INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE ON MARITAL SATISFACTION AMONG MARRIED GRADUATE STUDENTS AT PAN AFRICA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, NAIROBI, KENYA

SAMANTHA NASHIPAE KUSERO

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for the award of a degree in any other university.

Signature ..... **Date:** .....
Samantha Nashipae Kusero
(MMFT/24477/0/23)

This thesis has been submitted for review with our approval as University supervisors.

Signature ..... **Date:** .....
Dr. Veronica K. Makena, Ph.D
Pan Africa Christian University

Signature ..... **Date:** .....
Dr. Nancy W. Kungu, Ph.D
Pan Africa Christian University

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to God, who has carried me through this entire journey. His grace has been my foundation, and it is through Him that I found the strength to keep going. This work is also dedicated to my mother, Janet W. Denis, and my sister, Pri Nasieku, whose love, support and encouragement have been my constant source of strength.

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ABSTRACT

With the growing prevalence of social media in daily life, understanding its impact on marital dynamics has become increasingly relevant. This study explored the influence of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian (PAC) University. The research objectives were: to examine the patterns of social media usage among married graduate students at PAC University, Nairobi, Kenya, to determine its perceived effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University, Nairobi, Kenya, to identify literature-based strategies for promoting healthy social media usage among married graduate students at PAC University, Nairobi, Kenya, and to establish the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University, Nairobi, Kenya. Guided by the Attachment Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory, the study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The study targeted married graduate students at PAC University, with a sample of 218 participants, that were determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula. Participants were selected through convenience sampling technique. Of these, 185 completed the quantitative questionnaires, while 9 participated in semi-structured interviews to provide qualitative insights. Quantitative data was collected using the Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI), while qualitative insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Descriptive statistics and correlational analysis were conducted using SPSS version 30 for the quantitative data, and thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data to uncover patterns related to participants' experiences. The findings revealed minimal direct influence of social media usage on marital satisfaction, with social media serving primarily as a tool for emotional regulation and connection. Themes that emerged from the study included the importance of setting boundaries around social media use, fostering transparency and managing emotional responses to content, as well as the role of spiritual values in guiding digital engagement. These findings, along with the overall minimal effect of social media on marital satisfaction, contribute to a broader understanding of the influence of digital communication on marital well-being among the married graduate students who participated in the study. The study concludes that social media, while offering emotional support and connection, had a limited effect on marital satisfaction, suggesting that other factors, such as communication and shared experiences, play a more significant role. Recommendations for practice, policy and future research are provided to enhance relationship quality. For practice, marriage therapists and couples are encouraged to develop strategies for fostering transparency and balancing online and offline interactions. Policy recommendations suggest that universities implement structured programs such as digital well-being workshops to support married graduate students. Future research is encouraged to examine the long-term effects of social media on marital satisfaction and investigate the evolving impact of social media on relationships over time.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CSI:	Couples Satisfaction Index
ISERC:	Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee
NACOSTI:	National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation
PAC:	Pan Africa Christian University
SONTUS:	Social Networking Time Use Scale
SPSS:	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
UGT:	Uses and Gratifications Theory

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Communication: The process through which information, thoughts, and feelings are exchanged between individuals (De Netto et al., 2021). In the context of this study, communication refers to the interactions between spouses, including both verbal and non-verbal exchanges facilitated by social media.

Couple: Two individuals involved in a committed intimate relationship (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the context of this study, the term refers specifically to married partners, as all participants were legally married graduate students. The term is included because marital satisfaction was measured using the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI), an instrument designed to assess relationship satisfaction among couples.

Intimacy: The emotional closeness and connectedness experienced between partners in a marriage. According to Lankveld et al. (2021), intimacy includes physical affection, emotional support, and shared experiences that enhance the bond between spouses. In this study, intimacy will refer to the emotional and physical closeness that strengthens the bond between married partners, including shared experiences, mutual support, and expressions of affection, particularly as they are impacted by social media interactions.

Marital Satisfaction: This is a subjective evaluation of the quality and contentment experienced in a marriage and encompasses dimensions such as emotional support, communication quality, intimacy, trust, and overall happiness within the marital relationship (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2021). In this study, marital satisfaction refers to the extent to which married graduate students feel content and fulfilled in their marital relationship, focusing on factors such as emotional support, communication quality, intimacy, and trust, especially as influenced by social media usage.

Married Graduate Students: Individuals who are legally married and enrolled in a graduate program, such as a master's or doctoral degree, having previously completed an undergraduate degree (Bunch et al., 2025). In this study, the term refers specifically to married students pursuing Master's or Doctorate degrees at Pan Africa Christian (PAC) University.

Social Media Usage: Refers to the frequency, duration, and nature of interactions individuals have on social media platforms (Kolhar et al., 2021). This includes activities such as posting, commenting, messaging, and sharing content on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and others. In this study, the term is used to refer to the frequency, duration, and type of interactions on social media platforms, particularly focusing on how these activities: posting, commenting, messaging, and sharing content, affect the dynamics and satisfaction in marital relationships among graduate students.

Trust: Refers to the confidence one partner has in the other's integrity, reliability, and commitment (Vivekananda & Meenakshi, 2024). It influences how couples interact and perceive each other in the context of social media. In this study, trust refers to the confidence married graduate students have in their partner's integrity, reliability, and commitment, particularly in the context of how social media usage may affect perceptions and interactions within their marital relationship.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

The aim of this study was to establish the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University. This chapter provides the background to the study, followed by the statement of the problem, the purpose, objectives, and research questions. Additionally, assumptions, justification, significance, scope, limitations and delimitations of the study are discussed ending with the chapter summary.

Background to the Study

According to Gazi et al. (2024), social media has grown into one of the most widely used and far-reaching forms of communication in modern history, with platforms now embedded in the daily lives of people across virtually every region, age group and socioeconomic background. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) have fundamentally changed the way people interact, share information and maintain relationships in both personal and professional spheres (Gazi et al., 2024). The rapid adoption of these platforms across all age groups, income levels and regions has made social media a central feature of everyday life, shaping communication habits, social norms and even identity (Ihsaniyati et al., 2023). Within the context of intimate relationships, these shifts carry significant implications, as the ways in which individuals use social media (how often, for how long, on which platforms and for what purposes), have begun to reshape the dynamics of marriage and partnership. Understanding the scope of social media's reach is therefore an important starting point for examining its influence on marital satisfaction.

Social media usage refers to the frequency, duration and types of interactions individuals have on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). It encompasses both active interactions, such as posting and commenting, and passive behaviours, such as browsing or liking content (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2020). The purpose of usage also varies widely, ranging from seeking entertainment and maintaining social connections to sharing personal milestones and monitoring others' activities. Marital satisfaction, on the other hand, is defined as the overall quality of contentment and fulfilment experienced in a marriage and includes three key components: trust, intimacy and communication (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2021). High marital satisfaction is often associated with strong emotional bonds and effective communication, while low marital satisfaction can lead to conflict and emotional distance (Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022). As social media becomes increasingly embedded in daily life, how couples navigate its frequency, purpose and platform choices stands to either strengthen or quietly erode the trust, intimacy and communication that form the foundation of a marriage (Ntumbo et al., 2025).

Reza (2024), suggests that it is not simply whether a person uses social media, but rather how they use it, that determines its impact on their relationships. Frequency of use, referring to how often a person logs onto social media platforms, has been linked to reduced time and attention given to a romantic partner, with higher frequency associated with lower relationship quality (Métellus et al., 2025). Duration, meaning the total time spent on these platforms per day, similarly affects relational well-being, as prolonged use has been associated with emotional withdrawal and reduced investment in face-to-face interactions with a spouse (Lin & Lachman, 2024). The type of platform used also matters, as different platforms serve different relational

functions: WhatsApp is primarily used for direct communication between partners, while platforms like Instagram and Facebook introduce more opportunities for social comparison, jealousy and surveillance of a partner's online activity (Annet, 2024 ; Wahyuti & Sudarmanti, 2025). Whether social media is used to connect with one's spouse, maintain friendships, seek entertainment or engage with other matters, carries different implications for trust and intimacy within a marriage (Annet, 2024). Together, these four dimensions (frequency, duration, platform type and purpose) do not merely describe patterns of digital behaviour, but they map the precise pathways through which social media enters and potentially disrupts the emotional architecture of marriage (Opoku et al., 2025).

Wen (2024) highlights that technology can both help and hinder romantic relationships in the digital age, facilitating connection while also introducing new sources of tension. According to Vogels and Anderson (2020), around half of American adults in relationships report feeling distracted by their partner's cellphone use, while a significant portion also express discomfort over the types of platforms their partners use and the purposes for which they use them. These tensions are reflected in behaviours such as digital snooping (checking a partner's phone without permission) which about a third of adults in relationships admit to doing, often driven by jealousy and mistrust (Vogels & Anderson, 2020). However, Kovan (2023), notes that while social media can deepen jealousy, it is also used by couples as a channel for sharing affection and maintaining closeness. Taken together, these findings underscore that the effects of social media use on marital satisfaction are complex, touching on trust, communication quality and emotional intimacy in equal measure.

Research from Turkey (Konyar & Ersanli, 2022), further demonstrates the negative relationship between excessive social media use and marital well-being

among married couples. The study found a weak negative correlation between social media use and marital happiness, with excessive usage leading to reduced communication, heightened jealousy and decreased interest in the marital relationship, factors that in some cases, contributed to mistrust and divorce. Younger couples and those married for shorter periods showed higher levels of social media addiction (Ntumbo et al., 2025). These findings align with Karaman and Arslan's (2024) research, which similarly found that excessive social media use disrupts marital harmony and reduces relationship satisfaction. Konyar and Ersanli (2022) recommended that couples be supported through awareness programmes and counselling to reduce social media addiction and promote healthier relational habits.

A study conducted in China by Yu (2023) found that social media promotes interpersonal relationships, by providing diverse communication channels that help partners stay connected. However, the study also found that excessive use was associated with negative outcomes, including reduced face-to-face interaction, increased feelings of loneliness and heightened anxiety, all of which are relevant to the marital satisfaction components of communication and intimacy. The study is relevant to the present research in that it provides a broader understanding of how social media's positive and negative effects on interpersonal connection operate, which directly informs how married couples in any context might be affected by patterns of use. Yu (2023) recommended establishing reasonable norms for social media use, strengthening supervision and promoting real-life interactions to mitigate these negative effects. The aim of the study was to raise awareness about the need for a more balanced and healthy approach to social media, an objective that resonates with the goals of the present study.

Research by Kolhar et al. (2021) in Saudi Arabia found that excessive social media use negatively impacts sleep, face-to-face communication and overall social interactions. Late-night usage in particular contributes to chronic sleep restriction and heightened risks of depression and anxiety (Kolhar et al., 2021), which are consequences that carry direct implications for emotional availability and relational well-being within marriage. A study by Sharifian et al. (2021) observed that age influences social media usage, with younger individuals viewing it primarily as a communication tool, while older users more often experience it as a source of tension in their relationships. Gender differences also shape how social media is used within relationships, as men and women tend to engage with these platforms in distinctly different ways and for different purposes (Zhou et al., 2023). Understanding how demographic factors shape these patterns of use is thus key to building a completer and more nuanced picture of social media's influence on marital satisfaction.

A study by Konlan et al. (2023), conducted in Northern Ghana examined how social networking sites (SNS) impact romantic relationships. The study found that many couples use multiple platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, without fixed times for usage and that this unregulated frequency of use often generates jealousy, mistrust and conflict between partners. Partners were also found to use these platforms to monitor each other’s online activities, which further eroded trust and intimacy within the relationship (Métellus et al., 2025). Additionally, SNS addiction was found to harm offline relationships by pulling partners away from shared activities and face-to-face communication. To address these challenges, the study recommended that couples establish clear and agreed-upon standards for SNS use in order to protect the quality of their relationships (Konlan et al., 2023).

In Kenya, a study by Mwangi (2021) explored how social media use among young middle-class married couples in Kilimani, Nairobi, affects their marriages. While platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook were used primarily for socialising, excessive use was linked to negative feelings such as loneliness, jealousy and mistrust, particularly among women (Opoku et al., 2025). Many couples expressed discomfort and suspicion about their partner's online activities, which strained trust and emotional intimacy within their relationships (Métellus et al., 2025). The study found that increased frequency of social media usage was associated with reduced face-to-face communication, ultimately undermining one of the central components of marital satisfaction. Mwangi (2021) recommended that couples regulate their social media use and invest in direct communication as a means of enhancing marital satisfaction.

A study in Nakuru County, Kenya, explored how social media networking affects marital well-being among couples (Wathigo, 2019). It found that platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook supported spousal communication when used in moderation, but often led to challenges such as reduced quality time and heightened mistrust when the frequency of use became excessive (Wathigo, 2019). These issues were particularly pronounced in cases where social media usage disrupted traditional communication patterns, weakening the relational bonds between married partners. The findings of Hatamleh et al. (2023) emphasized that setting clear boundaries for social media use is essential for fostering marital harmony and protecting the quality of communication and trust between spouses. The study also highlighted the need for couples to prioritise face-to-face interactions as a means of maintaining intimacy.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of social media has drastically changed how people communicate and maintain their relationships (Gu, 2022). While these platforms offer new ways to connect, they also create complexities that can significantly impact marital relationships (Nasiche, 2024). Married couples, especially graduate students, encounter unique challenges in balancing academic obligations with their personal lives (Moumi, 2022). As social media becomes increasingly integrated into daily interactions, understanding its influence on marital satisfaction becomes essential. This knowledge is crucial for fostering healthier partnerships (Nasiche, 2024).

Das (2023) highlights a duality in social media's effects on marriage. Social media can enhance communication and emotional intimacy by providing couples with tools to express affection and share experiences (Graciyal & Viswam, 2021). However, it can also lead to misunderstandings, jealousy, and emotional distance, particularly when couples find it challenging to manage their online presence effectively (Kovan, 2023). According to Batool (2021), young married couples who are also university students face unique challenges. They must balance academic responsibilities with marital duties, a situation that may be worsened by their extensive use of social media (Batool, 2021).

Although there has been considerable research on how social media affects relationships (Konlan et al., 2023; Vogels & Anderson, 2020), its specific impact on marital satisfaction among university students, particularly in Africa, remains largely unexplored (Mwangi, 2021). Most prior studies, like Annet (2024) and Bouffard et al. (2021) have focused on general populations rather than specific demographic groups, overlooking the unique experiences of students balancing academic and marital roles. Furthermore, African contexts, with their rich cultural and social dynamics, remain

underrepresented in such research. This gap limits our understanding of how social media usage interacts with these factors to influence marital satisfaction. Addressing this issue is crucial for developing culturally relevant strategies to enhance marital well-being.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to establish the influence of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the patterns of social media usage among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.
2. To determine the perceived effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.
3. To identify literature-based strategies for promoting healthy social media usage among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.
4. To establish the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.

Research Questions

1. What are the patterns of social media usage among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya?
2. How do married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya, perceive the effects of social media usage on their marital satisfaction?

3. What literature-based strategies can promote healthy social media usage among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya?
4. What is the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya?

Assumptions of the Study

This study assumed that participants actively engaged with various social media platforms and that their self-reported data would offer accurate insights into their usage patterns. It was presumed that participants responded honestly to questions concerning both the nature and frequency of their social media usage. The study further assumed that participants had formed perceptions about how social media affected their marital satisfaction, particularly in aspects such as trust, intimacy, and communication, and that these perceptions were based on their lived experiences. Additionally, it was assumed that literature provides relevant and applicable strategies for promoting healthy social media usage, which could be synthesized and applied to the context of married graduate students at PAC University. Finally, the study assumed that a measurable influence exists between social media usage and marital satisfaction among the target population.

Justification of the Study

The increasing integration of social media into daily life has raised important questions about its impact on various aspects of relationships, including marital satisfaction (Annet, 2024). As the digital landscape continues to evolve, it is crucial to understand how social media usage patterns influence marital dynamics, especially among married graduate students. With social media becoming a dominant means of communication and connection, understanding how it impacts intimacy, trust, and

overall marital satisfaction is essential. This research is particularly relevant in the Kenyan context, where social media usage is rapidly increasing, but the effects on marital relationships remain under explored (Mutua et al., 2022). Moreover, findings from this study could contribute valuable insights to marital therapy and inform policymakers on fostering healthier digital habits.

