



Exploring the Effects of Social Media on Marriages in Northern Ghana

Isaac Konlan¹ · Muhammed Abdulai² · Hadi Ibrahim³

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media has served as an extension of the social life of people; information seeking, socialization, and many other social needs. The study uses a sequential mixed method (quantitative and qualitative design) to examine the effects of social media dependency on marital relationships in northern Ghana. Results revealed a high dependency on social media in Ghana with serious ramifications on romantic relationships. Thus, frequent online engagement has heightened partner monitoring, suspicion, jealousy, and mistrust between couples, affecting long-term relationships' well-being. Couples define standards/regulatory mechanisms to constrain their SNS engagement to minimize the associated effects of social media.

Keywords Social media · Marriage · Social networking sites (SNS) · Ghana · Romantic relationships

Introduction

Fundamentally, technological advancement is shaping and reconfiguring every aspect of society—education, business, healthcare, marketing, advertising, and communication. Technological devices have become a pervasive phenomenon (Christensen, 2018). Overwhelmingly, smartphone devices and social networking sites (SNSs) are more tenacious and prevalent than any other technological advancement in reconfiguring social life and

✉ Hadi Ibrahim
velgititi@yahoo.com

Isaac Konlan
ikonlan@brandeis.edu; isaac.nachi70@gmail.com

Muhammed Abdulai
nakpas@yahoo.co.uk; amuhammed@uds.edu.gh

¹ Brandeis University, 415 South Street, Waltham MA02453, USA

² Department of Communication, Innovation and Technology, Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale, Ghana

³ Department of Domestic Trade and Regional Offices, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Accra, Ghana

shaping interpersonal communication. Thanks to this new development, human communication and interactions are no longer limited by time and space but can occur instantaneously across regional and national boundaries (Giddens, 1991). Dialogue between people has become more comforting with rising intimacy and people's willingness to share details in conversations (Gull et al., 2019).

Globally, people are becoming more digital social beings, expecting the gratification of their social and emotional needs through SNS (Gull et al., 2019). In 2016, SNS sites had over 2 billion active subscribers, with Facebook and Twitter being the most used SNSs globally—each having over 100 million subscribers (Clayton, 2014; Clayton et al., 2013). In Africa, Facebook remains the most dominant social media site, with over 200 million subscribers. This demonstrates an exponential growth of subscribers resulting from recent internet prevalence in Africa. The statistics for individual countries closely mimic the growth pattern at global and regional levels. For instance, Nigeria and Uganda have many Facebook users, approximately 17,000,000 and 2,600,000 subscribers, respectively. In Ghana, the situation is not different. Nearly 95% of Ghanaian social media users subscribed to Facebook, with over 4,900,000 users (Internet World Stats, 2019).

SNS have resolved the communication gap between individuals in romantic relationships, especially married couples (Leighton et al., 2021). SNS has allowed couples to stay connected during work hours or when distance is a barrier. It allows couples to share photos, text, and videos and afford each other the emotional support needed. Pew Research observed that mediated communication technologies had added a profound level of intimacy to marital relationships. Couples feel closer because they can share conversations in cyberspace and resolve arguments that will be difficult to address in person (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). Also, Joo and Teng (2017) found out that social media, particularly Facebook, has built on family and relationships, with more people feeling connected to families through Facebook. SNS have created a stream where individuals stay connected to their spouses and enjoy romantic communication through content creation. In contrast, SNS has also contributed to the rise of divorce cases and dishonesty among couples. Saleh and Mukhtar (2015) observed that social media agonizes communication between partners, with most dishonest spouses demanding more online communication than interpersonal interaction. SNS have high potency of negatively affecting family relations by providing a sense of belonging and encouragement to couples in virtual communities and can satisfy the social, psychological, and emotional needs, interrupting the quality of their offline relationships (Aydin et al., 2018).

Also, the medium has gone beyond just being a conduit of information and has escalated tension in relationships. By connecting to social media, couples can monitor their partner's profiles, search their partner's networks of friends, search for photos and post history in the form of electronic surveillance on each other (Fox & Warber, 2014). Regrettably, SNS surveillance on partners' behavior online is noted to cause jealousy, anxiety, uncertainty, and mistrust, culminating in reducing the level of satisfaction in relationships (Gull et al., 2019). In a study of the effects of participation in cyberspace on relations between spouses, Latifi (2015) observed a strong correlation between a couple's participation in SNS and marital dissatisfactions or the potency of the couple to opt for divorce. Moreover, SNS' havoc on families arises of their addictive nature. These new developments are attention seeking, and its subscriber is susceptible to addiction which can deprive a couple of quality time and attention and cause social problems. In this study, we argued that social media use and its effects are not culturally neutral but culturally constructed. For instance, individuals participating in SNS come with cultural variables—values, norms, world views, and

expectations. So, the effects that these networking sites may pose to members of a particular society say Western societies may vary from the effects it has on another, African societies.

The growing presence of people on SNS has provoked several studies, including Fox et al. (2013), Valenzuela et al. (2014), and Aydin et al. (2018). For example, Valenzuela et al. (2014) found a positive correlation between Facebook usage and marriage unhappiness and thoughts of divorce. Also, Aydin et al. (2018) discovered that participation in virtual social networking decreases love and attention in an intra-family relationship because individuals can attain satisfaction in social and sexual needs from the Internet. While these studies are relevant to the core, contextualizing these preceding studies in Ghana is rather difficult, given the uniqueness of the value system and cultures. However, the impetus to investigate SNS impact has not taken root in academic literature in northern Ghana, to accompany the exponential growth in SNS and its potential destructive effects on the social fabric. For instance, Van Gyampo (2017), Frimpong & Vaccari (2015), and Ocansey et al. (2016) are studies that explored social media use and its effects in Ghana. The foregoing focused mainly on the impact of SNS on politics and students. Thus, these studies, whereas it brings to focus the impact of SNS, does not unravel the positive or negative consequences of mediated communication technologies on social relations and marriage in Ghana.

