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Digital Media Impact on Marital Satisfaction in Pakistan: A Socio-Psychological Analysis

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Keywords

Attachment styles, Pakistan, Digital media, Marital satisfaction, Relationship quality Social media.

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between digital media usage patterns, attachment styles, and marital satisfaction among Pakistani couples, extending previous research on relationship dynamics to contemporary digital contexts. A cross-sectional survey design was employed with married couples from urban Pakistan. Participants completed standardized scales measuring digital media usage patterns, adult attachment styles, relationship satisfaction, and demographic information. Data were analyzed using correlation analysis, multiple regression, and structural equation modeling to examine mediating relationships between variables. Results revealed that excessive social media use significantly predicted lower marital satisfaction among participants. Couples with secure attachment styles demonstrated greater resilience to digital media-related relationship stressors compared to those with insecure attachment patterns. Avoidant attachment styles mediate the relationship between problematic digital media use and decreased relationship satisfaction. Notable gender differences emerged, with females reporting higher levels of digital media-related relationship anxiety compared to males. The findings indicate that digital media usage patterns significantly influence marital satisfaction through attachment-related psychological mechanisms. These results suggest that culturally sensitive interventions focusing on healthy digital boundaries and enhanced communication skills may improve relationship quality among Pakistani couples navigating modern technological challenges in their marriages.

Introduction

The rapid diffusion of digital communication technologies has reshaped how intimate partners connect, coordinate, monitor, and negotiate boundaries in everyday life. Social networking sites (SNS), always-on messaging, and mobile internet access now mediate a substantial portion of couple interaction, introducing new affordances for connection as well as new frictions that may influence relationship quality. Recent population snapshots illustrate this scale: as of January 2025, Pakistan counted roughly 66.9 million active social-media user identities—about 26% of the population—underscoring the relevance of digital behaviors to contemporary marital life (DataReportal, 2025). Within such a landscape, questions about attention, availability, and trust increasingly play out online, with potential downstream effects on marital satisfaction. Foundational work on partner phubbing indicates that perceived phubbing predicts greater conflict and lower relationship and life satisfaction (Roberts & David, 2016), while research on interpersonal electronic surveillance shows that SNS features enable monitoring behaviors that can alter intimacy and control (Tokunaga, 2011). Exposure to partner-related and often ambiguous digital cues may fuel jealousy and insecurity (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). These lines of evidence suggest plausible pathways—distraction,

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surveillance, and ambiguity—through which digital media may erode or reorganize the bases of marital satisfaction.

Evidence from Pakistan complements and extends these patterns. Among married Facebook users, higher Facebook use intensity is related to lower marital satisfaction via online surveillance and jealousy, with gendered asymmetries in trust (Iqbal & Jami, 2019). Given Pakistan's mix of joint and nuclear family structures, religiously inflected ideals, and rapid digital uptake, the same online behaviors may carry culturally distinct meanings. Attachment theory provides a lens for explaining for whom digital media most strongly affects satisfaction. Adult-relationship extensions posit relatively stable patterns—secure, anxious, and avoidant—that shape proximity seeking, emotion regulation, and interpretations of partner behavior (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Individuals high in attachment anxiety appear reactive to delayed replies, last-seen indicators, or partner interactions with others online (Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2021), whereas avoidant orientations may leverage mediated channels to maintain distance (Marshall, Bejanyan, Di Castro, & Lee, 2013; Jang, Park, & Song, 2021). These tendencies clarify why pervasive connectivity can either scaffold bonding or strain it, depending on users' relational templates. Building on this literature, this study tests a theoretically specified model in which digital media usage predicts marital satisfaction through attachment-related mechanisms and examines gender and family-structure differences in a Pakistani sample.