Much of the existing research on social media and marital satisfaction has been conducted in Western regions, such as the United States and Europe, overlooking how these dynamics unfold in African settings. For example, Karaman and Arslan (2024) conducted a study in Turkey and have shown that social media usage can significantly influence relationship satisfaction. However, social and technological contexts differ across regions, which may lead to varying outcomes and interpretations of social media's role in marriage. By examining married graduate students at PAC University, this study sought to explore how social media usage impacts marital satisfaction in an African context. The findings could fill a critical gap in understanding this influence in Kenya, where social media use is rapidly increasing but its implications for marital satisfaction remain underexplored.

Significance of the Study

According to Lebow and Snyder (2022), as social media becomes more intertwined with everyday life, therapists must be equipped to understand the complexities it introduces into marital dynamics. This study's findings can inform therapeutic interventions, helping practitioners develop strategies to support couples in navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by social media. For example, this study's insights could help therapists design specific interventions focused on improving communication, managing jealousy, and setting healthy boundaries for social media use within marriages. According to Chakraborty and Dey

(2024), by understanding how social media usage patterns affect marital satisfaction, couples may be able to make informed decisions about how they engage with these platforms. Moreover, this study explored literature-based strategies for promoting healthy social media usage that couples can use to balance their online presence with their relationship needs, offering practical tools for fostering greater marital satisfaction. In addition to this, the findings could be valuable not only within PAC University but may also provide insights that can be generalized to other similar academic environments, contributing to broader efforts in promoting healthy relationships and well-being among graduate students.

This perspective is essential for developing therapeutic interventions tailored to the unique challenges faced by couples in this region (Konlan et al., 2023). In Kenya, where social connections and family life hold significant value, understanding how social media influences marital satisfaction can offer practical insights for supporting healthy relationships (Chomba et al., 2023). Therefore, this study's findings may help identify areas where social media use strengthens or strains marital dynamics among married graduate students. Additionally, the results may inform counseling practices and intervention strategies that promote balanced social media use and healthier communication between couples. Furthermore, the findings could contribute to a growing body of knowledge on social media's impact on marital satisfaction within the Kenyan context and beyond.

Moreover, the significance of this study extends to the church, as it provides valuable insights into how social media usage influences marital satisfaction, a key aspect of family life, which is central to many Christian teachings. Churches often emphasize the importance of strong, healthy marriages, and according to Musya (2024), understanding the impact of modern communication tools like social media

can help church-based communities support couples in nurturing these relationships. By exploring the dynamics between social media and marital satisfaction, this research could offer guidance for church leaders to address emerging challenges faced by married couples in the digital age. Furthermore, the study's findings could contribute to the development of church-based programs or counseling services designed to promote balanced media use within marriages. Ultimately, this understanding may empower the church to play a more proactive role in fostering digital responsibility and relational growth among Christian couples.

Scope of the Study

This study focused on the influence of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University, which, at the time, had 674 graduate students enrolled across various programs, 505 of whom were married. Both male and female participants were included to capture diverse perspectives on how social media affects marital dynamics. The study encompassed participants regardless of the length of their marriage, allowing for a broader understanding of how social media impacts relationships at different stages. The research adopted a mixed-methods design, using both questionnaires and interviews, with data collection conducted over approximately two weeks.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This study was delimited to married graduate students at PAC University, selected for their unique experience balancing academic, marital, and digital lives. While this group was highly relevant to the research objectives, a limitation was that the findings might not generalize to married individuals outside academic settings. The university's cultural diversity offers richness to the data, but may also introduce variability that is not representative of broader populations. The academic

environment itself could influence how participants perceive and report on marital satisfaction and social media use. Therefore, the results should be interpreted within the context of a married graduate population.

The study was delimited to examining the influence of specific social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X, TikTok, YouTube, and LinkedIn) as these were believed to be the most commonly used among the target population. This excluded other potentially relevant platforms, which is a limitation in terms of comprehensiveness. Furthermore, the study focused on the effects of social media on key aspects of marital satisfaction (trust, intimacy, communication and overall satisfaction) while excluding other influential variables such as mental health, and parenting. These exclusions were necessary to maintain a focused scope but limit the breadth of insights. As such, the findings may not capture all the complexities influencing marital satisfaction.

A methodological limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which might be influenced by social desirability bias or inaccurate recall (Cochran et al., 2025). Participants might have underreported or overstated their social media usage or its perceived impact on their relationships, potentially affecting the accuracy and reliability of the data collected. The use of convenience sampling was a delimitation chosen for its practicality and ease of access to the target population. The questionnaire link was circulated through WhatsApp groups and those who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate responded voluntarily. While this approach facilitated timely data collection, it might have limited the representativeness of the sample, as only those who were available and interested participated.

While this study used a mixed-methods approach to provide a broad and in-depth understanding, one limitation was that the survey data was collected at only one point in time. This means the study could not show how social media usage or marital satisfaction may change over time. Although the interviews helped to add rich details and context, the design still captured just a snapshot of the participants' experiences. This was a deliberate choice based on time constraints and the academic setting. As a result, the study highlighted current patterns rather than long-term effects. Future research could consider a longer-term design to better understand changes over time in how social media affects marriage.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study by providing the background and rationale for examining the influence of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University. It highlighted the problem being investigated and outlined the study's objectives and research questions. The chapter also discussed the assumptions, justification, significance, scope, limitations and delimitations of the study, providing a framework for understanding the context of the research. The next chapter presents the empirical literature review, theoretical framework, conceptual framework and a synthesis of the research gaps relevant to the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter presents an empirical literature review structured around the four objectives of this study: examining the patterns of social media usage among married graduate students, assessing the perceived effects of social media on trust, intimacy and communication, identifying strategies for promoting healthy social media usage to enhance marital satisfaction, and establishing the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction. The chapter then outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Attachment Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory, both of which guide the interpretation of the study's findings. Finally, the conceptual framework is presented, providing a visual and descriptive illustration of the relationships between variables and offering a roadmap for the study's approach to addressing its objectives.

Empirical Literature Review

A growing body of research has examined the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction, employing a range of methodological approaches and studying diverse populations Hatamleh (2024), conducted a quantitative survey among married adults in Jordan to examine the effects of social media use on marital satisfaction. Using structured questionnaires, the study found that excessive and unregulated social media use was significantly and negatively associated with marital satisfaction, particularly through its effects on trust and communication. The study is methodologically robust in its sample size and use of validated instruments and its findings are consistent with several other studies conducted in the Arab world. However, its focus on a predominantly Muslim, Middle Eastern context, limits the extent to which its findings can be generalised to other cultural settings, including sub-Saharan Africa. While its findings are geographically

limited to a Middle Eastern context, the study's implementation of trust, intimacy and communication as dimensions of marital satisfaction provides a useful conceptual foundation for the present study.

Parsakia and Rostami (2023) conducted a qualitative study in Canada to explore how technology shapes the formation and maintenance of personal relationships through digital intimacy. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the researchers identified seven major themes, including the formation and maintenance of digital intimacy, its benefits and challenges and the navigation of online and offline worlds. Their findings revealed that digital platforms facilitate emotional support and connection across distances, making them particularly valuable for long-distance relationships. However, participants also reported significant challenges such as privacy concerns, emotional disconnection, boundary management difficulties and miscommunication arising from digital interactions. Given that marriage is itself a personal relationship and that communication is central to how digital intimacy is both formed and disrupted, the study's findings remain pertinent to the present study's examination of how social media influences marital satisfaction among married graduate students.

Dag-um et al. (2024) employed a qualitative exploratory research design in the Philippines to examine how married students balance academic and marital responsibilities, the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ. Using criterion sampling and in-depth semi-structured interviews, the study applied Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis to analyse the data. Findings revealed that married students rely heavily on time management, prioritisation and positive attitudes, while facing challenges such as relationship conflict, financial difficulties, stress and difficulties juggling multiple roles as students, spouses and sometimes

parents. The study concluded that effective time management, strong interpersonal support and open communication are essential for maintaining both academic success and marital satisfaction. The study's focus on the married student population provides a useful lens for the present study, where educational commitments operate as a confounding variable in the influence of social media use on marital satisfaction.

Ntumbo et al. (2025) conducted a mixed-methods study in Zambia using a sequential explanatory case study design to investigate the impact of social media on marital relationships. The study found that social media had a dual effect: it could both strengthen and strain marriages depending primarily on how it was used by couples. On one hand, many couples reported using social media to stay emotionally connected throughout the day, with participants noting enhanced communication and improved emotional support. On the other hand, excessive use, secretive messaging and interaction with unfamiliar contacts were linked to jealousy, mistrust and reduced face-to-face intimacy, with participants reporting conflict and jealousy issues as well as reduced in-person interaction as a concern. Ntumbo et al.'s identification of effective communication, mutual boundary-setting and trust-building as key strategies for managing social media's relational effects offers an empirical basis for identifying literature-based strategies for promoting healthy social media usage among married graduate students.

Konlan et al. (2023) conducted a mixed method study in Ghana to examine the effects of social media dependency on marital relationships. The study identified three dominant themes: social media as a source of jealousy and suspicion, social media as a tool for maintaining connection and the importance of relational agreements around digital boundaries. The qualitative design offered rich, nuanced data on participants' lived experiences, which is a methodological strength. However, the sample and the

study's restriction to one geographic region limit its transferability. Notably, Ghana and Kenya share a number of socio-cultural similarities as sub-Saharan African countries, which makes the findings of Konlan et al. (2023) more contextually relevant to the present study than much of the Western literature. Nevertheless, the present study goes further by focusing specifically on the graduate student population.

Patterns of Social Media Usage among Married Graduate Students

This discussion explores patterns of social media usage among married graduate students by examining three key constructs: frequency of use, types of platforms used and purpose of usage. Frequency refers to how often individuals engage with social media, reflecting the intensity and consistency of their engagement (Barrera-Verdugo & Villarroel-Villarroel, 2022). The types of platforms used capture the variety of social media sites available and their distinct features (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2020), while purpose of usage examines the motivations behind social media engagement, ranging from academic and professional to relational and recreational (Uslu, 2022). Understanding these constructs is important because the impact of social media on marital satisfaction is unlikely to stem from usage alone, but from how, where and why individuals engage with these platforms. This exploration provides the necessary context for examining how social media usage patterns relate to marital satisfaction among this distinct population.

Haji (2025), notes that academic pressure and personal priorities both play a role in determining how frequently this group turns to social media. Saini and Mir (2023) found that daily use is common, often woven into daily routines such as study breaks or as a way of staying in touch with family and peers. Alshanqiti et al. (2023), reported that young adults, including graduate students, spend an average of two to three hours per day on social media, though this fluctuates with academic workload.

What is notable for this study is that married graduate students carry the additional responsibility of maintaining a marital relationship alongside their studies, which may make their social media habits distinctly different from those of single students or older adults (Dag-um et al., 2024). Their usage may therefore be both a reflection of, and a response to the unique pressures they face.

Platform choice among married graduate students largely reflects their need to manage both academic commitments and personal relationships. Facebook remains widely used for its ability to support group communication, long-form content and professional networking, making it especially useful for those with both academic and personal commitments (Enwereji et al., 2024). Instagram appeals to users through its visual format, while WhatsApp is heavily relied upon for instant and group messaging (Rafique et al., 2023). TikTok, now one of the fastest-growing platforms, primarily serves entertainment and self-expression purposes (Stamenković & Mitrović, 2023), while X (formerly Twitter) supports news updates and academic discussions (Mazzeffi et al., 2024). Platform preferences are further shaped by factors such as usability, privacy concerns and audience (Asempah, 2024). Notably, much of the existing literature on platform preference reflects Western contexts, which raises questions about whether these patterns hold in Kenyan settings, where cultural and regional dynamics may lead to different choices.

The purposes for which married graduate students use social media are varied and often overlap, blurring the boundary between academic, professional and personal use. LinkedIn and YouTube are commonly used for professional networking and accessing educational content (Davis et al., 2020; Shoufan & Mohamed, 2022), while WhatsApp serves a dual role as both a tool for academic group work and a means for couples to stay connected during the day (Rafique et al., 2023). TikTok offers a space

for recreational engagement and relief from academic stress (Ramsden & Talbot, 2024), whereas Instagram allows for emotional connection through shared moments (Rogers, 2021). The dual utility of these platforms, serving both academic productivity and relational maintenance, points to their significance in the daily lives of married graduate students (Adelakun et al., 2023). What remains less understood, however, is how this overlap in purpose affects the quality of marital interactions, particularly when academic or professional use encroaches on time and attention that might otherwise be directed toward a spouse.

While prior research by (Dag-um et al., 2024), provides useful insight into social media usage patterns, significant gaps persist, particularly regarding married graduate students. Much of the available literature focuses on broader demographic groups or specific age ranges, with limited attention paid to individuals who are simultaneously managing marital responsibilities and postgraduate study (Prasad & Sinha, 2020). Additionally, the majority of studies reflect Western contexts and there is a notable absence of research that examines how cultural and regional factors, particularly in countries like Kenya, shape social media use in this population. The rapid evolution of digital platforms further limits the relevance of older findings, underscoring the need for more recent and context-specific research. This study therefore sought to address these gaps by focusing specifically on married graduate students in a Kenyan setting, with the aim of understanding how their platform usage patterns relate to marital satisfaction.

Perceived Effects of Social Media Usage on Marital Satisfaction

While Attachment Theory offers a broad spectrum of concepts that could be applied to marital satisfaction, this study deliberately focused on three key concepts: trust, intimacy and communication, due to their central role in relational dynamics

(Reddy & Naila, 2024). These three constructs are consistently identified in the literature as the most important factors in determining the quality of marital relationships, particularly in the context of digital engagement (Hatamleh et al., 2023; Kamali et al., 2020). Trust, intimacy and communication are deeply interconnected, meaning that disruption in one area tends to affect the others (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). By focusing on these dimensions, this study aimed to provide a more detailed understanding of how social media influences the relational dynamics most critical to marital wellbeing, rather than offering a broad and potentially superficial overview. This targeted approach aligns with the study's objective of examining the perceived effects of social media on marital satisfaction among married graduate students (Reddy & Naila, 2024).

Trust is widely regarded as one of the most foundational elements of a healthy marriage and it is also one of the dimensions most vulnerable to disruption by social media (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2021). Research indicates that undisclosed social media activity, such as hidden accounts or secretive online behavior, can introduce suspicion and erode the trust between partners (Konlan et al., 2023). Activities perceived as inappropriate, such as excessive interaction with former romantic partners or frequent engagement with unknown individuals, are often experienced as threats to the relationship, leading to jealousy and mistrust (Tandon et al., 2021). By contrast, couples who openly share their social media habits and maintain visible interactions with one another are less likely to encounter trust-related difficulties (Hughes et al., 2021). For married graduate students who spend significant time online, often for academic and social purposes, the line between appropriate and problematic social media behavior may be particularly blurry, making transparent communication about digital habits especially important.

Privacy settings on social media platforms present a nuanced challenge to marital trust. According to Konlan et al. (2023), while they allow individuals to control who sees their content, they can generate suspicion if one partner feels deliberately excluded. Hatamleh et al. (2023) argue that transparency in the use of privacy settings can actually reinforce trust by demonstrating a sense of accountability. However, when one partner demands full access to the other's accounts, this can backfire, creating feelings of resentment rather than reassurance (Bouffard et al., 2021). The challenge for couples is therefore not simply whether to use privacy settings, but how to negotiate digital boundaries in a way that supports rather than undermines relational trust (Hatamleh et al., 2023). This tension is likely to be particularly relevant among graduate students, whose academic and peer networks are often managed through the same platforms used for personal communication.

When used thoughtfully, social media can actively strengthen the trust between partners (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Behaviors such as sharing updates, expressing affection publicly or tagging a spouse in posts can create a visible and reassuring digital narrative of commitment (Büttner et al., 2022). Research by Hatamleh et al. (2023), found that couples who engage jointly on social media often report higher levels of mutual trust, as shared participation fosters a sense of transparency and partnership. Lee and Hancock (2024), similarly suggest that when social media is approached with intentionality and openness, it can function as a trust-building tool rather than a source of conflict. These findings suggest that it is not social media use per se, but the manner in which it is used, that determines its impact on trust within marriage.