The scantiness of literature on the question of over-arching social media effects on marital and romantic relationships in the northern region of Ghana begs for nuance investigations to reveal the implication of the increasing engagement on SNS on marriages and romantic relationships. In effect, the research question address in this study are as follows: Do married couples in the northern region of Ghana use social media? What are the social networking platforms they engage in regularly? And, what effects, if any, does SNS have on married couples? The current study addresses this gap by adopting a mixed method approach to account for the explanatory inadequacies of previous studies on SNS use influence on relationships in Africa. The study will also be relevant for marital counselors and married couples to appreciate the unanticipated consequence of SNS on their relationships. In this respect, it will guide them to develop appropriate strategies for SNS to ensure that relationships are sustainable.

Conceptualizing Social Media and Marriages

Marriage is an important social institution and the foundation of many families in Africa and other parts of the world (Dobson, 2004; Sweeney, 2002). However, the meaning of marriage is contested and lacks a widely accepted definition due to the variation in arrangements and rules that govern a marriage union (Sadler, 2010). This study will understand marriage as “a legally and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman, that is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners and accords status to their offspring (if any)” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009). Marriage is a universal phenomenon because it is ubiquitous and present in all cultures (Ubesequera & Luo, 2008). However, the rules, ceremonies, and roles may vary from one society to another and may require religious and civil sanctions depending on the society and culture (Fineman, 2006; Crossman, 2020).

In recent times, the growth of technology has had good and bad influences on marital relationships, especially SNS. According to Clayton et al. (2013), frequent usage of SNS rout negative outcomes in romantic relationships, such as breakups, divorce, and

cheating. The study uncovered that spouses on Facebook neglect their partners directly or indirectly by connecting with previous romantic partners, cultivating a habit of surveilling partners, and developing jealousy (Clayton et al., 2013). It implies that the high presence on Facebook brings about conflicts and suspicion because chatting, viewing, liking, and posting pictures of an ex-lover can cause arguments between couples, resulting in separation. In light of this, Clayton (2014), in a follow-up study, applied the hypothesis of Clayton et al. (2013) to Twitter, another SNS, and the results were much similar. The study discovered that excessive Twitter use causes Twitter-related problems among couples that result in an unpleasant relationship outcome (Clayton, 2014).

Furthermore, Kimeto (2016) highlighted that SNS use affected marital relationships by deepening the level of mistrust between spouses. The study established a correlation between social media use and feeling of suspicion, jealousy, loneliness, and emotional distance that affected the health of romantic relationships. The implication is that couples become uncomfortable with their spouse's SNS activities and curious about their partner's online habits, damaging their partners' marital relationships (Arikewuyo et al., 2021). Profoundly, couples who experience much anxiety are most likely to engage in interpersonal electronic surveillance (IES) because of their high level of uncertainty (Felmlee, 2001). Thus, couples can monitor their partner's online activities and interpret ambiguous posts negatively without consulting their counterparts directly, which affects satisfaction, stability, and security in a romantic relationship (Fox & Warber, 2014).

Also, Valenzuela et al. (2014) revealed that SNS use in the USA has damaging effects on relationship satisfaction, unhappiness in marriages, troubled relationships, and thoughts of divorce. While it is not the services of SNS that cause problems in relationships between couples, romantic partners who are separated or in a struggling relationship rely on Facebook more often for emotional support. Similarly, Latifi (2015) discovered a strong relationship between SNS use and the likelihood of divorce. Mediated communication technologies have provided platforms for people to communicate with friends and family but spending long hours on these platforms can cause neglect family and harm important relationships in a family (Galvin et al., 2015). Sharing the sentiments, Rajeev and Jobilal (2015) believed that cyberspace is time-consuming and that long hours on these media can ignite jealousy or promote cheating. Moreover, some couples upload incomplete or false information about their details on their profile on SNSs, such as marital status and age, that rout argument in romantic relationships. This corrupts family relations, and the absence of communication brings humiliation, insecurity, and loneliness in marriages, which have scaled up infidelity (Aydin et al., 2018).

Amidst all negative connotations that behoove marriages due to participation in virtual communities such as Facebook and Twitter, it has fostered relationships and networking by providing multimodal content messaging such as text, pictures, and videos (Galvin et al., 2015). These enable the couple to express emotions in varied forms. Joo and Teng (2017) revealed that participation in SNS has enhanced interpersonal relations and communication within families and made couples spend much time together, extending their emotional connections. To shed more light, time spent on mediated communication technologies does not affect the level of intimacy in a relationship but the gratification of leisure involvement (Sanchez; Joo & Teng, 2018). While one cannot agree less that SNS performs these crucial functions in extending the human act of communication, Marshall McLuhan, however, was quick to point out that such a description of mediated communication technologies "is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (McLuhan, 1964; p.24). Imperatively, this argues that this simplified view of SNSs blinds us from the real content of the medium, thus the social consequences that the technology poses on society. Responsively, it is only a balance between the new communication techniques and human

reaction that can ensure social stability. In most cases, such equilibrium between mediated technologies and human reaction has been missing, which accounts for the negative consequence that SNS has rooted out on the social institution of marriage and romantic relationships in most societies (McLuhan, 1964; Clayton et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2014; and Latifi, 2015).

Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, the study adopts the media system dependency (MSD) and the media ecology theories to explore the common social networking platforms marriage couples use and how these networking sites affect married couples in the northern region of Ghana. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur proposed the media system dependency theory in 1976 to underscore a conceptual frame that will offer concrete grounding to engage in nuanced analysis of individual interaction with media and its effects on people. The concept postulates that mass media audience relies on the mass media to gratify their continuous need for information and use it to socialize in society. Thus, audiences use information from media to interact with others and understand the culture, values, and norms, either in the form of news or entertainment. MSD holds that as society becomes modernized and improves in communication technologies, individuals cannot depend only on interpersonal relations as a source of information; hence, the media serves as an information system to satisfy audience goals (Grant et al., 1991). Ball-Rokeach and Defleur (1976) conceptualized dependency “as a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party.” They observed that the need for dependency might range from the need to understand the world—the need to act meaningfully and effectively in that world—orientation, and the need for play—escape from daily problems and tensions. Hence, the greater the audience’s goals, the higher their dependencies on mass media and the likelihood that the information supplied by the media will influence audience perceptions, behavior, and attitudes (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

The schematics of MSD have been widely employed in several studies, including Einwiller & Carrol (2010) and Kim & Jung (2017). Nevertheless, the recent influx of sophisticated communication-mediated technologies has shaped the media ecology and how information is created, processed, and disseminated to audience members. Recent studies have shown that there is a reduction in the concentrated dependencies on mass media, although not wholly, because individuals have broadened their dependency relationships to include both new and traditional media, which has caused the power of old media to decline relatively, while the new media experience an upsurge in dependencies (Kim & Jung, 2017). In applying the basic tenets of the media dependency theory to the study of SNS, Kim & Jung (2017) extended the concept to encapsulate the current characteristics that new media introduced to the communication and media environment- the decentralization of the media power to create, process and disseminate information to individuals. In this regard, they observed that individuals could also engage with SNS for expression besides understanding, orientation, and play—the basic need in the traditional model of media dependency theory. Kim & Jung (2017) conceptualized expression “as a goal for presenting one’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions through various forms of media.” Conversely, SNS elevates the audience from the status of recipient to both a creator and an addressee of media content because of its two-way communication, contrary to traditional

mass media, which are unilinear (Kim & Jung, 2017). This implies that individuals can achieve their expression goals by creating, recreating, processing, and disseminating their thoughts, perceptions, and opinions through social networking services. The theory is pertinent to this study because romantic partners' SNS presence is likely to increase among couples who use social media during a relationship crisis. This makes them susceptible to all forms of ideas, and even virtual communities that may influence them negatively and, in this light, culminating in a divorce or more tension in a marital or romantic relationship (Valenzuela et al., 2014).

The concept of media ecology has its underpinnings from the works of Marshal McLuhan's book published in 1964, *Understanding Media-The Extension of Man*. The basic assumption of the theory holds that people have a symbolic relationship with media technology which affects their perception, feelings, and values of societies (McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan (1964) postulated that media technology, in this case, SNS, has psychic and social consequences on human society. By this, media ecology seeks to explore how media and mediated communication technologies affect human understanding, perceptions, values, and cultures (Islas, 2016). Media ecology refers to the media environment such as books, TV, radio, newspapers, and SNS (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others). Implicitly, through their content and structure, these media shape what we see, say, feel, think about, and ultimately, what we do (Islas, 2016).

Central to this study is the basic principle of media ecology that media, in this case, SNS, affects people's perceptions, understanding, and values, particularly marital couples. That is, couples found on SNS platforms are most likely to be influenced by the content and structure of the medium. By the function the medium performs, thus, creating, recreating, processing, and disseminating their thoughts and interacting with other contents, it enhances our human form of communication and poses a social consequence to individuals in society.

Study Design and Methods

This study focuses on the influence of social media usage on marital relationships in the northern region of Ghana. The study adopts a mixed methods approach to investigate the research problem. Thus, both quantitative (QUAN), and qualitative (QUAL) strategies guided the study in a sequential way (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2009). This was meant to draw from the strengths of both the (QUAN and QUAL) approaches, and as well minimize their limitations to explore the research problem (Kuada, 2012). Below is a diagrammatic representation of the research design and methods Fig. 1.

Sequential explanatory mixed design, which comes in two distinct phases, was adopted in the study (Creswell, 2009). This research design is associated with the collection and analysis of (QUAN) data in the first stage of the research, followed by the collection and analysis of (QUAL) data in the second stage of the study (Creswell, 2009, p.211). The essence of this approach was to build on the (QUAN) results by selecting participants from the sample to further explore the influence of social media usage on marital relationships in the northern region of Ghana.

An online survey method was used to generate data for the first phase of the study. This enabled the researchers to explore and describe the social media platforms married couples use regularly, and to some extent, establish their effects on building trust among married couples. The questionnaire was uploaded on Google document for the participants to respond to. The study participants were sampled using purposive sampling technique. In order to seek the consent of the participants, a cover letter was sent to all the participants explaining the study's objectives and usefulness. We adopted the online survey technique

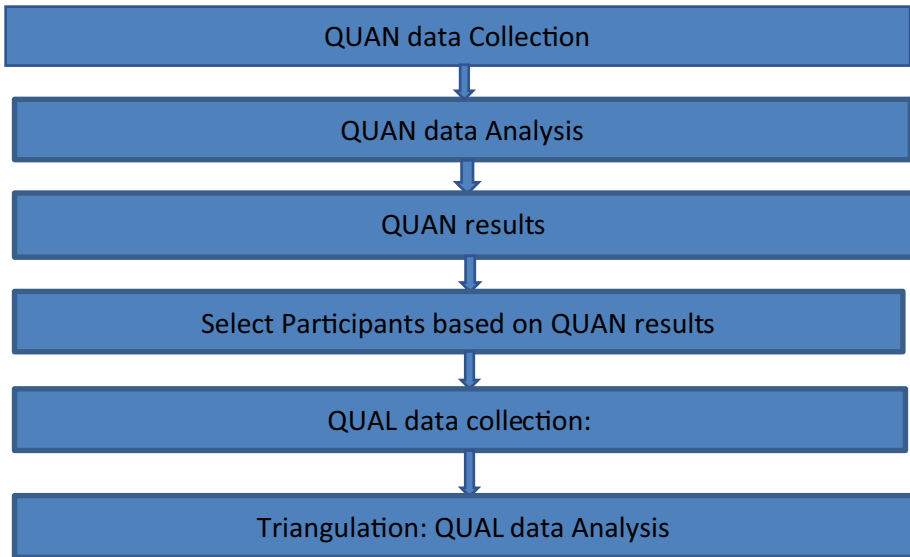


Fig. 1 Design of the study Source: Thogerson-Ntoumani and Fox (2005, p.499)