Digital Media and Relationship Dynamics

Over the past decade, research converges on the idea that digital platforms simultaneously facilitate connection and foster relational strain, depending on intensity, motives, and integration into daily routines. Continuous connectivity can enhance affectionate exchanges and perceived partner support (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2021), but can also displace face-to-face interaction and increase divided attention. Perceived partner phubbing predicts lower relationship satisfaction through reduced belongingness and increased conflict (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; Roberts & David, 2016). Beyond attentional dynamics, technology interference within interactions (so-called technoference) correlates with lower satisfaction and more depressive symptoms (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

SNS affordances have also normalized monitoring. Interpersonal electronic surveillance—checking feeds, tags, friends, and messages—blurs boundaries between mutual transparency and privacy invasion (Tokunaga, 2011). Exposure to ambiguous cues heightens jealousy, particularly for those high in attachment anxiety (Muise et al., 2009). Cross-sectional and longitudinal work demonstrates that compulsive or emotionally charged patterns of social media use, rather than mere time online, are associated with diminished relational well-being (Hou, Xiong, Jiang, Song, & Wang, 2020; Wegmann, Stodt, & Brand, 2020). In Pakistani contexts, women increased SNS participation intersects with enduring norms surrounding modesty and non-kin interaction, shaping interpretations of online behavior (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA], 2024; Zafar & Abbas, 2023). Pakistani evidence links Facebook use intensity to lower marital satisfaction via jealousy and surveillance, especially among women (Iqbal & Jami, 2019). Materialistic orientations fostered by SNS self-presentation are implicated as a pathway to diminished relationship satisfaction (Ahmed, Khan, & Ali, 2024). International findings similarly associate social media addiction

and phubbing with reduced relationship quality (Chadha, Sharma, & Gupta, 2025; Karaman, 2024).

Attachment Theory Framework

Attachment theory posits that early experiences with caregivers form internal working models that guide expectations and behaviors in later relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). In adulthood, relational orientations map onto anxiety and avoidance, yielding secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant styles (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Secure attachment supports balanced intimacy and autonomy, whereas anxious and avoidant patterns involve, respectively, hyperactivation (reassurance-seeking, vigilance) and deactivation (distance, suppression) of attachment systems. In digital settings, these strategies manifest as hypervigilant checking and jealousy (anxiety) or muted responsiveness and preference for mediated distance (avoidance) (Jang et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2021).

Cross-cultural evidence suggests these processes are robust but culturally inflected. In Pakistan's collectivist, religiously informed ecology, attachment behaviors are embedded in gendered scripts and extended-kin oversight (Chaudhry, 2014; Khaleque & Rohner, 2022). As a result, digital vigilance may be interpreted as care or as intrusion depending on family norms. Integrating attachment with cultural context clarifies why similar digital cues can have divergent implications for marital satisfaction across households.

Cultural Context and Digital Adaptation

Pakistan's marital ecology is characterized by collectivism, religiosity, and transitional modernity. Marriage is embedded in family honor, kinship alliances, and community reputation, and daily conduct is filtered through lenses of modesty, loyalty, and social accountability (Qadir, Khan, Medhin, & Prince, 2013). Rapid digitalization—over 54% internet penetration by 2024, predominantly via mobile broadband—has inserted new visibility and responsiveness norms into this ecology (PTA, 2024). Women's online participation is rising but remains negotiated within privacy and modesty expectations (Ali & Khattak, 2020; Zafar & Abbas, 2023). Fieldwork from Swat documents emergent tensions where online visibility intersects with gender segregation ideals (Pathan, Shah, & Ahmad, 2024). Urban samples show that jealousy and surveillance predict lower marital satisfaction, especially in nuclear families, while joint households may buffer digital stressors through social oversight (Iqbal & Jami, 2019). Islamic ethical teachings emphasizing balance (wasatiyyah), mutual respect, and family integrity inform negotiation of digital boundaries (Ali & Awan, 2021).

Literature Review

Problematic social media use is frequently framed as a behavioral addiction marked by salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapses (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2016). While the addiction frame remains debated, convergent findings indicate that compulsive engagement correlates with jealousy, conflict, and lower satisfaction (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Wegmann et al., 2020). Mechanistically, attention capture, intermittent reward schedules, and social comparison pressures can recalibrate expectations of responsiveness and validation within couples (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014).