Much of the existing literature examines general patterns of mistrust, such as jealousy or secrecy, without accounting for how specific demographic or cultural contexts, such as those of married graduate students in Kenya, might shape these experiences (Nasiche, 2024). There is also limited understanding of how different platforms affect trust differently, given that platforms vary widely in terms of their features, the nature of interaction they enable and the audiences they attract (Hatamleh et al., 2023). The long-term effects of specific transparency strategies, such as shared account access or mutual online visibility, on marital trust also remain underexplored (Jabali et al., 2024). Filling these gaps would not only deepen theoretical understanding but also offer practical guidance to couples and counselors working to navigate the intersection of digital life and marital trust.

Intimacy in marriage encompasses both emotional closeness and physical connection, and social media has been shown to influence both dimensions, though in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Adegbite & Shaibu, 2025). Platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat provide couples with creative tools for expressing affection, sharing special moments and reinforcing their emotional bond, particularly in long-distance relationships (Fejes-Vékássy et al., 2020). Public displays of affection online, such as tagging a partner or sharing personal milestones, can signal devotion and strengthen a couple's sense of partnership. However, these same behaviors can become counterproductive if one partner feels their gestures do not measure up to idealized portrayals seen elsewhere online (Lee, 2020). Social media can enhance romantic intimacy when it supplements genuine offline efforts but loses its positive effect when it becomes a substitute for real-world connection (Annet, 2024).

The findings of Konlan et al. (2023) indicate that although social media is primarily a digital medium, its influence can extend to physical intimacy within marriage. Positive social media interactions can serve as a precursor to meaningful face-to-face conversations or shared activities, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the relationship (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Conversely, when one or both partners habitually prioritize online activity over physical togetherness, the relational bond can weaken over time (Yasmine & Karima, 2024). Exposure to idealized or unrealistic depictions of relationships and body image on social media can also generate insecurity and dissatisfaction, further dampening physical closeness (Merino et al., 2024). To preserve intimacy, couples must consciously limit digital distractions and create space for physical connection (Konlan et al., 2023).

Annet (2024), reveals that social media is not only a potential risk to intimacy but can also serve as a resource for improving it. Many platforms offer access to articles, videos and support communities focused on relationship wellbeing and couples experiencing intimacy challenges may benefit from engaging with this content (Hatamleh et al., 2023). In the view of Taba et al. (2020), consuming positive, relationship-focused content can inspire couples to adopt healthier relational practices and generate new ideas for nurturing their connection. However, it is important to note that generic online advice may not always translate effectively to the specific cultural and relational context of a given marriage (Konlan et al., 2023). This caution is especially relevant for Kenyan couples, whose cultural norms and relationship expectations may differ considerably from the largely Western contexts in which much of this content is produced.

According to Mwangi (2021), the potential of social media to enhance or hinder intimacy in marital relationships is acknowledged but several gaps remain

unexplored. Additionally, there is limited understanding of how married graduate students, who often face unique time constraints and stressors, navigate social media to foster intimacy. A study by Zhou et al. (2023) investigated the long-term effects of relying on social media resources, such as relationship-focused content, on marital satisfaction or how these resources aligned with diverse cultural contexts. Further research could also examine how couples balance online and offline efforts to sustain intimacy, particularly in relationships where digital engagement is a significant mode of connection. Filling these gaps would provide a deeper, more practical understanding of social media's role in marital intimacy.

Communication is perhaps the dimension of marital satisfaction most directly shaped by social media, given that many platforms are designed primarily as communication tools (Gomes et al., 2021). For couples with demanding schedules, platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger can make it easier to stay connected throughout the day, offering a practical means of maintaining relational closeness even when face-to-face interaction is limited (Rafique et al., 2023). For married graduate students, who may spend long hours in class, studying or at work, this kind of digital communication can play a genuinely supportive role in the marriage (Hall et al., 2022). Quick messages, shared content or expressions of care through digital channels can help couples feel present in each other's lives despite physical separation (Mihailidis, 2020). However, an over-reliance on digital communication risks reducing the depth and quality of conversations, ultimately diminishing rather than strengthening emotional connection (Ruben et al., 2021).

Ruben et al. (2021) highlighted that while social media facilitates faster communication, it also increases the likelihood of misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Text-based communication often lacks the nuance of tone and

body language, leading to misread intentions or unclear messages (Udoudom et al., 2024). For instance, a delayed response to a message may be perceived as disinterest, causing unnecessary tension between partners (Ruben et al., 2021). Additionally, Konlan et al. (2023) suggested that ambiguous posts or interactions with others online can create confusion and trigger arguments. To mitigate these challenges, couples should prioritize open and clarifying conversations, ensuring that social media complements rather than complicates their communication (Nasiche, 2024).

Lai et al. (2023) indicated that social media platforms can sometimes lead to communication overload, where partners feel pressured to remain constantly available or responsive. For married graduate students, social media could add emotional fatigue, as balancing academic demands with the expectation of frequent digital communication becomes overwhelming (Zhuang et al., 2023). This over-communication could inadvertently reduce the quality of exchanges, as partners may resort to superficial or transactional conversations instead of meaningful dialogue (Bouffard et al., 2021). Research by Nasiche (2024) observed that setting boundaries for digital engagement, such as designated offline times or limiting non-essential interactions, can help preserve the quality of marital communication while avoiding burnout. Furthermore, fostering open conversations about digital habits and expectations can create a sense of mutual understanding, allowing both partners to navigate social media in a way that supports, rather than hinders, meaningful connection (Zhang et al., 2023).

The findings of Gyasewaa et al. (2023) indicated that the demanding nature of graduate studies often requires married students to allocate significant time and mental energy to their academic responsibilities. These commitments can limit opportunities for in-depth marital interactions, as study sessions, assignments and

deadlines frequently take precedence (Dag-um et al., 2024). Social media may act as a compensatory mechanism, allowing couples to maintain some level of connection amidst their academic pressures (Hughes et al., 2021). However, the extent to which these platforms fulfill this role may vary based on the flexibility of their schedules and the couple's communication dynamics (Sun et al., 2023). While some students might use brief social media interactions to express affection or check in with their partner, others may find their educational workload so overwhelming that even online engagement becomes sporadic (Hollister et al., 2022). Nasiche (2024) suggested that understanding how education commitments intersect with social media usage provides valuable insights into their broader impact on marital satisfaction.

Outside of education, married graduate students engage in various activities such as professional work, caregiving or leisure pursuits. The allocation of time to these activities often determines how much attention and energy is left for their marriage. Annet (2024), highlights that social media platforms may provide a quick and efficient means for couples to reconnect during busy periods, but over-reliance on these platforms can also lead to surface-level interactions. For example, a spouse deeply involved in a demanding job may use social media for updates but might lack the bandwidth for meaningful conversations, potentially affecting intimacy and trust (Morris, 2020). Similarly, time spent on recreational activities like social gaming or streaming services can either enhance individual well-being or divert attention away from nurturing the marital bond (Takiguchi et al., 2022). Recognizing this allows for a nuanced understanding of how external commitments shape the role of social media in marital satisfaction.

Dag-um et al. (2024) suggested that financial challenges are a significant stressor for many married graduate students, as they navigate the dual demands of

funding their education and meeting household obligations. Lee et al. (2020) revealed that financial pressure often influences emotional dynamics within the marriage, as couples may experience increased tension or anxiety. Social media can serve as a resource for emotional support or connection during challenging times, offering people a sense of relief or distraction (Sun et al., 2023). For example, couples might share encouraging messages or use cost-effective social media platforms for communication instead of expensive phone calls (Li, 2021). However, Bouffard et al. (2021) revealed that financial stress can also heighten conflicts or reduce the perceived effectiveness of social media interactions if couples struggle to address underlying issues. By examining how financial stress interacts with social media usage, this study sought to highlight its nuanced effects on marital satisfaction.

Despite extensive research (Kovan, 2023; Mwangi, 2021) on social media's role in communication, several gaps persist regarding its impact on marital satisfaction. Mwangi (2021) explored how specific communication patterns on social media differ between couples with high and low marital satisfaction, particularly among married graduate students managing unique stressors. Additionally, the long-term effects of digital communication on emotional intimacy and conflict resolution remain underexplored (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). Furthermore, there is insufficient focus on strategies couples use to balance online and offline communication, particularly in relationships where digital engagement is essential. Addressing these gaps would provide deeper insights into fostering effective communication in a digitally connected marriage.

According to Saadat (2025), spirituality plays a significant role in shaping marital satisfaction by influencing how couples navigate challenges and maintain emotional connection. Haikola (2023) indicates that shared spiritual beliefs and

practices can enhance relationship stability, trust and forgiveness, which serve as buffers against marital conflict. In the context of social media use, spirituality may guide people's online behavior, encouraging mindfulness, restraint and value-based engagement that supports relational harmony (You & Liu, 2022). Moreover, couples who prioritize spiritual communication often demonstrate greater emotional regulation and empathy, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings or jealousy linked to online interactions (Kovan, 2023). Spirituality may thus serve as an internal resource that promotes balance between digital engagement and marital commitment, fostering a sense of unity despite external pressures (Basu & Nadindla, 2025).

Strategies for Promoting Healthy Social Media Usage to Enhance Marital Satisfaction

While much of the literature on social media and marriage focuses on its risks, there is a growing body of work that examines what couples can actively do to mitigate those risks. One of the most consistently recommended strategies is prioritizing face-to-face communication, even in the context of busy academic and professional lives. Harony et al. (2021) found that couples who actively protect time for offline conversation are better able to resolve misunderstandings and build deeper emotional connections. Practical measures, such as establishing technology-free periods or creating shared daily routines for meaningful discussion, can help ensure that digital engagement does not crowd out in-person connection (Gruber et al., 2022). For married graduate students, these moments also provide an opportunity to discuss how social media is affecting their relationship and to make adjustments collaboratively (Johnson & Francis, 2022). Regular conversations about digital habits promote mutual understanding and can prevent small tensions from escalating into larger sources of conflict (Lee & Hancock, 2024).

A more structured strategy involves deliberate periods of digital disconnection, commonly referred to as digital detox. Johnson et al. (2021) describe digital detox as an intentional practice in which couples step away from social media for a defined period, allowing them to focus on each other and on resolving any issues without online distractions. For married graduate students who face significant external pressures, including academic deadlines and social comparisons online, these breaks may offer important relief (Dilinika & Huang, 2024). Regular digital detox periods, whether weekly or monthly, create consistent opportunities for partners to reconnect outside the influence of social media (Anandpara et al., 2024). Research by Parsakia and Rostami (2023) suggests that these intentional breaks can meaningfully enhance emotional intimacy and overall marital satisfaction. The challenge for graduate students lies in finding the time and mutual commitment to implement such practices consistently.

Self-regulation is another strategy that the literature identifies as important for managing social media use within marriage. According to Gioia et al. (2021), individuals who actively monitor and adjust their own online behavior are better placed to avoid the habits most likely to harm their relationship, such as excessive scrolling, engaging with negative content, or posting material that may cause conflict. Hatamleh et al. (2023) further suggest that developing digital literacy, the ability to critically evaluate online content and resist harmful comparisons, enables couples to engage with social media in ways that support rather than undermine their self-esteem and relational wellbeing. This kind of intentional engagement is particularly relevant for married graduate students, who are exposed to large volumes of online content through both their academic and social networks (Plackett et al., 2023). Workshops or

educational resources focused on healthy digital habits could therefore be a valuable support for this population (Hatamleh et al., 2023; Reinecke et al., 2021).

For couples who find the balance between social media and marital life particularly difficult to navigate, professional support in the form of counseling or therapy can be an effective intervention. Lebow and Snyder (2022) note that therapy provides a neutral and structured environment in which partners can voice concerns, develop shared strategies and work through conflicts related to digital behavior. Therapists can help couples establish realistic expectations about digital engagement and build proactive approaches to managing the challenges that arise (Treter et al., 2021). For married graduate students, who face a particularly demanding combination of academic, relational and financial pressures, this kind of targeted professional support can be especially valuable (Naslund et al., 2020). It is worth noting, however, that access to therapeutic support may not be equally available to all students, and cultural attitudes toward seeking professional help may vary, particularly in a Kenyan context where mental health services remain underutilized (Lotringen et al., 2023).

Despite the existence of strategies for managing social media use in marriage, there is limited research that examines how couples in specific cultural or demographic contexts put these strategies into practice. Prior studies have explored general approaches to managing relationship difficulties (Maftei et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023), but few have focused on the distinct challenges faced by married graduate students, who must balance academic life with maintaining a healthy marriage. The literature also lacks attention to culturally situated strategies, particularly those relevant to Kenyan couples, whose relational norms and access to support resources may differ significantly from those described in Western-oriented research (Hanifah et al., 2022; Powell-Disola, 2021). This study therefore sought to explore not just

whether couples employ strategies for healthy digital engagement, but how they adapt those strategies to their specific cultural and academic context. In doing so, it aimed to offer a more grounded and applicable set of insights for supporting married graduate students in managing social media use.

Relationship between Social Media Usage and Marital Satisfaction

Establishing the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction requires moving beyond a simple observation of patterns to examine how one variable may influence the other. Peerzade and Shaikh (2022) emphasize that this relationship is shaped by the intensity and purpose of online engagement, as well as how that engagement aligns with the expectations held by each partner. Occasional or intentional use may support relaxation and connection, while excessive or secretive use is more likely to create emotional distance and conflict. For married graduate students, this relationship may be further complicated by the fact that social media is often simultaneously an academic tool and a personal medium, making it difficult to clearly separate its relational effects from its functional role in their studies (Jabali et al., 2024). Understanding this complexity is essential if the findings are to contribute meaningfully to both theory and practice.

The academic environment in which married graduate students operate makes the intersection of social media and marital satisfaction particularly significant. Digital engagement is pervasive in university settings, embedded in course delivery, peer networking and student life more broadly (Jabali et al., 2024). The findings of Henaku et al. (2024) note that married graduate students must contend with both the academic demands of their programs and the relational demands of marriage, often with social media playing a role in both. The ways in which social media usage influences emotional availability, time management and stress levels within the

marriage are therefore important areas of inquiry (Zhou et al., 2023). Examining how the quantity and nature of social media use correspond with marital satisfaction in this specific context may reveal behavioral patterns that have practical implications for student wellbeing services and relationship support programs.

Identifying the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction also serves a broader theoretical purpose by connecting digital behaviors to the dynamics of intimate partnerships. Zhou et al. (2023) note that when correlational findings are interpreted within a contextual framework, they yield a richer understanding than when they are considered in isolation. For example, discovering whether higher levels of social media use are associated with lower marital satisfaction, or whether certain types of use are more damaging than others, could have meaningful implications for counseling professionals, educators and university wellness programs (Kovan, 2023). According to Konyar and Ersanli (2022), that this kind of evidence-based understanding is particularly important for developing targeted support strategies. This study therefore aimed to contribute to that evidence base, with specific attention to the experiences of married graduate students in Kenya.

Research on the relationship between social media and marital satisfaction among student populations remains limited, despite growing interest in the area. Dag-um et al. (2024) point out that married graduate students experience a distinctive combination of stressors related to academic pressure, relational responsibilities and often financial strain, all of which may shape how social media is experienced within the marriage. Whether frequent engagement with social media enhances or disrupts key relational processes such as emotional availability, presence and mutual responsiveness remains an open question (Morris, 2020). By grounding the discussion

in the lived experiences of a specific and underrepresented population, this study aimed to add context-specific nuance to the existing literature and to contribute insights that are directly relevant to the social realities of married graduate students today (Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in two theories: Attachment Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory. Attachment Theory, originally developed by John Bowlby and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, examines how early relational experiences shape the ways in which individuals form and maintain emotional bonds in adulthood (Kochendorfer & LaBuda, 2024). In the context of this study, it helps to explain key dimensions of marital satisfaction, including trust, communication and intimacy. Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, approaches media use as an active and purposeful behavior, driven by individuals' desire to meet specific psychological or social needs (Bhatiasevi, 2024). Together, these theories offer a complementary framework: Attachment Theory illuminates the relational dynamics that social media behaviors affect, while UGT explains the motivations that drive those behaviors in the first place (Yan, 2024).

Attachment Theory

A central concept of Attachment Theory is the idea that individuals develop distinct attachment styles, namely secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized, based on their early interactions with caregivers (Walker et al., 2021). These attachment styles continue to influence how people approach intimacy, trust and communication in their adult relationships, including marriage (Sharma & Kaushik, 2024). In a marital context, attachment patterns shape how partners respond to each other's needs, how they manage conflict and how they maintain closeness over time (Lu, 2024).