of data collection because it is relatively cheaper and faster. In addition, the online survey was cross-sectional. In this case, the data was collected at one point in time, between January and March, 2020. Some of the questions posed to the selected respondents were as follows: Which of the following best describes your main reason for using social media? Which of the social media platforms do you use often?

In connection with the purpose of using a mixed methods approach, Greene et al. (1989) identified complementarity, triangulation, initiation, development, and expansion. In this study, complementarity and triangulation provided the justifications for the mixed methods approach. In view of this, our study sought to use multiple data sources to elaborate and clarify the results of both the (QUAN) and (QUAL) phases of the study.

In terms of sampling technique, the study adopts the sequential mixed sampling technique (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Participants were selected sequentially through probability and purposive sampling techniques. Simple random sampling was the method chosen for determining the sample for those who took part in the study. To compensate for the poor response rate to the online survey and reduce sampling error in the first phase of the study (QUAN), a large sample was selected. The questionnaire was sent out to 60 participants. The participants were randomly selected from the database of the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS). Replies were received from 55 respondents (which represented a response rate of 92%). Of these, 34 were males (61.8%) and 21 were females (38.2%). In view of this, females were disproportionately represented in the online survey. The mean age of the respondents was 28 years. Respondents were asked to identify their highest level of education completed: those who had senior high school (SHS) as their highest level of education represented, 25%; university and/or tertiary education, 55%; and the rest or others, 20%.

In the first phase of the study, the (QUAN) data revealed that married couples aged between 20–35 and 36–45 expressed different perspectives on the influence of social media usage on building trust in marital relationships. These revelations triggered a deeper investigation into the different perspectives identified. So, in the second phase of the study, the researchers chose to follow up on a subsample of ten married couples aged between 20–35 and 36–45 to elicit their responses on the issue highlighted. In-depth interviews were conducted with the subsample. Each interview was recorded with a recording device with the respondents' prior approval. Recorded interviews were transcribed into a text document.

In terms of data analysis, the first phase of the study (QUAN) was analyzed using the computer software package- Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). Frequencies were gathered on each variable. All items contained within the participation types were then totaled to compute a total score for each respondent for the following items: Reasons for using social media, forms of social media platforms, social media, and building trust in marital relationships. Using forms of social media used by married couples as dependent variables and the influence of social media usage on marital relationships as an independent variable. The qualitative data were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique (Boyatzis, 1998). In view of this, patterns, themes, and categories were identified in the transcribed data. In addition, the theme-based coding scheme was used where a preliminary list of codes was generated from the data. We collected the codes into potential patterns. These patterns were interpreted using thick descriptions, and the meanings complemented the QUAN results and conclusion.

Results

The essence of the study was to establish the overwhelming influences that SNS exert on marital and romantic relationships. In doing this, the study addressed these questions; what social media sites do the people use in northern Ghana? What do they use these sites for? And what impacts do these sites have on their relationship? The quantitative and qualitative results are triangulated to address the research objective of this study.

Social Media Usage Pattern in Northern Ghana

The research participants were asked to indicate the social media platforms they have subscribed and indicate the most frequently use SNS sites. From the below Fig. 2, most of the respondents subscribed to WhatsApp (96.4%) and Facebook (92.7%), while Instagram (36%), Twitter (29.1%), and LinkedIn (7.12%) has the lowest subscription. Nearly all respondents frequently visited WhatsApp (89.1%) than other SNS platforms. Very few respondents reported that they visited Facebook (9.1%) and Instagram (1.8%) frequently. The frequency of visits to Twitter or LinkedIn was not significant. This implies that WhatsApp and Facebook are the most commonly visited SNS platforms in northern Ghana. The finding resonates with Latifi (2015) and Kimeto (2016) who also observed that WhatsApp and Facebook are widely used SNS among young people in Africa.

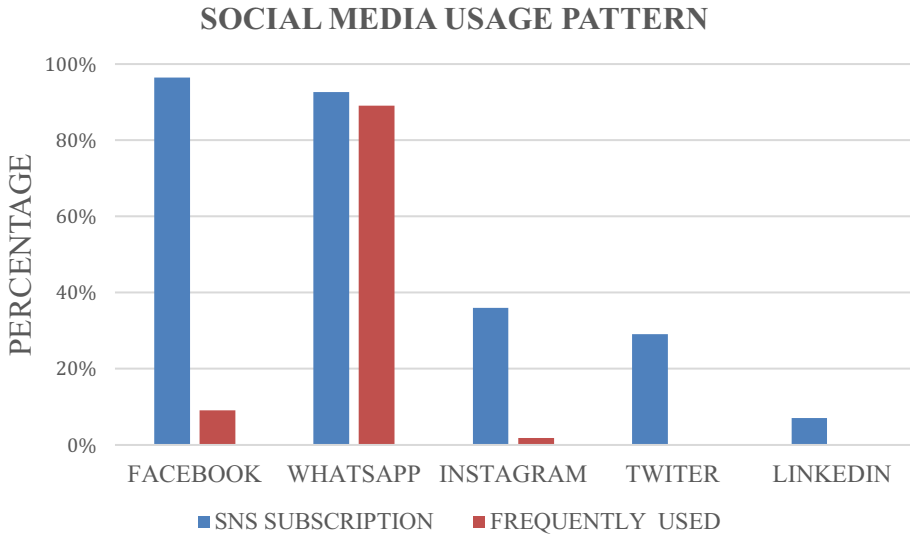


Fig. 2 Social Media Usage Pattern

The study found, Fig. 3, that research participant spent an average of 21.7 h per week on SNS with most respondents (83.6%) visiting SNS multiple occasion in a day with a mean score of 0.89 h per visit. Males reported less online engagement than female. The weekly mean time spent on SNS was 23.3 h compared to the 19.9 h spent by female respondents on SNS. Interestingly, very few respondents reported having specific time of the day to engage in day- majority of respondent (69.1%) visited social media platforms anytime of the day. Unregulated online engagement time and hour of the day