Phubbing research demonstrates that divided attention during dyadic time

communicates devaluation, predicting conflict and depressive symptoms (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; Roberts & David, 2016). Studies on electronic surveillance show that platform affordances facilitate vigilance and interpretive ambiguity, both potent triggers of jealousy (Muise et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2011). Meta-analytic patterns emerging emotionally charged use (e.g., surveillance, comparison) is more detrimental than informational use. In Pakistan, SNS engagement has been linked to materialistic values that mediate lower relationship satisfaction (Ahmed et al., 2024), aligning with theories that emphasize extrinsic value orientation as a relational stressor. These streams motivate models that integrate psychological dispositions, behavioral patterns, and cultural moderators.

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional correlational design. A total of 960 individuals (480 couples) from Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad participated between March and June 2025. Ages ranged 22–45 years (M = 32.4, SD = 6.7), with marriage duration 1–20 years (M = 8.2, SD = 5.1); 52% were female. Inclusion required legal marriage, cohabitation, active social media use, and literacy in Urdu or English; dyads undergoing counseling or legal separation were excluded. Stratified convenience sampling enhanced socioeconomic and educational heterogeneity (Shujja, Malik, & Khan, 2023).

Data collection followed APA ethical standards (American Psychological Association, 2020). After being informed of consent, spouses completed questionnaires independently (≈30 minutes). Instruments included a 24-item Digital Media Usage Scale (pilot α = .89) assessing intensity, partner monitoring, and communicative substitution; the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990; Urdu validation: Malik, 2015; αs = .76–.84); and the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988; α = .85), plus demographics.

Analyses in SPSS 29 and AMOS 29 proceeded in stages. Screening confirmed acceptable normality and absence of problematic multicollinearity. Pearson correlations assessed bivariate relations. Multiple regression modeled predictors of marital satisfaction. Mediation via anxious and avoidant attachment was tested using Hayes's PROCESS Model 4 with bias-corrected bootstrap CIs (Hayes, 2022). Gender differences were examined with independent samples t tests; attachment-style differences with one-way ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests. A structural equation model evaluated the proposed indirect paths using fit thresholds CFI > .90, RMSEA < .08, SRMR < .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Power analysis using G*Power 3.1 indicated N ≥ 782 for medium effects with eight predictors (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2009); the achieved N = 960 exceeded this threshold. IRB approval was obtained from IIUM (protocol IRB/IIUM/2025/017).

Results

Less than three percent of data were missing and were replaced using series-mean imputation following Little's MCAR test, $\chi^2(45) = 38.21$, $p = .73$. Skewness and kurtosis values fell to 1.5. The KMO measure was .89 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(276) = 6284.47$, $p < .001$. Digital media usage ranged 24–120 (M = 67.4, SD = 18.2). Marital satisfaction was normally distributed (M = 28.6, SD = 6.8, range 7–35). Attachment distributions were 45% secure, 28% anxious-preoccupied, 18% dismissive-avoidant, and 9% fearful-avoidant; reliabilities ranged α = .78–.89.

Bivariate correlations indicated digital media usage correlated negatively with marital satisfaction ($r = -.42$, $p < .001$) and secure attachment ($r = -.35$, $p < .001$), and positively with anxious ($r = .41$, $p < .001$) and avoidant ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) dimensions. Secure attachment correlated positively with satisfaction ($r = .58$, $p < .001$), whereas anxious ($r = -.38$, $p < .001$) and avoidance ($r = -.45$, $p < .001$) were negative. Gender comparisons showed women reported higher digital use ($M = 71.2$, $SD = 17.8$) than men ($M = 63.1$, $SD = 18.4$), $t(958) = 5.67$, $p < .001$, and men reported higher satisfaction ($M = 29.8$, $SD = 6.4$) than women ($M = 27.5$, $SD = 7.1$), $t(958) = 4.23$, $p < .001$. No significant gender differences emerged in attachment distributions.