Importantly for this study, research suggests that attachment styles also influence how individuals use social media within their relationships, with some seeking digital closeness to fulfill emotional needs and others using it more sparingly to protect relational boundaries (Eichenberg et al., 2024). This connection between attachment style and digital behavior makes Attachment Theory a valuable lens for interpreting the study's findings (Thompson et al., 2021).

Individuals with a secure attachment style tend to use social media in ways that reflect and reinforce the trust and openness already present in their relationships (Yan, 2024). They are likely to view social media as an extension of their communication with their spouse, using it to share experiences, express support and maintain a sense of connection. According to Arikewuyo et al. (2020), their balanced approach reduces the risk of conflict arising from online behavior, as they bring the same relational skills they exercise offline into their digital interactions. While securely attached individuals are not entirely immune to social media-related tensions, their strong communication foundation equips them to address these constructively (Sharma & Kaushik, 2024). For the purposes of this study, secure attachment provides a useful comparative baseline against which the social media behaviors and marital experiences of less securely attached individuals can be understood.

Anxious attachment, characterized by a strong need for reassurance and a fear of rejection, creates a very different pattern of social media engagement. Individuals with this style may use social media excessively as a means of monitoring their spouse's activity, seeking validation, or gauging the health of the relationship through online interactions (Eichenberg et al., 2024; Sullivan, 2021). While these behaviors reflect a genuine desire for closeness, they can be experienced by the other partner as intrusive or distrustful, creating relational tension (Hatamleh et al., 2023). Research

by Steele (2024) notes that the heightened sensitivity typical of anxious attachment means that delayed messages or online interactions with others can easily be misread as signs of neglect or infidelity, triggering disproportionate conflict. Over time, these patterns can create a cycle of insecurity that erodes both trust and communication, potentially requiring professional intervention to address (Evraire et al., 2022; Kural & Kovacs, 2021).

Avoidant attachment is associated with a preference for emotional independence and a tendency to keep online and offline lives separate. Individuals with this style are less likely to use social media for intimate communication with their spouse, and their minimal engagement in couple-centered digital activities can leave their partner feeling undervalued or disconnected (Reddy & Naila, 2024; Yan, 2024). While this withdrawal from digital intimacy may reduce certain kinds of conflict, Coffey et al. (2022) caution that it can also limit emotional availability and hinder the development of deeper relational intimacy. A partner who reads the avoidant individual's lack of social media engagement as disinterest may feel increasingly neglected, gradually weakening the relational bond (Nelson, 2024). Disorganized attachment, which combines elements of both anxious and avoidant styles, presents its own set of challenges, including unpredictable swings between over-engagement and withdrawal on social media that can destabilize trust and communication within the marriage (Reddy & Naila, 2024; Shorter et al., 2022).

Despite its utility, Attachment Theory is not without limitations in this context. One notable weakness is its heavy emphasis on early childhood experiences as the primary determinants of adult relational behavior, which may underestimate the influence of later life events, social context and personal growth (Mehdiabadi, 2023). In the view of Sagone et al. (2023), this focus can overlook the fluid nature of adult

relationships, particularly in environments where external factors such as social media play a significant and ongoing role in shaping relational patterns. In the context of this study, Attachment Theory may therefore not fully capture the ways in which digital interactions dynamically reshape emotional bonds over time. For this reason, it is used in combination with UGT, which addresses the motivational and behavioral dimensions of social media use that Attachment Theory leaves underexplored.

Uses and Gratification Theory

UGT positions individuals as active consumers of media who select platforms and content based on specific needs they wish to meet, such as companionship, self-expression, information, or escape (Hajdarmataj & Paksoy, 2023; Moon et al., 2022). This is a significant departure from older media theories that viewed audiences as passive recipients, and it is particularly relevant in the context of social media, which allows users to curate their experiences in highly personalized ways (Hoang et al., 2024). For married graduate students, the gratifications sought through social media may reflect their attempts to balance academic demands, relational needs, and social pressures, all of which compete for limited time and emotional energy. Understanding what drives their social media use is therefore as important as understanding how much time they spend on it, since the motivations behind usage shape its likely impact on the marriage. This theory provides the conceptual tools to move beyond patterns of usage and into the underlying needs that those patterns serve.

Within a marital context, the gratifications each partner seeks from social media may differ considerably and may not always align with the other's relational expectations. One spouse may use social media primarily for academic networking, while the other turns to it for emotional support or entertainment, and these different forms of engagement can create relational friction if they disrupt mutual attention or

emotional availability (Olpin et al., 2023). When the gratifications sought online are those that could be provided within the relationship itself, such as emotional connection or validation, it may signal unmet needs within the marriage (Smith et al., 2021). As stated by Bhatiasevi (2024), UGT is valuable precisely because it draws attention to these motivational dynamics, allowing researchers to examine not just what people do on social media but why, and what that reveals about their relational experiences. This perspective is central to the analytical approach taken in this study.

The theory also encourages attention to how individuals engage with social media, not only how much time they spend on it. Falgoust et al. (2022) distinguish between active engagement, such as posting, messaging, and commenting, and passive consumption, such as scrolling through a feed, suggesting that these different modes of engagement may have different relational effects. Excessive passive consumption, in particular, has been linked to reduced quality time with a partner and to feelings of neglect or emotional distance (Ahmed, 2023). According to Bhatiasevi (2024), UGT's attention to user motivation adds important nuance here, as it recognizes that not all social media use is equally harmful or beneficial. Rather, the relational impact depends largely on the underlying needs being met and whether those needs could be better addressed within the marriage itself.

Like Attachment Theory, UGT has limitations that are important to acknowledge. Its primary focus on individual choice and motivation can obscure the relational and social forces that shape how partners use social media, particularly within the context of marriage (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022). A partner who turns to social media for emotional relief may not be consciously aware of how this behavior affects their spouse's sense of closeness, and the theory does not inherently account for power dynamics, emotional histories, or the vulnerabilities that characterize

intimate relationships (Bhatiasevi, 2024). By using UGT alongside Attachment Theory, this study aimed to compensate for these limitations, drawing on the strengths of each to construct a more complete picture of how social media use and marital satisfaction interact among married graduate students.

Conceptual Framework

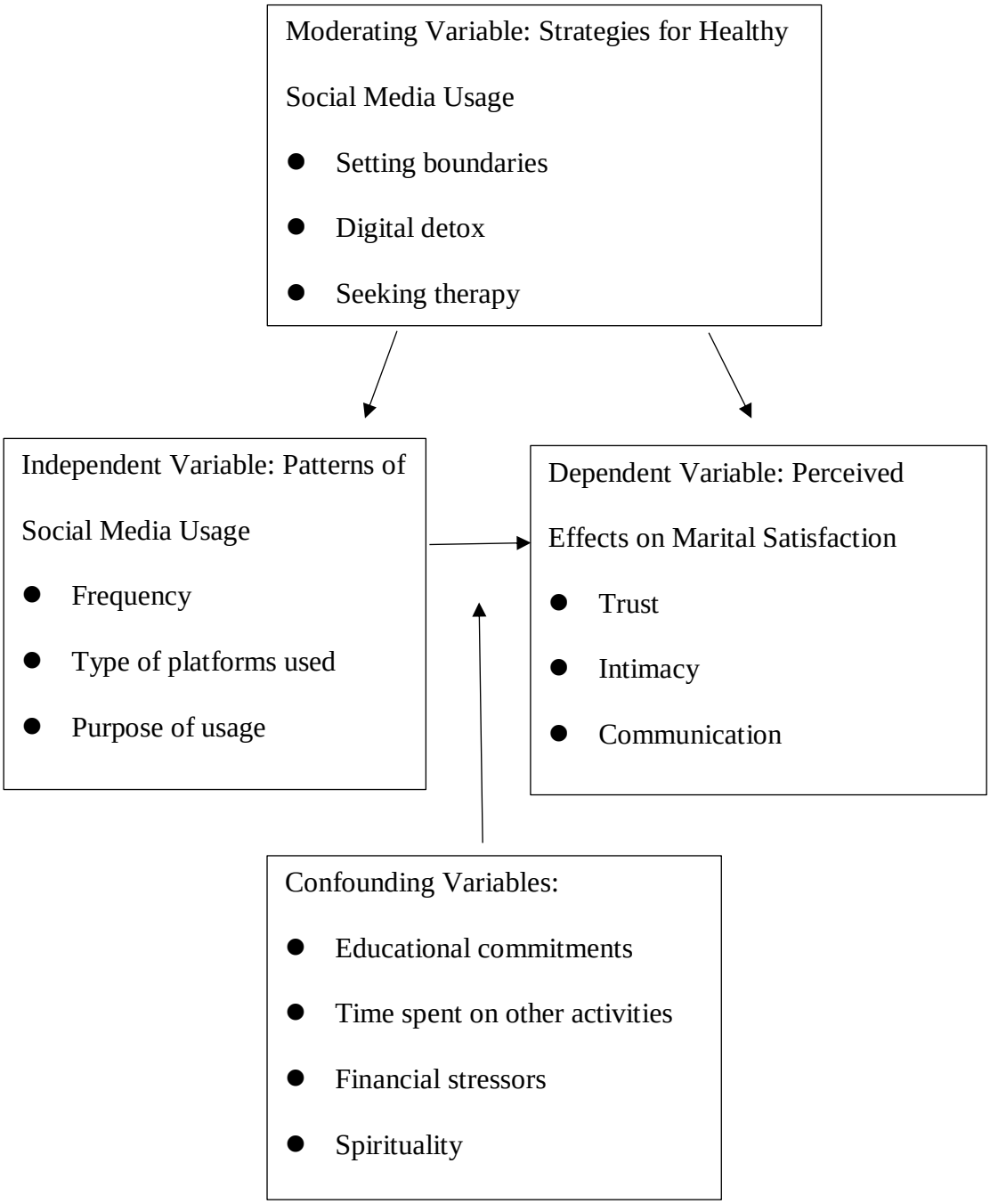
The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction while accounting for confounding variables that could influence the outcomes. Social media usage represents the primary focus of this study, capturing various patterns and types of engagement with digital platforms. Marital satisfaction is measured in terms of trust, intimacy and communication in the marital relationship. The framework also considers how different forms of social media usage, such as frequency and purpose, may impact these dimensions of marital satisfaction. By examining these relationships, the study aimed to uncover how digital behaviors can either support or challenge key aspects of marital life, depending on the nature and intensity of social media engagement.

Confounding variables such as educational commitments, financial stress, time spent on other responsibilities and spirituality are also included in the framework. These factors were not the primary focus of the study, yet they may independently influence marital satisfaction or interact with social media usage in meaningful ways. For instance, high levels of academic pressure or financial strain may contribute to marital tension regardless of online behavior. Similarly, spirituality could shape how couples interpret or respond to conflicts, emotional needs or digital boundaries. Including these variables in the analysis helps minimize potential bias and supports a more accurate interpretation of the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction. This conceptual framework was developed by the researcher

based on the reviewed literature and the guiding theories, which included Attachment Theory and UGT.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Synthesis of Research Gaps

Despite existing research on the influence of social media use on marital satisfaction, significant gaps remain in understanding how demographic factors, such as age and gender, influence this relationship, particularly among married graduate students. Much of the literature is outdated, reflecting trends that may no longer capture current digital behaviors. There is also a lack of research on the specific patterns of social media usage among married graduate students, including how these behaviors influence communication, trust and intimacy within the marriage. Additionally, while some studies address strategies for managing digital engagement in relationships, few focus on the distinct pressures faced by married graduate students balancing academic and marital life. Furthermore, strategies for promoting healthy social media usage, especially in Kenya, remain underexplored. This study aimed to address these gaps by offering updated, context-specific insights into how social media usage impacts marital satisfaction and how couples navigate these challenges in the digital age.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has reviewed literature on the patterns of social media usage, its perceived effects on marital satisfaction, literature-based strategies for promoting healthy usage and the overall relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students. The Attachment Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory were used to frame the study. The conceptual framework outlined the study variables, including confounding factors and research gaps are identified. The next chapter presents the research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology and begins by presenting the research paradigm, research design, followed by a discussion of the population and sampling techniques used to select participants. The data collection instruments are then described, alongside the processes of data collection, pre-testing, instrument validity and reliability, data analysis, ethical considerations and chapter summary.

Research Paradigm

This study adopted the mixed-methods approach. The mixed-methods approach is underpinned by the philosophical stance of pragmatism, which emphasizes the practical application of research findings and allows for the use of both quantitative and qualitative data to address the research problem (Foster, 2024). Pragmatism is grounded in the idea that research should focus on solutions that work in practice, which is why this study combines numerical data with rich, qualitative insights (Kelly & Cordeiro, 2020). This paradigm supports the use of diverse methods to explore the complex, real-world implications of social media usage on marital satisfaction (Ormerod, 2023). By combining both approaches, the study aimed to generate more comprehensive findings that are not only statistically significant but also meaningful in terms of the lived experiences of married graduate students. Pragmatism recognizes that each research method brings distinct strengths to the investigation (Foster, 2024), providing a fuller understanding of how social media impacts relationships in academic settings.

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, specifically a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected

simultaneously and then merged during analysis, to better understand the research problem (Saraswati & Devi, 2023). The quantitative component utilized a correlational design within a descriptive cross-sectional survey, aiming to examine the influence of social media usage (independent variable) on marital satisfaction (dependent variable) among married graduate students at PAC University. The qualitative component used a qualitative descriptive design, an approach that prioritizes a straightforward, detailed account of participants' experiences and perceptions without imposing a theoretical framework with semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences and perceptions regarding social media and their marriages (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). Collecting both types of data at the same time made it possible to compare the results and see how they support each other. The interviews also explored additional factors such as academic responsibilities, financial pressures, time spent on other activities and spirituality, helping to give more context to the survey results. Combining the two methods strengthened the findings through triangulation, allowing the study to capture both measurable patterns and personal stories (Valencia, 2022).

Target Population

The target population for this study consisted of married graduate students enrolled at PAC University. There were 674 graduate students enrolled across various programs, of whom 505 were married. All married students who met the inclusion criteria of being currently enrolled in a graduate program at PAC University were eligible to participate. Both male and female participants were included to provide diverse insights into how social media affects marital satisfaction, with no age limit applied, ensuring a broad range of experiences and perspectives were captured. Table 1 shows the distribution of students by school.

Table 1

Distribution of Students by School

Name of School	Number of Students Enrolled	Number of Married Students
School of Humanities and Social Sciences	116	93
School of Theology	71	45
School of Leadership Business and Technology	487	367
Total	674	505

Source: Office of the Registrar, PAC University, 2025

Sample Size

Sample size refers to the number of participants selected from the population to represent that population in the study (Ahmed, 2024). A properly determined sample size ensures that the study's results are representative of the larger population (Garg et al., 2024). For this study, the sample size consisted of 218 married graduate students, drawn from the total population of 505 married graduate students at PAC University. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for sample size estimation, which is widely recognized for determining the appropriate sample size for a finite population. The formula was suitable because it simplifies the process of deriving a sample size while maintaining statistical rigor and ensuring reliability in the findings. The formula ensured a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, which are standard parameters for social science research.

The formula for determining the sample size was as follows:

$$S = \frac{(X^2 * N * P * (1 - P)}{(d^2 * (N - 1) + X^2 * P * (1 - P)}$$

Where:

S = Required sample size

X^2 = Chi-square value at 95% confidence level

N = Population size

P = Population proportion = 0.5 (assumed maximum variability)

d = Margin of error = 0.05

$$S = \frac{3.841 * 505 * 0.5 * (1 - 0.5)}{0.052 * (505 - 1) + 3.841 * 0.5 * (1 - 0.5)}$$

$$S = \frac{484.92625}{2.22025}$$

S = 218

Sampling Method

This study employed a convenience sampling technique to recruit participants for the quantitative component. Convenience sampling technique is commonly used in social sciences when the target population is accessible and the aim is to obtain responses efficiently (Ahmed, 2024). It is used in exploratory or descriptive studies where the focus is on gathering data from readily available participants who meet the inclusion criteria (Golzar et al., 2022). Following this approach, the researcher circulated the questionnaire link through WhatsApp groups, inviting married students who met the inclusion criteria to participate. This strategy enabled efficient access to participants within the available population. The quantitative sample consisted of 218 married graduate students drawn from the population of 505 married graduate

students at PAC University. For the qualitative component, maximum variation purposive sampling was used to identify participants for the semi-structured interviews. This specific form of purposive sampling is recommended when the researcher seeks information-rich cases that can offer deeper insights into the study variables (Tajik et al., 2024). From the 218 questionnaire respondents, 9 participants were purposively selected based on their expressed willingness. To enhance diversity, 3 respondents were chosen from each of the three schools represented in the study: the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, the School of Theology, and the School of Leadership, Business and Technology.