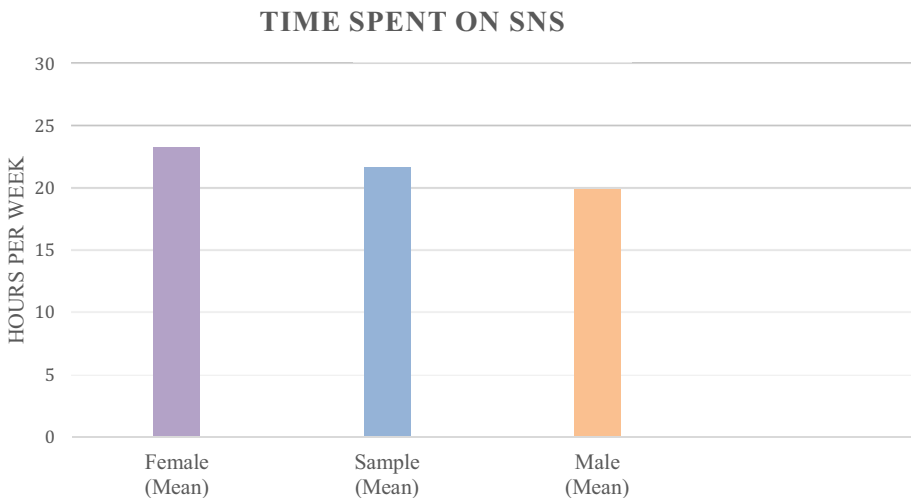


Fig. 3 Time Spent on SNS

romantic partners visit SNS have significant impact on their offline relation with their significant others (Christiansen, 2018). Thus, it heightens depression, frustration, and conflicts between partners if the engagement is prolonged and occurs during interactions with significant other (Bouffard et al. 2022; Christensen, 2018).

Evidence from the qualitative result support the finding of the quantitative finding presented. The challenge with online engagements is its addiction and time-consuming nature. In most cases, the addictiveness of the medium rivals or diminishes the quality time couple spend together to enhance physical interaction (Sharaievska & Stodolska, 2017; Christensen, 2018; and Bouffard et al., 2022). This causes tension between romantic partners, especially when one spouse is chatting with an opposite-sex friend on social media. In an incident of misunderstanding or disagreement between couples, they turn their attention to online engagement rather than focusing on addressing the problems in their relationship. This respondent even captures it neatly,

“It [social media] destroyed our marriage because anytime we fight, we spend more time on social media that would have been used to think about the welfare of our relationship”

As if to agree with this, another respondent noted,

“...sometimes my spouse spends much time chatting with friends and families on social media during bedtime. At this point, I might need her in bed around that time, but because of her engagement on social media, she might not have time, and that can ruin our relationship”

The above statements clearly point to the competition that transpires between active SNS presence and social life. As couples spend more time on social media, they become socially and emotionally distant from their partners (Aydin et al., 2018), beginning with a reduction in face-to-face interaction between couples (Sharaievska & Stodolska, 2017). Hence, the amount of time spent on SNS disproportionate affects, not only the quality of interaction among romantic partners but also marital satisfaction (Latifi, 2015). Romantic relationships thrive on sustained communication and grow as couples spend more time together, but if couple increases their dependence on social media to gratify their social and emotional needs, the possibility of a conflict, breakup or divorce becomes eminent (Bouffard et al., 2022). From the above response, it can be deduced that not only does this finding agree with Aydin et al. (2018) and Latifi (2015), but it also highlighted the theoretical assumption of media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). Accordingly, during relationship crises, couples increases their online engagement to reduce dissonance by seeking emotional and social solaces on SNS (Kim and Jung, 2017).

Reasons for Social Media Engagement Among Respondents

There are several motivations for SNS participation including socialization, acquiring information, marketing, and connecting with family members. The study respondent was asked to report their motivation for SNS use for, either for socialization, communicating with family, or to satisfy information. Primarily, respondents (55%) subscribe to social media for the purpose of socialization, thus expanding their social network, and linking up with old friends. Other ways that respondents use social media is to satisfy information needs (27%) and communicate with their spouse or family (18%) in fig. 4. This resonates with Clayton (2014) findings which revealed that the media opportune people to socialize

