. However, technology was not exclusively negative: several couples acknowledged its role as a connector, particularly in long-distance contexts or during busy schedules.

Trust and Digital Infidelity

The results also demonstrated that experiences of digital infidelity were linked to significantly lower

trust scores on the Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS). This aligns with Clayton et al. (2013) and Roberts and David (2016), who argue that partner surveillance and online behaviors contribute to jealousy and diminished relational security. The qualitative narratives provided nuance, suggesting that definitions of “digital infidelity” varied widely, from liking an ex-partner’s photos to engaging in secretive conversations. These findings resonate with Krasnova et al. (2016), who emphasized the toxic role of smartphone jealousy in modern relationships. Importantly, this indicates that couples’ interpretations of fidelity boundaries in digital spaces are crucial in shaping trust.

Boundary-Setting as a Protective Factor

Couples who reported explicit technology-use boundaries demonstrated significantly higher relationship satisfaction. This finding complements prior studies suggesting that intentional regulation of digital interactions promotes relational stability (Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). The qualitative data highlighted common strategies such as device-free meals, agreed-upon “no-phone zones,” and negotiated expectations about online interactions. These align with Gottman and Silver’s (2015) emphasis on building rituals of connection and maintaining trust through clear agreements. The protective impact of boundary-setting shows that intentional negotiation of digital actions may serve as a buffer against relational strain.

Theoretical Implications

The study’s findings support interpersonal process models of intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 2005), which emphasize the role of self-disclosure and responsiveness in fostering closeness. Excessive social media use may inhibit these processes by diverting attention and reducing responsiveness. Attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) further provides a lens for understanding digital jealousy and surveillance behaviors, as insecure attachment may amplify concerns about digital infidelity. Finally, Sternberg’s (1986) triangular theory of love highlights how technology may differentially affect intimacy, passion, and commitment, with our findings particularly emphasizing strains on intimacy and trust.

Practical Implications

The findings highlight the importance of couples having open talks about their digital use and setting mutually agreed-upon boundaries. Practitioners

working with couples can incorporate conversations about digital habits into therapy, addressing topics including phubbing, social media envy, and technofrence. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns may encourage healthy technological behaviors that improve, rather than degrade, relationship quality.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions; longitudinal studies would provide stronger evidence of temporal relationships between technology use and relational outcomes. Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, particularly in sensitive domains such as infidelity. Third, while the sample included couples from diverse backgrounds, the focus on heterosexual relationships limits generalizability to other populations. Future research could explore same-sex partnerships, cultural variations, and the role of emerging technologies such as AI-driven communication tools.

V. CONCLUSION

This study adds to the expanding body of research on digital technologies in intimate relationships by finding that, while technology promotes connection, its unregulated use can strain intimacy and destroy trust. Boundary-setting appeared as a critical protective element, emphasizing the significance of deliberate digital actions. Together, these findings suggest a multifaceted picture of technology in modern romance—neither completely harmful nor totally useful, but strongly influenced by how couples manage its place in their lives.

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