Types of Data

The study collected primary data through self-reported structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Primary data refers to information collected directly from participants for the specific purpose of a study (Cheong et al., 2023). Quantitative data was gathered using structured questionnaires designed to measure participants' social media usage patterns and marital satisfaction. Structured questionnaires contain pre-designed and standardized questions that allow participants to respond based on their personal experiences and perceptions (Caduff & Ranganathan, 2023). In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants who expressed willingness to provide detailed insights. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research because they allow for guided discussion while giving participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences (Mashuri et al., 2022). A question in the questionnaire asked respondents if they were willing to participate in an interview and those who indicated interest were included in the qualitative phase. The interviews explored participants’ experiences with social media and its impact on

their marriages, focusing on potential stressors, responses to these challenges and the broader effects on marital satisfaction.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

This study used two primary instruments for data collection: the Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) to measure social media usage (Appendix II, Section B), and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) to measure marital satisfaction (Appendix II, Section C). The SONTUS was developed by Olufadi (2015) to assess social media usage based on time and behavioural patterns. It includes dimensions such as time spent on social networking during different times of the day, frequency of use, and engagement level. Each item is rated on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicates that social media was never used in that situation during the past week, and 10 indicates that social media was used more than three times during the past week, spending more than 30 minutes each time. A global SONTUS score is computed by summing responses across all 29 items, yielding a possible range of 29 to 290. The SONTUS has been validated and applied in diverse contexts., for example, Sathar et al. (2020) used the SONTUS to examine social media usage among medical students in India, demonstrating its relevance across different populations.

SONTUS has shown strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.80, indicating its reliability in measuring social media usage patterns (Olufadi, 2015). Reliability refers to the consistency of an instrument's results when applied repeatedly under similar conditions (Andersson et al., 2024). Sürücü and Maslakçı (2020), indicate that validity refers to the extent to which an instrument accurately measures the concept it is intended to measure. In this study, validity was evaluated across four types: content, construct, criterion, and face validity. Content validity is supported by its comprehensive structure that captures different time-based

social media behaviors (Roebianto et al., 2023) while construct validity is confirmed through its theoretical grounding and consistent results in measuring the construct of social media usage (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020). Face validity is evident through its frequent use in studies examining digital behavior and online engagement, making it recognizable and credible in the field (Allen et al., 2023) while criterion validity has also been supported in studies where SONTUS scores significantly correlated with related behavioral outcomes (Moore et al., 2020).

The CSI was developed by Funk and Rogge (2007) to measure satisfaction within romantic relationships. It assesses components such as intimacy, communication, emotional connection and overall relationship happiness. The tool is structured to capture key aspects of romantic dynamics, offering insight into participants' relational experiences. Items are rated using varying response scales depending on the item, including 6-point and 7-point response options, where higher scores consistently reflect greater satisfaction or a more positive relationship characteristic. Frenn et al. (2022) used the CSI in a study among Lebanese adults to examine couple satisfaction and its relationship with attachment styles and emotional processing. This demonstrates the instrument's reliability and cultural adaptability, making it suitable for the current study context.

The CSI has shown exceptional reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients consistently reported above 0.90, indicating high internal consistency (Yekta et al., 2017). These psychometric strengths make it a robust tool for exploring how social media use may relate to marital satisfaction in this study. In terms of validity, the CSI has demonstrated excellent performance across multiple types. Content and face validity are confirmed through its widespread adoption in marital studies and its intuitive alignment with the domain of relationship quality (Allen et al., 2023).

Construct validity has been affirmed in numerous studies, including those that relate CSI scores to theoretical models of intimacy and communication (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020). Criterion validity is supported by findings that show strong correlations between CSI scores and other established measures of relationship satisfaction (Quinn-Nilas, 2022).

In addition to the questionnaires, qualitative data was collected through interview guides (Appendix III). The interview questions were developed based on the study's research objectives and variables, and explored how factors such as educational commitments, time spent on other activities, financial stressors, spirituality, and other contextual variables influence marital satisfaction. These interviews were intended to provide deeper insights into participants' personal experiences with social media and its perceived impact on their relationships. The semi-structured format enabled participants to articulate their views in their own words, generating rich, narrative data to complement the quantitative findings. This qualitative component helped to contextualize and deepen the understanding of patterns identified through the questionnaires.

Before data collection begun, ethical approval was sought from PAC University's Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) and National Commission for Science, Technology & Innovation (NACOSTI) to ensure the study complied with ethical standards. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any point, and the confidentiality of their responses. To ensure transparency, the researcher provided a clear explanation of the study's objectives and addressed any concerns participants may have had. The researcher remained available throughout the data collection process to assist participants, clarify any doubts, and ensure their understanding of the

procedures. This approach fostered a supportive and ethical research environment and enabled participants to feel comfortable and confident in their involvement. These measures aimed to ensure that ethical principles were adhered to and that participants' rights were respected at all stages of the research.

The data collection process proceeded in several stages, beginning with participant recruitment and ending with the secure handling of data. Convenience sampling was employed and the questionnaire link was circulated through WhatsApp groups along with a brief overview of the study for eligible participants. Married students who met the inclusion criteria and expressed interest were invited to complete the questionnaire. All procedures were designed to uphold ethical standards, ensuring that participants' rights and confidentiality were respected throughout the study. These measures helped to maintain the integrity of the research while facilitating efficient data collection.

To ensure participants fully understood the purpose of the questionnaire, both the researcher and a research assistant were available to provide assistance. The research assistant was selected based on prior experience in social science research and was oriented on the study's ethical requirements, including confidentiality and voluntary participation, before being required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Participants were informed that they could seek help at any point if they encountered difficulties or uncertainties while completing the questionnaire. Assistance was provided through various means, including email, phone calls, or text messages, to accommodate participants' needs and schedules. The research assistant also helped participants navigate any technical challenges that arose while filling out the questionnaire. This proactive support aimed to enhance the reliability and accuracy of

the data collected while ensuring participants felt supported and comfortable in their participation.

After the questionnaire phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 9 participants who had expressed willingness to be interviewed, based on a question included in the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet and lasted approximately 45 to 55 minutes each. Each session was audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. The researcher guided participants through the interview questions and ensured they were comfortable throughout the process.

Instrument Pre-testing

Pre-testing of the research instruments was conducted at Daystar University, which was selected due to its similarities with PAC University. Both are Christian institutions, a factor that was particularly relevant given that spirituality was one of the variables explored in the study. The instruments were administered to 19 married graduate students, a figure the researcher considered appropriate for capturing meaningful feedback while maintaining feasibility. This initial testing phase confirmed that the questionnaire items were clear and comprehensible, with no items requiring substantive revision, which contributed to the overall quality and preparedness of the data collection process.

Data Analysis

This study involved both quantitative and qualitative approaches. After the data collection through the survey instruments, the quantitative data was cleaned, coded and entered into SPSS version 30. This process converted the raw data into an organized format for analysis, allowing for systematic examination of the social media usage and marital satisfaction. Descriptive statistics were employed to

summarize and interpret the data, providing a clear picture of the respondents' social media usage patterns and marital satisfaction. Data visualization was done using tables and pie charts to facilitate interpretation and enhance clarity. Responses from SONTUS and CSI were scored according to the respective instrument guidelines (Appendix II), with reverse-scored items recoded where necessary.

Before conducting the inferential analysis, the data was checked to ensure that the chosen statistical test was appropriate. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction. This analysis produced a correlation value that was used to address the study objective related to the relationship between the social media usage and marital satisfaction. The procedure helped determine whether social media usage and marital satisfaction were related among the participants in the study. Statistical significance was assessed using standard criteria to aid in the interpretation of the results. This approach provided a clearer understanding of the relative impact of social media usage compared to other factors influencing marital relationships (Mizumoto, 2022).

Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Audio recordings from the Google Meet interview sessions were transcribed verbatim and reviewed to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data prior to coding. Initial codes were generated from the transcripts and subsequently organized into broader themes that addressed the study objectives by exploring participants' patterns of social media usage, their perceptions of the effects of social media on marital satisfaction, and strategies for promoting healthy social media use among married graduate students. The identified themes were reviewed, defined and presented as part of the qualitative findings, providing contextual insights that complemented the quantitative analysis of the relationship between social media

usage and marital satisfaction. By triangulating both data types, the study provided a rich and well-rounded analysis of the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was first sought from PAC University's Institutional Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (ISERC) to ensure adherence to institutional guidelines. Following this, authorization was obtained from the Office of the Registrar to access the married graduate students' population (Appendix IV). The researcher also applied for a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), in compliance with Kenyan research regulations (Appendix V). Once both approvals were granted, the researcher coordinated with relevant university authorities to facilitate the data collection process. This ensured the study was ethically sound and aligned with institutional and national policies.

All potential participants received a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures and their role in it. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without facing any consequences. The consent form outlined these details and highlighted the participants' rights and protections. Any potential risks were minimal and might have included emotional discomfort when reflecting on personal experiences in their marriage. In such cases, participants had the option to pause or withdraw from the study and referrals to professional support services were made available if needed.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study. The questionnaire did not require participants to provide their names. The only identifying information collected was the email addresses of those who volunteered for interviews, which they provided willingly and could have made anonymous had

they chosen to do so. While the nature of qualitative interviews may limit full anonymity, the presentation of findings was carefully managed to ensure no individual participant could be identified, with identifying information excluded or coded during analysis.

Data was stored in encrypted and password-protected digital files, with access restricted solely to the researcher. Any physical copies of consent forms were locked in secure storage. The raw data was used exclusively for academic purposes related to this study and was not shared with unauthorized individuals or institutions. Plagiarism was avoided by properly citing all referenced works and maintaining academic integrity in reporting findings. These measures ensured that the research adhered to both ethical and scholarly standards.

After data collection, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask questions or seek clarification. The debriefing also informed them about how their data would be used and how the study would contribute to knowledge on social media and marital satisfaction. This transparency was intended to build trust and show appreciation for their contribution. Participants would also receive a summary of the study's findings if they expressed interest. By integrating these practices, the study aimed to uphold participants' dignity, safety and rights throughout the research process.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology employed in this study, including a detailed description of the research paradigm, research design, target population, sample size and sampling method. It also addressed the types of data, data collection methods and procedures, as well as a comprehensive overview of the research instruments, including their validity and reliability. Additionally, the chapter

has covered instrument pre-testing, the data analysis plan and ethical considerations. The next chapter presents the study's findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study on the influence of social media usage on marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University, Nairobi, Kenya. The findings are based on responses from 185 participants who completed the questionnaire, 9 of whom also took part in follow-up semi-structured interviews. The data is analyzed according to the study's specific objectives: to examine the patterns of social media usage, to determine the perceived effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction, to identify literature-based strategies for promoting healthy social media usage, and, to establish the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University, Nairobi, Kenya. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses on social media usage and marital satisfaction. Correlation coefficients and regression analyses were employed to explore the influence between variables. Qualitative data from interviews was analyzed thematically to identify key insights and support the quantitative findings. The integration of both data types provided a well-rounded understanding of the research questions.

Response Rate and Demographic Analysis

The questionnaire link was circulated using Google Forms. A total of 185 fully completed responses were received and included in the analysis, representing a response rate of approximately 84.9% based on the targeted sample of 218 participants. This response rate is considered acceptable for survey-based research of this kind, as response rates of around 70% or higher are generally regarded as good in social science research. This section presents the demographic characteristics of the

185 participants, including age, gender, level of education, school of enrollment, duration of marriage, employment status, and number of children.

Age

The distribution of the age of the respondents is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Age of Respondents

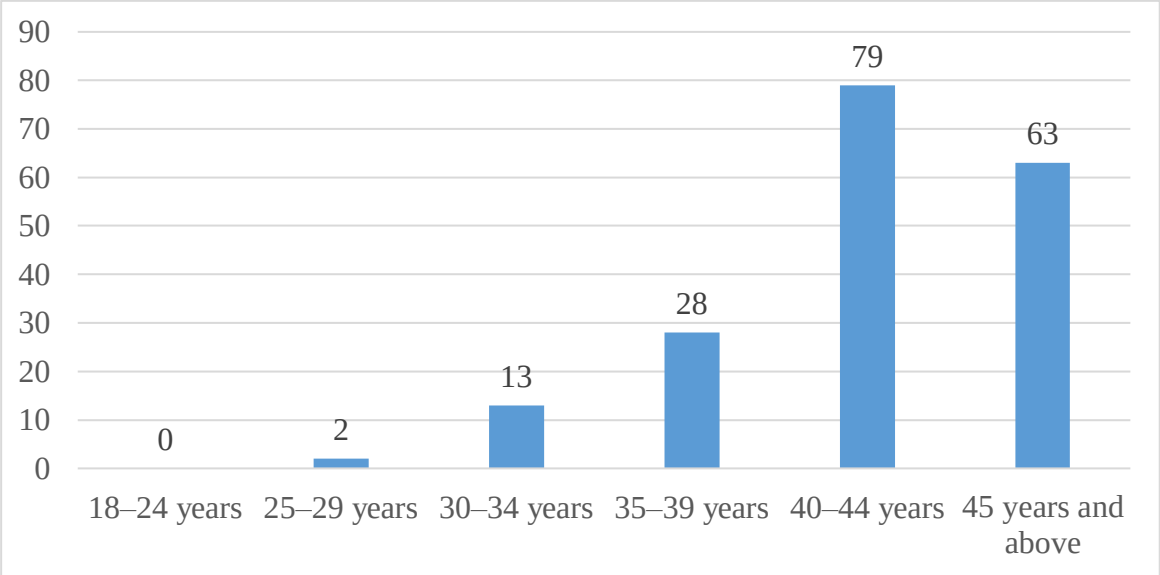


Figure 2 shows that most respondents were aged between 40 and 44 years (n = 79, 42.7%), followed by those aged 45 years and above (n = 63, 34.1%) and those aged 35 to 39 years (n = 28, 15.1%). A smaller proportion of respondents were aged 30 to 34 years (n = 13, 7.0%) and 25 to 29 years (n = 2, 1.1%), while no respondents fell within the 18 to 24 years category. These results suggest that the majority of participants were in mid-adulthood, which may have shaped both their patterns of social media use and their perspectives on marital satisfaction.

Gender

The distribution of respondents by gender is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Gender of Respondents

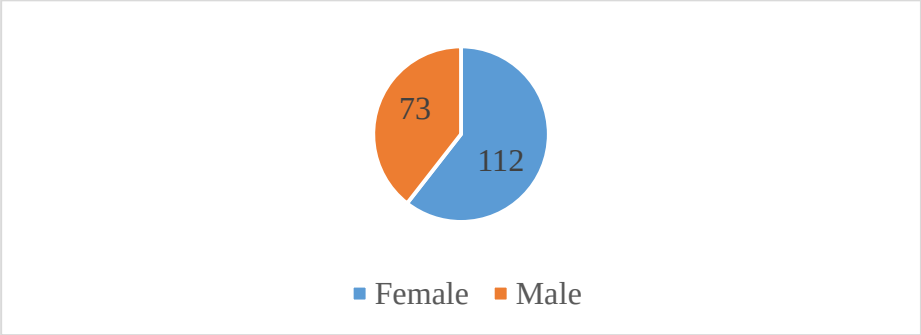


Figure 3 shows that the majority of respondents were female (n = 112, 60.5%), while male respondents accounted for 39.5% (n = 73) of the total. This indicates a higher participation rate among women in the study, which may reflect either the gender distribution of married graduate students at PAC University or a greater willingness among women to participate in research on marital satisfaction.