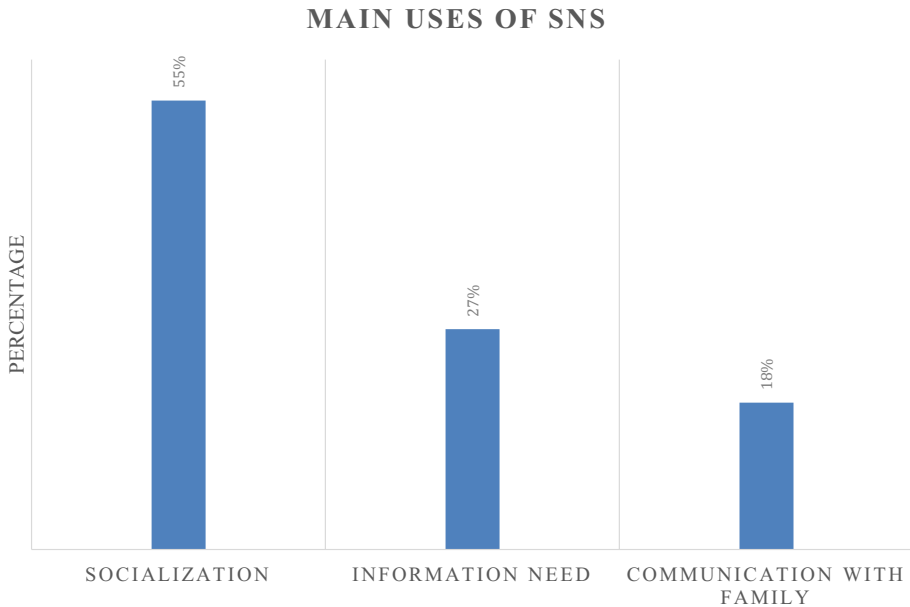


Fig. 4 Main Uses of SNS

and connect with an unprecedented network of friends. In line with this finding, Minkel (2012) also demonstrated that social media helps subscribers to forge and expand their social networks. Thus, the principal aim of subscribing social media is fairly similar across different region and context.

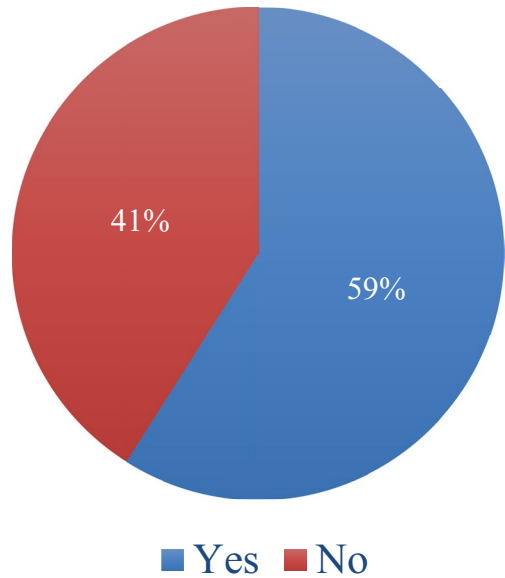
Subscribers especially romantic partners also use social media for non-conversational purposes. Social media does not limit the extent to which subscribers can relate, meet, or connect with new and old friends alike. In this respect, couples or romantic partners can equally experience the wide networking opportunity the medium offers. However, the virtual network that people join or friends that they meet can exert some pressure on relationships and raise the need to spy on partners' social media activities (Clayton, 2014). Figure 5 reveals that a large proportion of the research population (59%) agreed to have spied on their partners on social media to ascertain the networks they engage with, while 41% have not felt the urge to check their partner's social media activities. This result is in sync with the finding of Fox and Warber (2014) who revealed that due to the high level of discomfort felt and experience in romantic relationship, partners spy on the SNS activities of their spouse as a form of electronic surveillance.

Effects of SNS Engagement of Romantic Relationships in Northern Ghana

Given that the activities that couple may engage in on social media, the need to ascertain the effects of couple or romantic partners on their relationship was fundamentally important in this study. In doing this, the following statements were outline for respondents to agree or disagree.

Fig. 5 Partner Surveillance

Partner Surveillance



From the above Table 1, 61% of the respondents agreed that SNS was straining their relationship, 12% were neutral about its effects while 27% disagreed that social media was putting their romantic relationship in difficulties. Similarly, a large percentage of the respondents agreed that they feel uneasy and suspicious of their partners' social media activities but 24% disagree that they feel suspicious of their spouse SNS activities and 4% neither agreed nor disagreed. A lot of the respondents (64%) agreed that they often feel jealous when their romantic partners are chatting with the opposite sex on social media; however, 30% of the research participants disagreed that their spouse's engagement with opposite sex on SNS made them jealous and 6% neither agree nor disagree. These findings concur with Tandoc et al. (2015), Nitzburg and Farber (2013), and Kerkhof et al. (2011) who revealed that intensive engagement with SNS cause serious anxiety, depression, envy, and jealousy between couples in a romantic relationship.

Further, the research probe to understand whether social media multimodality has been used by romantic partners to extend their communication and relationship. In

Table 1 Effects of SNS on trust in romantic relationships

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
SNS usage strain our relationship	61%	12%	27%
I Feel uneasy or suspicious because of spouse SNS activities	72%	4%	24%
I Feel jealousy as a result of spouses SNS activities with opposite sex	64%	6%	30%
Communication of SNS has deepen our relationship	33%	5%	63%
SNS usage has increase the time I spend with my spouse or family	31%	15%	55%

accordance, 63% of respondents disagreed that communication on SNS has deepened their relationships while 33% of research participants agree that social media has positively impacted their relationship and 5% did not agree or disagree. Likewise, participants were asked to agree or disagree whether social media has increased the time spent with their spouse. Fifty-five percent of respondents disagreed that social media has increase the time spent with partner but 31% agreed that social media has extended the time they spend with their spouse. This contradicts the findings of Kimeto (2016) who observed that SNS has improved interactions between couples and enhanced the time and memories couple shared with each other.

In the quantitative finding, the study reveals that a lot of couples engage in electronic interpersonal surveillance of their partners. In this regard, respondents were questioned on how surveillance of partners' SNS activities was affecting their relationship. Conversely, the study discovered that trust was affected significantly because of spying on the activities and the friend couple relates with on social media. This response captures it more vividly,

“It [SNS] destroys the relationship because we don't really get much time for each other. Jealousy comes into the relationship, and it leads to problems, no more trust in the relationship because everyone is thinking of what the other is always doing on social media”

This view demonstrates the distractions that social media have of romantic relationships at three levels. Firstly, the time-consuming nature of the medium, secondly the jealousy comes in because of the activities that subscribers engage and lastly, it affects trust as a result of the limited time spent with the spouse and growing level of jealousy. As a couple spy on each other the propensity of misunderstanding the interaction with the opposite sex or posting ambiguous content become high and doubts sets in which reduces the amount of trust that the couple share with each other. Another respondent put this differently by noting that.