The regression model predicting marital satisfaction was significant, $F(5, 954) = 127.48$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .40$. Digital media usage ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .001$), anxious attachment ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$), and avoidant attachment ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$) were negative predictors, whereas secure attachment ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) positively predicted satisfaction. Demographics were nonsignificant. Mediation analyses supported indirect effects through anxiety ($B = -.15$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [−.21, −.09]) and avoidant attachment ($B = -.18$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [−.25, −.11]); direct effects remained significant ($B = -.21$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation. ANOVAs showed differences across attachment groups for digital media usage, $F(3, 956) = 42.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, and satisfaction, $F(3, 956) = 78.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$, with secure > insecure on satisfaction and lower digital use. Exploratory analyses indicated partner surveillance, time on social platforms, and substitution of in-person interaction with messaging were most strongly associated with reduced satisfaction. Effects were stronger in nuclear families.

The SEM demonstrated acceptable fit, $\chi^2(221) = 611.37$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06, and path coefficients paralleled regression results, confirming the mediating role of attachment orientations.

Discussion

Findings affirm that digital media usage is inversely associated with marital satisfaction, with attachment-based psychological mechanisms playing a central mediating role. Partial mediation indicates that digital behavior's impact depends on how individuals regulate uncertainty and proximity needs online. For anxiously attached partners, ambiguous cues (e.g., delayed replies) activate hypervigilance and surveillance; for avoidant partners, digital spaces enable deactivation via disengagement. Both trajectories compromise mutual responsiveness, a cornerstone of marital quality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These results align with work documenting technoference and phubbing as relationship stressors (McDaniel & Drouin, 2019; Roberts & David, 2016) and extend Pakistani research by integrating attachment mediation (Iqbal & Jami, 2019).

Gendered patterns reflect culturally embedded roles: women's higher digital engagement and surveillance comport with relational maintenance expectations and greater sensitivity to symbolic cues (Zafar & Abbas, 2023), while men's relatively higher satisfaction may reflect differing role expectations and lower interpretive load. Nuclear families showed stronger negative associations, consistent with joint-family oversight serving as a social regulator (Qadir et al., 2013). These culturally specific dynamics highlight that technology amplifies existing emotional and structural features of marital life.

Robustness checks (e.g., alternative scoring excluding the communicative-substitution subscale from DMUS; re-running PROCESS with 10,000 bootstrap samples) yielded substantively similar indirect effects, bolstering confidence in mediation inferences. Nevertheless, causality cannot be inferred; longitudinal work is needed to examine directional dynamics and potential feedback loops whereby dissatisfaction increases problematic use. Mixed-methods designs could illuminate the microprocesses—how couples interpret and negotiate specific digital events (e.g., "seen" without reply, unexpected tags)—that drive daily affect and long-term satisfaction.

Practical Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

Implications span counseling, education, and policy. Attachment-informed interventions can help couples identify insecurity triggers and co-create digital boundaries (response-time expectations, privacy rules, surveillance abstention). Psychoeducation embedded in premarital programs—within universities, community centers, and religious institutions—can normalize discussions of digital intimacy and trust, framed within Islamic principles of moderation and mutual responsibility (Ali & Awan, 2021). At the policy level, public-awareness campaigns can foreground digital ethics in family life and encourage reflective, non-intrusive engagement.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design, urban–educated sampling, and reliance on self-report. Future research should employ longitudinal, dyadic daily-diary methods to capture temporal contingencies; integrate passive sensing (screen-time logs) to complement self-reports; and conduct cross-cultural comparisons within South Asia and the broader Muslim world to clarify cultural moderators. Generational analyses are warranted to trace evolving norms among digitally native couples. Intervention studies can test whether attachment-focused digital literacy modules improve satisfaction and reduce surveillance.

Conclusion

Excessive or emotionally dysregulated digital engagement is associated with lower marital satisfaction among Pakistani couples, and attachment-related mechanisms are key to understanding this association. Secure attachment appears protective, while anxious and avoidant orientations amplify vulnerability to technoference, phubbing, and surveillance dynamics. Because technology functions as an amplifier of existing emotional and cultural dynamics, sustainable marital well-being will depend on cultivating secure attachment, responsible digital literacy, and value-based relational ethics that respect Pakistan's collectivist and religiously informed marital ecology (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; PTA, 2024; Zafar & Abbas, 2023).

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