Distribution of Respondents by Level of Education

The distribution of respondents by level of education is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Level of Education of Respondents

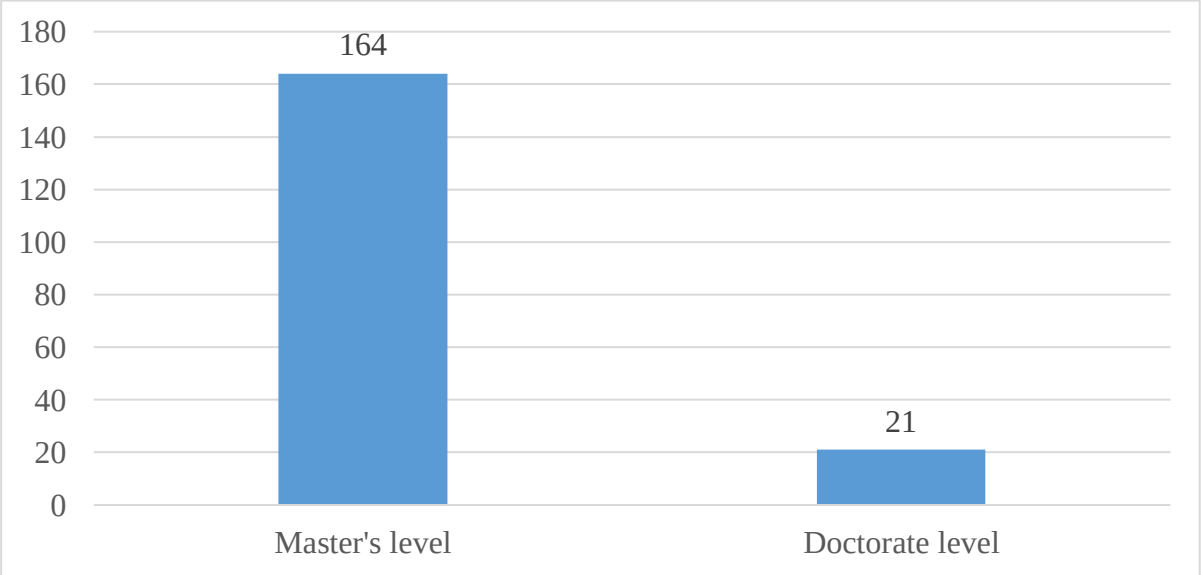


Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents were enrolled in master's-level programs (n = 164, 88.6%), while doctoral-level students made up 11.4% (n = 21) of the sample. This indicates that most married graduate students who participated in the study were pursuing master's degrees, which may reflect greater availability among master's students to participate in the research.

Distribution of Respondents by School Enrollment

The distribution of respondents by school enrollment is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5

School of Enrollment of Respondents

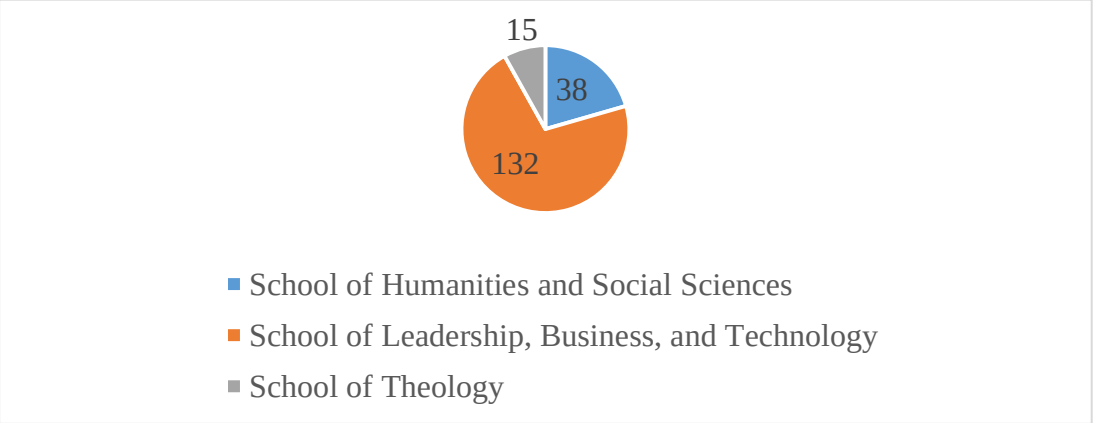


Figure 5 shows that the majority of respondents were enrolled in the School of Leadership, Business, and Technology (n = 132, 71.4%), followed by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (n = 38, 20.5%) and the School of Theology (n = 15, 8.1%). This suggests that students pursuing programs in Leadership, Business, and Technology make up the largest proportion of the married graduate student population at PAC University who participated in the study. These differences may also reflect variations in program size or engagement across schools.

Distribution of Respondents by Duration of Marriage

The distribution of respondents by length of marriage is presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Duration of Marriage of Respondents

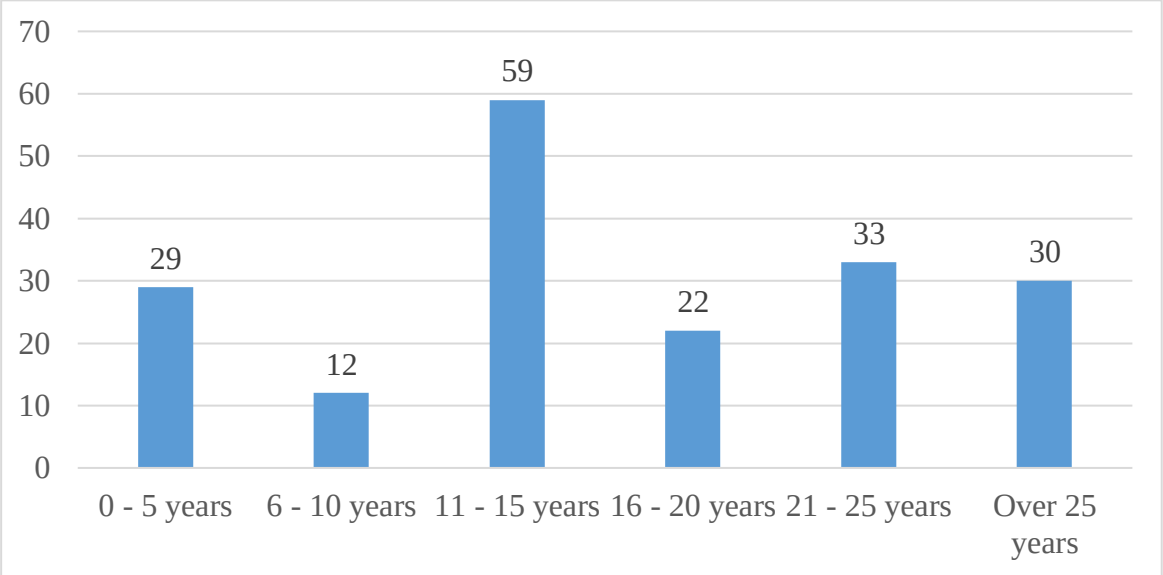


Figure 6 shows that the highest proportion of respondents had been married for 11 to 15 years (n = 59, 31.9%), followed by those married for 21 to 25 years (n = 33, 17.8%) and those married for over 25 years (n = 30, 16.2%). Respondents married for 0 to 5 years accounted for 15.7% (n = 29), while those married for 16 to 20 years and 6 to 10 years represented 11.9% (n = 22) and 6.5% (n = 12), respectively. These findings indicate that a majority of participants were in long-term marriages, with more than 77% having been married for over a decade, which may influence how they navigate social media use within their relationships.

Distribution of Respondents by Employment Status

The distribution of respondents by employment status is presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Employment Status of Respondents

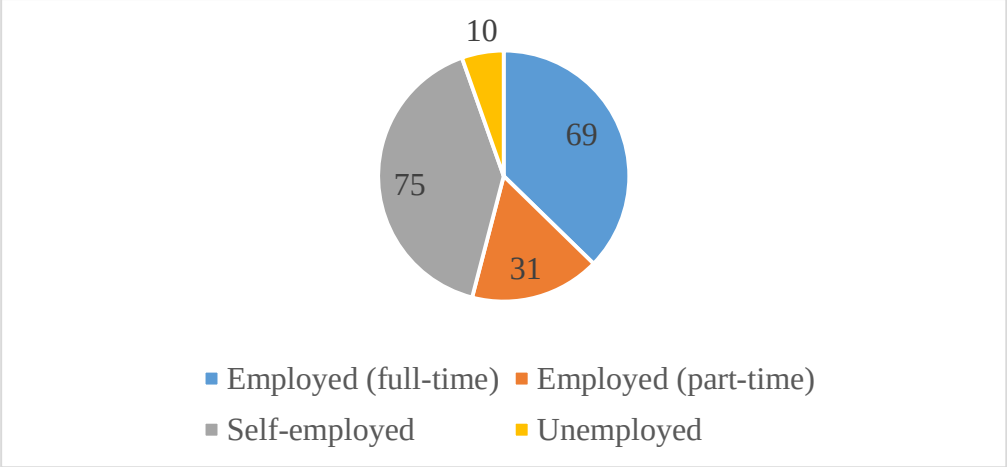


Figure 7 shows that the majority of respondents were self-employed (n = 75, 40.5%), followed by those employed full-time (n = 69, 37.3%). A smaller proportion were employed part-time (n = 31, 16.8%), while the fewest were unemployed (n = 10, 5.4%). These findings suggest that most participants were engaged in some form of employment, with a notable lean toward self-employment among married graduate students at PAC University. This may reflect the flexibility self-employment offers in balancing academic, marital, and family responsibilities.

Distribution of Respondents by Number of Children

The distribution of respondents by number of children is presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Number of Children among Respondents

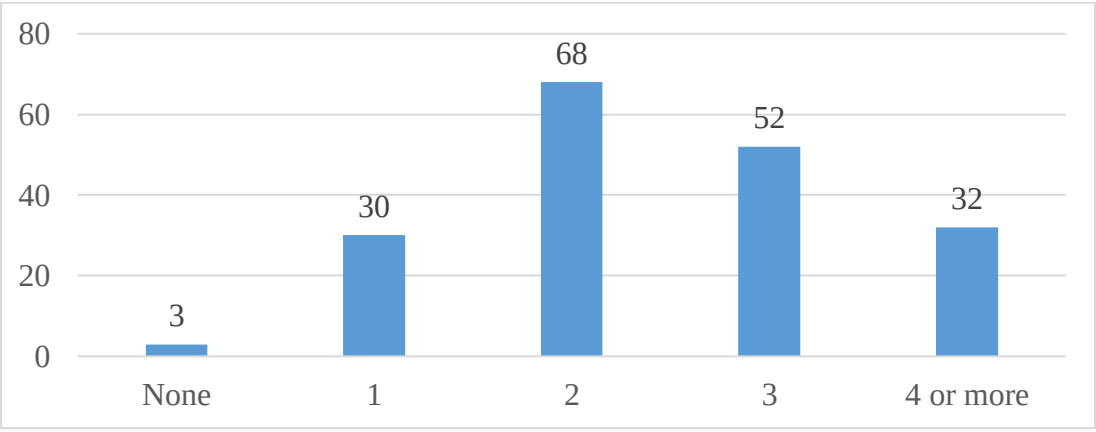


Figure 8 shows that the highest number of respondents had two children (n = 68, 36.8%), followed by those with three children (n = 52, 28.1%). Additionally, 17.3% (n = 32) reported having four or more children, while 16.2% (n = 30) had one child. Only 1.6% (n = 3) of respondents reported having no children. These results indicate that most married graduate students at PAC University had between two and three children, which may shape how they manage their time, responsibilities, and interactions on social media platforms.

Patterns of Social Media Usage

This section addresses the first objective of the study, which was to examine patterns of social media usage among married graduate students. Participants responded to all 29 items of SONTUS, rating how frequently they used social media in each of the different situations on a scale of 1 to 10, where higher scores indicated more frequent use. To capture overall usage, a global SONTUS score was computed for each participant by summing responses across all 29 items, producing a possible range of 29 to 290. The mean scores for each of the items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean Scores for SONTUS Items

Situation	**M**
When you are at a seminar/workshop or training program.	4.92
When you are at home sitting idly.	7.28
When you need to reduce your mental stress.	7.15
When you go to the stadium to watch football, basketball, etc.	2.32
When you are doing school- or job-related assignments at home.	4.56

When you are waiting for someone (e.g., friends), either at their house or at a pre-arranged place.	5.99
When you are listening to music, the radio, or religious lectures.	3.90
When you have gone through a lot of stress.	5.97
When you are in a meeting.	3.19
When you are in class receiving a lecture.	2.45
When you need to maintain contact with existing friends.	7.58
When you are in bed about to sleep.	5.56
When you are reading in the library for academic purposes (e.g., recommended text for class).	3.72
When you are at a place to repair your car, house appliances, etc.	6.92
When you need to reduce your emotional stress.	6.57
When you want to reduce the pressure of your daily routine.	5.26
When you are at a social gathering, such as a wedding ceremony, birthday party, or reception.	5.29
When you need to communicate with your family and friends.	6.89
When you are sitting in a religious place (e.g., church, mosque) and activities such as the sermon or prayer have not yet started.	2.50
When you need to find out more about people you met offline.	5.74
When you are in the company of friends, family, or colleagues, having fun.	3.44
When you are watching TV, news, football, films, sports, etc.	3.39

When you go to the cinema to watch a movie.	2.26
When you are a passenger in a car, bus, or train for at least two minutes.	4.69
When you need to find people you have not seen for a while.	5.93
When you are waiting for your boss in their office for at least two minutes when they have not yet attended to you.	2.66
When you are trying to forget your financial challenges.	5.24
When you are online doing school- or job-related work (e.g., a project or homework).	3.86
When you are watching academic-related video lectures or those related to your job.	3.99

Note. N = 185. Items were rated on a scale of 1 (never used social media in this situation during the past week) to 10 (used social media more than three times during the past week, spending more than 30 minutes each time). Higher mean scores indicate more frequent social media use in that situation.

As shown in Table 2, social media was used most frequently when participants needed to maintain contact with existing friends (M = 7.58), when sitting at home idly (M = 7.28), and when needing to reduce mental stress (M = 7.15). Other situations associated with relatively high usage included repairing a car or household appliance (M = 6.92), reducing emotional stress (M = 6.57), and communicating with family and friends (M = 6.89). In contrast, usage was lowest in structured or socially restrictive settings, such as going to the cinema (M = 2.26), attending class during a lecture (M = 2.45), and sitting in a religious place before a service begins (M = 2.50). This pattern suggests that participants engaged with social media primarily during

unstructured moments, periods of waiting, or times of emotional need, while limiting use during formal or communal activities that demanded their full attention.

It is worth noting that several of these situations are not mutually exclusive in practice; for example, it is entirely possible for someone to use social media while watching television or while in the company of family members, and the relatively moderate scores for these items (M = 3.39 and M = 3.44, respectively) likely reflect this kind of simultaneous, lower-intensity use rather than a complete absence of social media activity. These findings align with research by Konyar and Ersanli (2022) who noted that graduate students tend to integrate social media into less structured parts of their routines, especially for stress relief or social connection. Similarly, Saini and Mir (2023) found that emotional needs and downtime significantly drive social media use among adults. This study adds nuance by showing how emotional and relational needs, such as staying in touch with spouses or decompressing from multitasking roles, shape social media usage patterns. Generally, the findings portray a picture of purposeful and context-sensitive engagement rather than passive or aimless consumption.

Perceived Effects of Social Media Usage on Marital Satisfaction

This section presents the perceived effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction, based on responses to items from the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). The mean scores for each of the CSI items are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Mean Scores for CSI Items

Item	M

Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, in your relationship.	4.37
Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for amount of time spent together.	4.14
Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for making major decisions.	4.42
Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for demonstrations of affection.	4.09
In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	3.95
How often do you wish you had not gotten into this relationship? (reverse-scored)	4.83
I still feel a strong connection with my partner.	4.44
If I had my life to live over, I would marry the same person.	4.69
Our relationship is strong.	4.20
I sometimes wonder if there is someone else out there for me. (reverse-scored)	5.47
My relationship with my partner makes me happy.	4.43
I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner.	4.17
I cannot imagine ending my relationship with my partner.	4.86
I feel that I can confide in my partner about virtually anything.	4.53
I have had second thoughts about this relationship recently. (reverse-scored)	5.37

For me, my partner is the perfect romantic partner.	4.24
I really feel like part of a team with my partner.	3.78
I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as my partner does.	4.65
How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	4.11
How well does your partner meet your needs?	4.27
To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	3.92
In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?	4.11
How good is your relationship compared to most? (1 = worse than all others, 6 = better than all others)	4.35
Do you enjoy your partner's company?	4.36
How often do you and your partner have fun together?	3.91

Note. N = 185. Items were rated using varying response scales ranging from 1 to 6 or 1 to 7 depending on the item. In all cases, higher scores reflect greater satisfaction or a more positive relationship characteristic. Items marked as reverse-scored were recoded prior to analysis so that higher values consistently indicate greater satisfaction.