“It [SNS] is causing more harm than good to marriage because through social media people create new friends of the opposite sex and they end up dating each meanwhile they have wife/husband”

This statement powerfully illustrates that the use of SNS for socialization with the opposite sex can wreck unrelenting havoc on relation. Given this statement, even a well-meaning relationship develop with, in a case of male, a female may be perceived as a potential threat to the relation by the other partners which may cause nagging or mistrust. This concurs with observation of Cravens and Whiting (2014) that many romantic partners felt that it was inappropriate to friend an ex-spouse, having attractive friend on social media, commenting on very attractive pictures, and privately messaging the opposite sex. One responded reacted to trust for her spouse, and quite suspicious at that,

“Well... Errhm, trusthehehe..... well, I trust him even though I don't know all his friends because with Facebook or WhatsApp, you can't know all his friends, but like the ones I have seen and all that”

This indicates that despite the expression of trust, the mere fact that one cannot know the reach of a partner's friends leaves a feeling of uncertainty and suspicious that could have long term implication on the health of the relationship, especially when the relation is still in the early stages. In this regard, any information share on social media that appears to be ambiguous will cause high suspicion and possibly cause tension between romantic partners. To clear this doubt, most respondents adopt a strategy of using same passwords to

grant access to each other social media platforms for surveillance. Meaning, to hence trust and demonstrate that one is not engage in any form cheat or extra marital satisfaction of social media, couple share same passwords so that they view each other's activities including the images, text, friends, and their profile. This respondent clearly stated,

“to me I don't see anything wrong accessing it [partner's SNS] because the only thing I see wrong accessing it is that, when I have fishy deals. I don't know when I use the word fishy deals like when I do some corner, corner”

This response “corner, corner” is use in a Ghanaian context to imply secretive activities that one is unwilling to share with partner such cheating or interact with opposite sites in manner that depicts an interest for extra marital affair. For the respondent, a nonchalant attitude to share access to your social media platform means that person in question is cheating or has an interest to cheat. This concurs with the findings of Fox and Warber (2014) postulation that couple that couple share access to their respective social media platforms to avoid mistrust and suspicion. While this might solve the problem of suspicion, it can rule out the misinterpretation of ambiguous post that partners may share on their platform. This simply means that access to partners' social media platform is not a panacea to resolving social media-related problems in the marital affair.

In the quantitative finding, the study reveals that a lot of couples engage in electronic interpersonal surveillance of their partners. In this regard, respondents were questioned on how surveillance of partners' SNS activities was affecting their relationship. Conversely, the study discovered that trust was affected significantly because of checking or spying on the activities and the friend couple relates with on social media. This response captures it more vividly,

“It [SNS] destroys the relationship because we don't really get much time for each other. Jealousy comes into the relationship, and it leads to problems, no more trust in the relationship because everyone is thinking of what the other is always doing on social media”

This view demonstrates the distractions that social media have of romantic relationships at three levels. Firstly, the time-consuming nature of the medium, secondly the jealousy comes in because of the activities that subscribers engage and lastly, it affects trust because of the limited time spent with the spouse and growing level of jealousy. As a couple spy on each other the propensity of misunderstanding the interaction with the opposite sex or posting ambiguous content become high and doubts sets in, this reduces the amount of trust that the couple share with each other. Another respondent put this differently by noting that;

“It [SNS] is causing more harm than good to marriage because through social media people create new friends of the opposite sex and they end up dating each meanwhile they have wife/husband”

This statement powerfully illustrates that the use of SNS for socialization with the opposite sex can wreak unrelenting havoc on relation. Given this statement, even a well-meaning relationship develop with, in a case of male, a female may be perceived as a potential threat to the relation by the other partners which may cause nagging or mistrust. This concurs with observation of Cravens and Whiting (2014) that many romantic partners felt that it was inappropriate to friend an ex-spouse, having attractive friend on social media, commenting on very attractive pictures, and privately messaging the opposite sex. One responded reacted to trust for her spouse, and quite suspicious at that,

“Well... Errhm, trusthehehe..... well, I trust him even though I don't know all his friends because with Facebook or WhatsApp, you can't know all his friends, but like the ones I have seen and all that”

This indicates that despite the expression of trust, the mere fact that one cannot know the reach of a partner's friends leaves a feeling of uncertainty and suspicious that could have long term implication on the health of the relationship, especially when the relation is still in the early stages. In this regard, any information share on social media that appears to be ambiguous will cause high suspicion and possibly cause tension between romantic partners. To clear this doubt, most respondents adopt a strategy of using same passwords to grant access to each other social media platforms for surveillance. Meaning, to hence trust and demonstrate that one is not engage in any form cheat or extra marital satisfaction of social media, couple share same passwords so that they view each other's activities including the images, text, friends, and their profile. This respondent clearly stated,

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Settling Relationship Disputes Between Romantic Partners

Having established that SNS disputes and quarrels exist in romantic affairs, the study inquired to understand how the couple manages their disputes despite the havoc that social media has on their relationship, especially creating social or emotional distance. In doing the respondents were asked, how they resolve their disputes. Response to these was closely related and situated into the cultural dynamics of African society and particularly the cultural context of Ghana.

‘The best thing to do is to sit my wife down and solve the problem ourselves or invite an elderly person whom we respect most and have the experience to help us if the problem is beyond our control’

Another supported,

“...I report the problem to the elders in my family. They will sit us down and talk to us. He always feels bad when approach to talk to him anytime we quarrel...”