As shown in Table 3, emotional connection and commitment emerged as particular strengths among respondents. A large majority indicated that they still felt a strong connection with their partner (M = 4.44) and that they would marry the same person again if given the chance (M = 4.69). Respondents also reported high levels of trust and intimacy, reflected in strong agreement that they could confide in their partner about virtually anything (M = 4.53) and that they could not imagine ending the relationship (M = 4.86). By comparison, the item assessing teamwork, namely

feeling like part of a team with one's partner, received a notably lower mean score (M = 3.78), suggesting a possible gap in collaboration, shared responsibilities, or mutual goal-setting relative to other aspects of the relationship

Table 3 highlights that trust and emotional intimacy were relatively strong among respondents, with high agreement on feeling connected and happy in the relationship. These findings align with previous research that underscores emotional closeness and open communication as essential elements of marital satisfaction (Hatamleh et al., 2023; Reddy & Naila, 2024). Table 3 illustrates that while trust and emotional intimacy were strong, teamwork within the marriage appeared to be comparatively weaker. This supports emerging literature which argues that although social media can enhance emotional connection through ongoing digital interaction, it may simultaneously limit shared in-person experiences and collaborative dynamics (Hatamleh et al., 2023; Ruben et al., 2021). In the context of this study, these insights are particularly relevant, given the multiple roles and pressures faced by married graduate students. The findings contribute to the understanding that social media does not uniformly enhance or harm marital satisfaction, but that its impact may differ across specific relational dimensions.

Relationship Between Social Media Use and Marital Satisfaction

The distribution of scores for social media usage and marital satisfaction is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for SONTUS and CSI

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Media	185	114.00	158.00	139.31	7.03

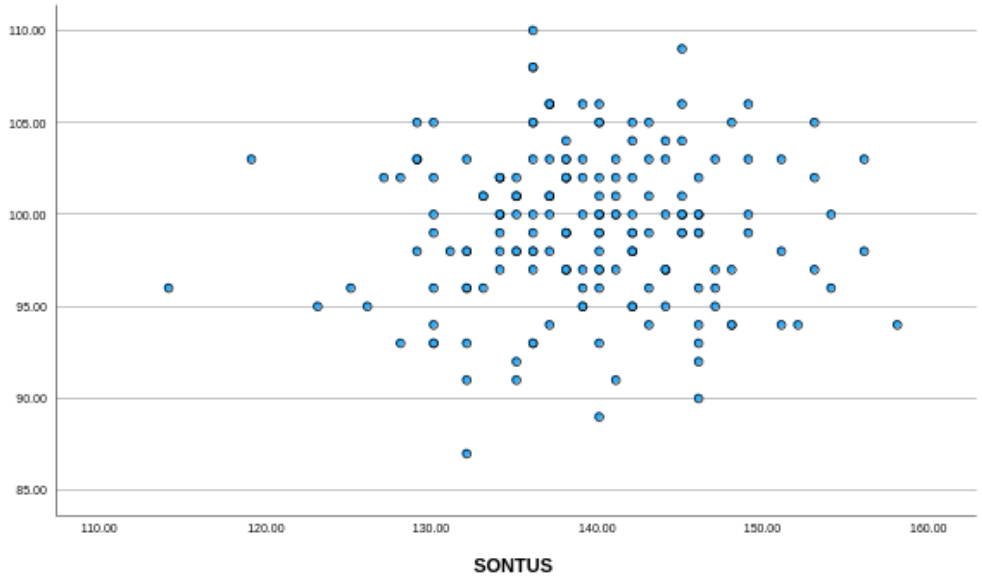
Usage (SONTUS)					
Marital Satisfaction (CSI)	185	87.00	110.00	99.30	4.10

This section aimed to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to provide an overview of the two variables. As shown in Table 4, the mean score for social media usage (SONTUS) was 139.31 (SD = 7.03), with scores ranging from 114.00 to 158.00. The mean marital satisfaction score (CSI) was 99.30 (SD = 4.10), with scores ranging from 87.00 to 110.00. These results suggest that most participants reported high levels of both social media usage and marital satisfaction with relatively low variability across the sample. These findings are consistent with Jabali et al. (2024), highlighting that married graduate students often maintain high engagement with social media for relational and emotional purposes without it necessarily diminishing overall marital satisfaction.

Before testing the relationship between the two variables, the assumptions underlying correlation analysis were checked. A Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that both the SONTUS scores ($p = .267$) and the CSI scores ($p = .377$) were approximately normally distributed. A scatterplot was then produced to examine the linearity of the relationship between the two variables and to check for any significant outliers, and is presented in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Scatterplot Showing the Relationship Between Social Media Usage and Marital Satisfaction



As shown in Figure 9, the points are widely and evenly scattered with no discernible upward or downward trend, suggesting that the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction is not linear and that no extreme outliers were unduly influencing the data. Because both variables met the assumption of normality and no major violations of linearity or outliers were observed, a correlation analysis was considered appropriate. Given the dispersed pattern observed in the scatterplot, a Spearman's rank-order correlation was used as the primary test of association, as it does not assume a strict linear relationship and is robust to the kind of dispersed pattern observed here. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Marital Satisfaction

Correlations

		SONTUS	CSI
SONTUS	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.930
	N	185	185
CSI	Correlation Coefficient	-.006	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.930	
	N	185	185

As presented in Table 5, the Spearman correlation coefficient between social media usage and marital satisfaction was $r_s = -.006$, $p = .930$, indicating an extremely weak and statistically non-significant association. This near-zero coefficient suggests that participants' overall level of social media usage was not associated in any consistent way with their reported level of marital satisfaction. In other words, within this sample, those who used social media more frequently were no more or less likely to report higher or lower marital satisfaction than those who used it less frequently. These results indicate that, within this sample, social media usage and marital satisfaction appear to be statistically independent of one another.

These findings align with prior research suggesting that while social media engagement is widespread among married graduate students, its influence on marital satisfaction is limited and context-dependent, with occasional or controlled use not necessarily disrupting relational quality (Jabali et al., 2024; Peerzade & Shaikh, 2022). At the same time, these findings differ from several earlier studies that reported measurable associations between social media usage and marital satisfaction

(Bouffard et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). One possible explanation for this difference is that the overall amount of time spent on social media may matter less than how and why it is used within a relationship. This interpretation is consistent with the argument made by Punyanunt-Carter et al. (2024), who emphasized the importance of examining not just how much social media is used, but the purpose, content, and communication patterns that accompany that use. These findings contribute to the broader literature by suggesting that, at least within this sample of married graduate students, intentional and relationally sensitive use of social media may matter more than overall screen time.

Strategies for Promoting Healthy Social Media Usage

The study identified strategies for promoting healthy social media usage among married graduate students at PAC University. Insights were drawn from nine in-depth interviews , that were audio-recorded with participants' consent, which provided a deeper understanding of how couples manage digital engagement in the context of academic, relational, and spiritual commitments. Initially, 11 participants volunteered for the interviews; however, two were excluded to ensure alignment with the study's selection criteria, resulting in a final sample of nine participants. The interview participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study sought to include married graduate students from different PAC University schools to ensure varied perspectives. Participants described both the benefits and challenges of social media in their marriages and shared the intentional practices they adopt to maintain balance. Through thematic analysis, several core strategies emerged, with notable consistency across respondents. The findings offer both practical and value-driven approaches to fostering healthy digital habits within marriage.

Using Social Media as a Tool Rather Than a Distraction

Participants shared that social media, when used thoughtfully, served as a supportive tool for communication, connection and shared meaning in their marriages. Rather than being a source of tension, many used it to spark conversations, send encouragement or stay emotionally present despite busy schedules. It was described as a bridge during long days, a prompt for spiritual reflection and even a source of humor and joy in the relationship. Several participants emphasized how sending each other posts, quotes or devotionals helped them maintain both emotional and spiritual closeness. While the content varied from memes to sermons, the intention behind sharing was often to connect, support and express affection. These findings are consistent with Gioia et al. (2021), who suggested that intentional and mindful use of social media such as sharing supportive content can enhance relational and emotional intimacy, rather than detract from marital satisfaction.

Participant AHS shared, “Sometimes I’ll send my wife a video or a meme that made me think of her. It breaks the ice after a long day.” Participant BWS reflected, “I tag her in something funny or uplifting, and it sparks a moment between us… like a mini date in the middle of the day.” Participant JHS explained, “We’ll come across a video or a quote and send it to each other. It kind of opens the door… we’ve had better conversations because of that.” Similarly, Participant JJK noted, “I tag him in stuff I know he’ll laugh at or feel appreciated by… it’s lighthearted but meaningful.” Participant KNJ described how “random reels” and worship clips reminded them they were still thinking of each other amid their busy lives.

For Participant KSJ, social media helped them stay spiritually connected: “When I’m at work and see something inspiring, I’ll send it to my wife. It might be a Bible verse or testimony… it helps us stay spiritually connected.” Participant KTH

said, “It makes us feel connected even when life is hectic,” while Participant MYG described sending sermon clips, adding, “Sometimes I’ll send clips to my husband and say, ‘This is what I needed to hear today.’” Lastly, Participant PJM shared, “I came across a video on budgeting in marriage and forwarded it to my husband. It led to this whole conversation… we actually made a few changes after that.”

These reflections demonstrate that social media, when used intentionally, can serve as a powerful relational tool rather than a source of disruption. Rather than passively consuming content, the participants described active engagement, sharing messages, devotionals and uplifting posts as a way to stay emotionally and spiritually connected. These insights align with strategies suggested in the literature, such as maintaining digital boundaries and using social platforms to foster meaningful connection (Kovan, 2023). While previous research by Johnson and Francis (2022), often emphasizes the risks of social media, this study highlights how couples, particularly married graduate students, are finding ways to use it constructively within the demands of academic and relational life. By filtering content through shared values and open communication, these participants demonstrated that healthy digital engagement can support rather than hinder marital satisfaction.

Minimizing Misunderstandings through Communication and Digital Boundaries

Participants acknowledged that while social media can support marital connection, it also presents opportunities for miscommunication, misinterpretation and tension. Many described instances where seemingly innocent posts, comments or likes triggered emotional reactions from their spouses. These misunderstandings were often rooted in differences in perception, lack of prior communication, or unspoken expectations. However, these experiences also led to growth, prompting open

conversations, increased self-awareness and the establishment of shared digital boundaries.

Participant BWS shared, “I posted something… just a general quote, but my wife thought I was subtweeting her. That’s when we agreed to always clarify before assuming.” Similarly, Participant KNJ recounted, “I shared a meme that was sarcastic about husbands and chores… he thought I was taking a jab at him. We had to talk about it, and I saw his point.” Participant KSJ reflected on liking a post with a questionable caption, saying, “I didn’t really pay attention to it… but my wife asked, ‘Do you agree with that?’ It taught us the importance of perception.” Others, like Participant JHS, noted how phone usage itself became a source of tension: “My husband felt like I was more engaged online than with him… now we have one hour of screen-free time every evening.”

Issues around boundaries and online interactions with others also emerged. Participant JJK explained, “Some of my DMs made my husband uncomfortable… it was a wake-up call. Now I always ask myself how he might perceive something before I post.” Likewise, Participant MYG shared, “I liked and commented on a male colleague’s post… my husband asked why I was being so friendly. That’s when we agreed on certain boundaries.” Participant KTH described a moment when her husband misinterpreted a comment on someone’s post, prompting a larger conversation: “We talked about what comfort and respect look like for each of us.” Participant PJM added, “Sometimes I’d comment in a women’s group and forget to tell him… it made me realize how easily miscommunication can happen online.” And Participant AHS reflected, “My wife pointed out how much time I spent scrolling. Now we even challenge each other to stay offline and do Bible study together.”

These accounts demonstrate that digital misunderstandings, while common, can be effectively addressed through open dialogue and mutual respect. As highlighted in the literature, setting clear expectations and boundaries around social media use helps minimize unnecessary tension (Johnson & Francis, 2022; Kovan, 2023). The participants' experiences suggest that conflict is not always the result of malicious intent, but rather of differing interpretations and unspoken assumptions. By proactively discussing their digital habits, the couples in this study were able to transform moments of friction into opportunities for deeper understanding and relational growth.

Social Media as a Conversation Starter and Not a Substitute for Real Dialogue

While social media was not consistently used as a tool for serious communication, participants described its indirect influence on how they and their spouses approached topics such as parenting and finances. Several respondents noted that social media could act as a conversation starter, helping introduce difficult or unfamiliar ideas in a more relatable way. However, they also emphasized that social media sometimes created confusion, tension or delays in communication, particularly when posts were misinterpreted or when digital habits replaced face-to-face conversations.

Participant MYG shared, "There was one time a preacher said something about financial unity in marriage… it led to a proper sit-down where we re-evaluated how we were budgeting." Similarly, Participant JHS reflected, "I showed him a thread about mental load in parenting, and he was like, 'Ohhh, now I get what you've been saying.'" Participant PJM also explained, "I saw a video about budgeting and shared it… it led to a really productive conversation. But there's so much advice out there, it feels overwhelming." Meanwhile, Participant KNJ described how parenting

discussions were sparked from posts in online mom groups, noting, “It opens the door for conversation, but sometimes the tone of that door being opened isn’t always… calm.”

Despite the benefits, others expressed caution. Participant AHS said, “We’ll both be scrolling and we’ll not talk about what we should be talking about… it just pushes important conversations to the back burner.” Participant JJK added, “I’ll think I’ve already raised a topic just because I posted something… but he totally misses it. We’ve realized we can’t rely on social media to do the talking for us.” Likewise, Participant KTH explained, “We both saw the same post but had completely opposite reactions… it sparked a really honest discussion, but also a few days of silence.” Even Participant BWS admitted, “Sometimes it makes things worse… you’ll see this polished family doing everything ‘right,’ and it kinda makes you question your own approach.”

These accounts highlight that while social media can help initiate meaningful conversations, it is not always a reliable or neutral space for serious relational dialogue. As noted in literature, couples benefit most when they treat online content as a springboard rather than a substitute, engaging with posts critically and choosing to process key issues through direct and intentional communication (Gioia et al., 2021; Plackett et al., 2023). The couples in this study demonstrated growing awareness that not all digital content aligns with their unique marital dynamics, prompting them to establish boundaries and deepen their offline engagement.

Setting Boundaries and Encouraging Transparency

Participants shared practical and reflective advice they would offer to other couples seeking to maintain trust and intimacy while navigating social media. A key theme across responses was the importance of setting clear boundaries, both in terms

of time spent online and the nature of digital interactions. Many also emphasized openness, encouraging couples to discuss their expectations early, regularly check in with each other and remain mindful of how their online behavior impacts their partner.

Participant BWS advised, “Set boundaries early. Don’t wait for conflict to force that conversation… Also, be clear about what privacy means for each person. What’s ‘normal’ for one might feel like secrecy to the other.” Similarly, Participant JJK recommended being honest about discomforts and online habits, explaining, “We sometimes even scroll through each other’s feeds just casually… it keeps things light and transparent.” Participant KNJ echoed this, suggesting couples ask, “How do you feel about how we’re using social media these days?” as a way of checking in and maintaining mutual understanding.

Some participants highlighted the benefits of intentional disconnection. Participant AHS shared, “Sometimes we go on fasts… even just for two days… and we’re like, ‘Wow, we actually talked more.’” Participant JHS also emphasized this point, adding, “Don’t let social media replace real conversation… setting screen-free time, even just for an hour, helps.” Others noted the need to filter what content couples consume or engage with. Participant PJM advised, “Trust and intimacy are built offline, not on timelines. Don’t perform for the internet.” Participant KSJ added, “I always ask, ‘Would I be okay if my wife saw this?’ That question alone can keep your boundaries in check.”

Respect, transparency, and shared digital habits were frequently mentioned. Participant MYG said, “I told my husband I like watching short sermon clips, and now sometimes he watches them with me… that little habit brings us closer.” Participant KTH emphasized “shared reflection,” explaining, “It’s easy to have

parallel lives online and never intersect." Participants recognized that social media, if navigated thoughtfully, could strengthen rather than weaken emotional intimacy, but only when couples prioritize trust, communication, and mutual respect in both their online and offline interactions.