The above statements emphasize the centrality of the African culture's extended family relations where family elders are very significant to dispute resolution in romantic relations. The experiences and wisdom of elders in African society make versatile and core to solving recurring family disputes. Given the respect that most African societies have for the elderly, they

seem to have a significant role in managing relationship disputes (Ademowo, 2015). Cultural underpinnings of African society, such as using extended families and solving family issues with elderly people rather than the court, can be attributed to the low rate of divorce as compared to many western countries (Ademowo, 2015; Oppong, 2006). While the divorce rate is estimated to be 10% in Ghana, although higher than in previous years, the rate of divorce in the USA is five times (50%) higher than in Ghana. This results from the difference in the approaches that both cultural settings adopt in the formation and settlement of marital disputes and quarrels.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to determine the SNS usage pattern and its impact of social media on marital relationship in northern Ghana. Computer-mediated technology affects every aspect of social world and reconstructing how social relations are formed and managed through time–space compression (Latheef, 2018). It is increasingly difficult to escape the social web with the ever-expanding virtual societies. In this respect, the physical and virtual social engagement of romantic couples overlaps and affects the quality of marital relationship. The study found that romantic couples are subscribed to multiple SNS platforms, most of whom are subscribers to WhatsApp (96.1%) and Facebook (92.7%) (Latifi, 2015). The SNS preference aligns with the overall subscription pattern in Africa as Kimeto (2016) found them as the most widespread SNS in the continent. WhatsApp and Facebook offer more flexibility to interact across multiple groups and meet new people. The mean hours spent on SNS is 21 h per week and 0.89 h per visit with multiple visits in a day and did not have specific time they visited SNS. This finding is higher than the 17.5 min reported in Appiah's (2016) study which was narrowly focused on WhatsApp. Spending longer hours on SNS can be problematic. As individuals derive social gratification from SNS they begin to have prolonged engagement sites which makes them susceptible to addiction (Appiah, 2016). The implication of this cultivated habit is the negative consequences such as diminishing the quality of individual's offline relationship with their partners (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

SNS as a communication medium are designed to further strengthen social relations through bridging geographic and time constraints. However, the medium can have unintended impacts. The study revealed that whereas the impetus for signing up to SNS is to socialize and build social relationships with one's current social network or explore new friends, romantic couples use SNS to keep surveillance on their partners' contents, friends, and other virtual engagement (Fox & Warber, 2014). More than half of the research participants reported to surveil their partner's online activities and the forms of engagement they do. Retrospectively, McLuhan's warning about the hidden negative ramifications that media communication technology poses on the social fabric and human relationship is illuminated in this finding as romantic partners report the devastating effects—mistrust, jealousy, and quarrels—that SNS engagement unleashes on their relationship (McLuhan, 1964; Isla, 2016). Both the quantitative and qualitative results revealed discomforts associated with partners' SNS which resulted in spying, and mistrust between couples. This often results in disputes between romantic couples that thereby reduce the quality of interaction between the couples rather than enabling it (Sharaievska & Stodolska, 2017; Clayton, 2014; Clayton et al., 2013). The qualitative results espoused that because of constant engagement in online activities and being absent-minded during conversation even at bedtime which affects the nurturing intimate relationship (Aydin et al., 2018).

The results demonstrated an increasing SNS dependency among romantic couple. As a result of conflicts and frustration couple experience because of their partner's SNS use, marital couple seek emotional gratification from online activities to escape the loneliness and emotional stress of resolving marital conflicts (Clayton, 2014). This consumption of SNS is highly integrated in the basic theoretical underpinnings of the media/SNS dependency theory and media ecology (Kim & Jung, 2017; McLuhan, 1964). The SNS dependency theory holds that during social conflict, whether between friends or couples, their SNS presence increase to seek social or emotional support from their virtual communities (Kim & Jung, 2017). The results showed that most romantic spend most of their day engulfed in communication mediated activities that extend their social capital or emotional gratification. This increases the dependence on SNS for social satisfaction and the rate at which media influence our daily activities. The ultimate result of such prolonged dependency is mistrust, jealousy, or possibly infidelity which damages romantic relationship (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013).

In most African societies, like Ghana, marriage transcends beyond being a bond between two lovers to include an established bond between extended families (Ademowo, 2015; Oppong, 2006). Quarrels, conflict, and infidelity in romantic relationships are resolved within the family rather than in court, and the shared respect of both families plays a central role in resolving the marital dispute. Most romantic couples involve their extended families especially the elderly members to mediate marriage disputes. While this system of dispute resolution works, it is pertinent that couple develop strategies that will guide their use of SNS to minimize the negative consequences and increase the benefits.

Conclusion

The study investigated the impact of social networking site engagement on romantic relationships in northern Ghana. Using mixed methods, the study found out that most romantic partners subscribe to one or multiple SNS, and the majority use it for socialization that is, meeting new friends and reconnecting with old friends. Further, the research revealed that a lot of people do not have a specific time they visit social media. Thus, they visit SNS morning, afternoon, evening, or midnight and a large proportion of couples use it for partner monitoring. This dependence on social media affects romantic relationships by arousing jealousy, straining relationships, and causing mistrust between romantic partners. Hence, to sustain a good relationship, couples need to develop standards to guide their usage of the medium to curtail the negative consequence of SNS.

Limitations and Direction of Future Research

The current global pandemic, COVID-19, has been a great challenge to this study. Because of the pandemic, the researcher had to administer questionnaires using Google forms. In this respect, people who were not familiar with this technology were not able to respond. Also, the study did not extend to include how this interference or tension that may arise as a result of online engagement may affect parenting, especially for married couples with children. Hence, future studies should encapsulate the effects that social media have on parenting in this digitalized world, paying keen attention to parents' social media engagement and how it affects child upbringing.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval Not applicable.

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