These findings align with literature that emphasizes the role of intentionality and boundaries in cultivating healthy digital habits. According to Gioia et al. (2021), open dialogue about online behavior helps couples prevent misunderstandings and reduce secrecy. Plackett et al. (2023) further argue that mutual respect in digital engagement fosters emotional security and reduces relational conflict. Reinecke et al. (2021) highlight self-regulation as a foundational practice for navigating digital spaces with integrity, while Hatamleh et al. (2023) stress the value of digital literacy in avoiding harmful comparisons. The insights from this study affirm that married graduate students who communicate expectations early and reflect together on their online habits can protect intimacy and build trust, despite the distractions of the digital age.

Managing Time and Competing Priorities

Participants consistently described the challenges of juggling academic responsibilities, family life and relational commitments. Many acknowledged that their educational workload often consumed the majority of their time and energy, leaving little room for quality connection with their spouse. Social media, while occasionally serving as a brief outlet or source of spiritual content, was more often seen as a distraction that reduced meaningful engagement unless intentionally managed. Several participants reflected on how easy it was to default to scrolling instead of initiating meaningful conversations. For some, the combination of academic fatigue and online escapism created unintentional emotional distance in

their marriage. These reflections highlight the delicate balancing act married graduate students must navigate, especially when both partners are under academic pressure.

Participant AHS reflected, “There are times I’m buried in assignments and by the time I look up, it’s bedtime… social media makes it harder sometimes. It’s easy to lose 30 minutes just scrolling.” Similarly, Participant KNJ admitted, “When I’m overwhelmed, I turn to social media as a kind of break, but then sometimes I realize I’ve spent 30 minutes online and haven’t even asked my husband how his day was.” This sentiment was echoed by Participant JJK, who shared, “I use social media just to zone out… But I’ve noticed that it leaves me feeling more disconnected if I’m not careful.”

Several participants described emotional exhaustion and how it affected their availability for conversation and connection. Participant JHS said, “School is intense, our baby’s still young… and when I try to take a break, I end up scrolling and then feeling guilty.” Participant KTH added, “We’re both so tired at the end of the day that sometimes it’s just easier to scroll than to talk… it’s not helping either. It’s just kind of… filling the space.” Others highlighted efforts to reclaim intentionality. Participant PJM explained, “It’s easy to confuse rest with isolation… so we’ve started checking in every evening and just asking each other, ‘How are we really doing?’”

Strategies like screen-free zones, evening check-ins and boundary-setting were mentioned as ongoing efforts to maintain intimacy amidst demanding schedules. These practices reflect a growing awareness among couples of the need to consciously protect their limited shared time from digital distractions. According to Reinecke et al. (2021), intentional communication and self-regulation are essential tools for couples managing external stressors alongside digital engagement. The findings from this theme suggest that although academic life adds strain, couples who deliberately set

boundaries and reflect on their media habits can mitigate the negative effects of social media on their relationships. This reinforces the idea that healthy digital engagement requires not just awareness, but active effort, especially in high-demand seasons like graduate school.

Navigating Work, Hobbies, and Social Media in a Busy Marriage

Participants highlighted the difficulty of balancing work, personal hobbies and relational connection in the context of social media. Many shared that their days were already packed with responsibilities whether academic, professional or parental and that social media often filled the small pockets of free time. Rather than providing rest, participants admitted that scrolling could unintentionally replace opportunities for connection with their spouse. Some used app timers or intentional reminders to limit their usage while others acknowledged how these distractions added emotional distance. As one participant explained, even ten minutes of quiet could be a moment for bonding rather than passive online engagement. This theme emphasizes how couples must remain aware of how they manage their downtime, especially in seasons of high demand.

Participants reflected on how exhaustion from work, school and household responsibilities often led them to use social media as a form of escape. Participant AHS shared, “Instead of using that time to check in with my wife, I’m just staring at my phone… I’ve set up a few app timers to help me stay conscious.” Participant BWS noted, “Now, I try to use my breaks for reflection or even reading a chapter of something helpful.” Participant JHS admitted, “When I finally get a breather, I just want to shut off… but my husband doesn’t always get it.” She added, “I’ve actually started therapy, just to process everything… it’s helped me see I’m not lazy… I’m just

maxed out." These reflections highlight how emotional overload often drives social media use, sometimes at the expense of relational presence.

Hobbies, side hustles, and time-consuming responsibilities were also identified as competing demands. Participant JJK said, "Add Instagram on top of that and suddenly hours are gone." Participant KNJ explained, "We'll watch a funny TikTok together… one of us screen mirrors our phone to the TV and we scroll together and sometimes make fun of the kind of content that comes up on the others' fyps." Participant KSJ noted, "My wife and I agreed early on that we wouldn't let screens come between us, whether it's work or social media." These participants described intentional efforts to stay connected, even when life gets hectic.

Some participants described small but meaningful shifts in routine. Participant KTH reflected, "I'd scroll to wind down, but then feel more tired and less connected at home… I started replacing it with short walks or music." Participant MYG shared, "I try to log out of social media during work hours and save it for short breaks… At home, I make a point of putting my phone away when we're eating or talking." Participant PJM stated, "You can love your work and still lose sight of your partner… I learned that the hard way." These remarks emphasize that mindful adjustments can improve emotional presence in the relationship.

While social media was not always framed as the main issue, participants agreed that when combined with the pressures of work and personal pursuits, it often contributed to emotional distance. Many couples emphasized the value of conscious habits, screen-free meals, check-in conversations and co-watching content, as ways to reclaim time for each other. According to Coyne and Woodruff (2023), even brief digital detoxes can enhance emotional availability in relationships. The findings from this theme suggest that healthy media use is less about strict rules and more about

mutual awareness and intentionality. For married graduate students navigating layered responsibilities, the goal is not to eliminate digital use, but to remain aligned in how time and energy are spent, especially when attention is already stretched thin.

Navigating Financial Stress and Social Media Influence

Participants acknowledged that financial stressors influenced both their emotional well-being and their social media habits. Many shared that seeing posts about material success during periods of financial strain triggered feelings of comparison, inadequacy or disconnection from their spouses. As a result, several couples began intentionally curating their online spaces, muting certain accounts, limiting exposure to triggering content and seeking content that encouraged gratitude or faith. These changes were often coupled with more deliberate offline time such as sitting together, sharing uplifting media or openly discussing emotions stirred by online content.

Participant AHS shared, “I’d go online and see people going on holidays or buying land… It made me question things… We agreed to follow only content that builds, not breaks.” BWS similarly noted, “We agreed to mute certain accounts and focus more on things that ground us… Just sitting on the couch and talking, no Wi-Fi required.” Participant JHS explained, “It’s discouraging… I go online and see other moms posting their nurseries or buying new things… We’ve agreed to talk more openly now, and I avoid content that pushes me into comparison.” JJK added, “There was a time I’d scroll just to avoid thinking about it… Now, I try to be more honest… I remind myself that social media is just highlights, not the full story.”

Participant KNJ stated, “We’re both stressed about money… then you go on social media and see people going on vacations… Now I just mute accounts that trigger that feeling.” KSJ shared, “We say, ‘Let’s guard our hearts.’ So we follow

pages that uplift, not those that show vacations or flashy lifestyles." KTH explained, "It affects your mood, and that mood spills into the relationship… Contentment doesn't come from scrolling… that's something we've had to remind ourselves often." MYG stated, "It's not intentional, but it affects how I feel… I lean more into spiritual and motivational content." PJM reflected, "It created silent expectations… Now, we avoid content that glamorizes excess… We prefer simplicity and joy in the little things."

These findings echo literature which emphasizes the value of setting boundaries around digital engagement and prioritizing face-to-face conversations to preserve relational health (Johnson & Francis, 2022; Kyalo, 2024). Scholars such as Gruber et al. (2022) and Lee and Hancock (2024) advocate for structured offline routines, while Harony et al. (2021) highlight the emotional benefits of authentic, in-person communication. For married graduate students experiencing financial pressure, cultivating intentional digital habits, such as following uplifting content and limiting harmful comparisons can safeguard emotional intimacy and reduce unnecessary conflict.

Integrating Spiritual Values in Digital Engagement

Participants emphasized that their spiritual beliefs and shared faith practices significantly influenced how they approached social media within their marriages. Rather than treating digital engagement as separate from their values, couples described filtering their content and behavior through a spiritual lens. Practices such as praying together, engaging with faith-based content and taking intentional breaks from social media were common. These spiritual rhythms served not only to guide individual behavior but also to foster mutual accountability, deepen emotional connection and preserve peace within the relationship. The participants made it clear

that faith was not just a private conviction but a practical tool for navigating the digital world as a couple.

Many participants described social media use as an area where faith served as a compass. Participant KSJ said, “We try to ask, ‘Is this edifying? Would I be comfortable if my spouse saw this? Would God be pleased?’” Similarly, Participant KTH shared, “Instead of arguing over what’s ‘too much’ or ‘harmless,’ we ask, ‘Is this honoring?’” Participant PJM reflected on how their shared spiritual values shaped online behavior, explaining, “My husband and I often talk about Philippians 4:8… whatever is pure, lovely, admirable. That verse has become a sort of filter for what we choose to watch, share, or respond to.” Participant JHS echoed the importance of intentional content choices: “My faith teaches me to guard my heart… I once unfollowed a few accounts because I noticed they stirred up discontent.” These responses highlight the way faith-based reflection shaped what couples allowed into their digital spaces.

Other participants spoke about shared spiritual routines that helped them stay grounded. Participant AHS explained, “My wife and I sometimes do short fasts, not just from food, but from social media… it helps us come back to center.” Participant KNJ said, “If we’re both just scrolling aimlessly, one of us might say, ‘Hey, how about a devotional instead?’” Participant JJK described how faith offered a reset during moments of distance, sharing, “When things start to feel off, we’ll ask ourselves, ‘Are we still aligned?’… prayer reminds us that we’re a team.” Participant BWS emphasized using social media intentionally, stating, “My wife and I often pray for wisdom about the things we let into our hearts… it’s not about rules, it’s about being intentional.” These quotes reflect how couples incorporated spiritual disciplines into their daily routines to guard their emotional and relational wellbeing.

Integrating faith into social media use allowed couples to strengthen connection and reduce relational strain. Rather than relying solely on rules or restrictions, many turned to shared values and spiritual rhythms as a guide for digital engagement. As noted by Coyne and Woodruff (2023), digital detox periods and intentional interaction with values-based content can help couples refocus on what truly matters, fostering deeper connection and emotional balance. For married graduate students navigating academic, financial and relational pressures, grounding their online habits in spiritual convictions may serve as a stabilizing force that promotes mindfulness, accountability and lasting intimacy. This faith-informed approach to social media helped participants create a more peaceful and purpose-driven digital environment within their marriages.

Letting Faith Shape Perspective and Practice in the Digital Space

Participants described how their spiritual values functioned as a lens through which they evaluated the influence of social media on their marriage. Many shared that their faith helped them discern when content was becoming harmful or misaligned with their values. Participant AHS reflected, “If something online is starting to shape how I see my wife or my marriage, I stop and ask, ‘Is this the truth or is it just a trend?’” Participant KSJ shared a similar view, stating, “We believe it’s our responsibility to guard what enters our minds and social media is a big part of that.” Participant KNJ emphasized the quiet danger of comparison, saying, “Social media can be so subtle… it doesn’t come shouting, but it shifts your perspective slowly.”

Several participants shared examples of how their faith guided their decisions to limit or adjust their online activity. Participant BWS said, “Our faith reminds us that what we feed grows… if we’re feeding our minds with stuff that’s toxic or shallow, it spills over into how we relate.” Participant KTH similarly noted, “My faith

reminds me to ask, ‘What’s the fruit of this?’ If it’s jealousy, distraction, disconnection, then it’s probably not good soil.” Participant JJK acknowledged a time when her spiritual conviction led to a personal change, recalling, “I was venting online more than I should have… even just with vague quotes or passive-aggressive posts. I felt convicted about that.”

Some participants described the connection between their spiritual rhythms and the quality of their relational interactions. Participant MYG explained, “When I’m in a good place with God, I’m drawn to sermons, worship, encouraging testimonies… when I drift a bit, I notice I start scrolling mindlessly.” Participant JHS also drew a connection between spiritual depletion and online behavior: “During that time, I relied on social media more, and it wasn’t helping… now I see that when my spirit is nourished, I don’t need the escape.” Others like PJM described how their values created an internal check before acting impulsively, saying, “I asked myself, ‘Does this reflect Christ? Or just my momentary emotions?’ That check, that pause… is something faith has taught me.”

Across responses, participants described faith not as a set of rules, but as a guiding compass for digital engagement. Participant JJK reflected, “We’ll ask, ‘Is this building or distracting us?’ It doesn’t mean we never scroll, but it means we try not to escape into our phones when things get tough.” Participant KSJ offered another guiding question: “Would I be comfortable if my spouse saw this? Would God be pleased?” Participant AHS emphasized shared spiritual practices, stating, “We sometimes do short fasts, not just from food, but from social media. It helps us come back to center.” These shared beliefs offered participants a language and framework for navigating online choices as a team.

Spiritual alignment appeared to provide both a filter for content and a foundation for relational habits, especially during emotionally vulnerable seasons. As suggested by Johnson et al. (2021), faith-informed approaches, such as digital detoxes, value-based media consumption and mutual accountability, can help couples center their relationship around shared priorities and reduce the emotional strain caused by constant online engagement. In the context of married graduate students facing overlapping pressures, grounding digital habits in faith served as both a relational anchor and a practical strategy for marital well-being.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings revealed nine key themes related to how married graduate students navigate social media use within their relationships. Participants emphasized the importance of boundaries, communication and shared values in promoting healthy digital engagement. While social media was occasionally used for connection, it was more often described as a potential source of distraction, comparison or emotional distance, particularly when compounded by academic, financial and parenting pressures. Many students described strategies such as digital detoxes, mutual accountability, spiritual routines and intentional screen-free time to maintain emotional intimacy. Generally, participants viewed faith, self-awareness and offline communication as essential tools for protecting and strengthening their marriages in a digitally connected world.

The findings from this study can also be understood through the theoretical lenses that guided the research. Attachment Theory helps explain participants' emphasis on emotional availability, reassurance and intentional connection, as many couples described using boundaries, transparency and shared routines to maintain a sense of security and closeness within their marriages. Practices such as screen-free

time, open communication about digital behavior and faith-based check-ins reflect efforts to preserve emotional bonds and reduce feelings of neglect or disconnection. Similarly, the Uses and Gratification Theory provides insight into how participants approached social media as a tool rather than a source of passive consumption. Couples described selectively engaging with content that met specific relational, emotional or spiritual needs, such as encouragement, humor or shared reflection, while deliberately limiting content that triggered comparison or distraction. Together, these theories help contextualize the qualitative findings, suggesting that marital satisfaction is not determined by social media use itself, but by the intentions, meanings and relational needs that guide how couples engage with digital platforms.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative analysis found that the global SONTUS score, representing the overall social media usage, was not significantly correlated with the global CSI score, representing overall marital satisfaction ($r_s = -.006$, $p = .930$). On its own, this result might suggest that social media use is largely irrelevant to how married graduate students experience their marriages. The qualitative findings, however, paint a much richer picture, showing that social media plays an active role in participants' relationships, sometimes strengthening connection and at other times introducing friction, depending on how it is used. Together, these two sets of findings suggest that the amount of time spent on social media is far less important than the manner and intent behind that use.

This pattern of results reflects a form of complementarity rather than contradiction. The quantitative data answered the question of whether overall frequency of social media use on its own, predicts marital satisfaction, and the answer was no. The qualitative data then helped explain why this might be the case by

showing that two participants with similar levels of overall usage could have very different experiences depending on whether that usage was intentional, relationally connective and guided by shared values, or whether it was used as an escape from stress, exhaustion or unresolved conflict. For example, participants who described sending devotionals, encouragement or shared jokes to their spouses characterized their social media use as something that brought them closer, while others described similar amounts of time spent scrolling alone as something that left them feeling more distant from their partner. A single global usage score cannot distinguish between these very different patterns of engagement, which helps account for the near-zero correlation observed in the quantitative analysis.

The theoretical lenses introduced earlier in this study, help to tie these findings together further. Attachment Theory suggests that what matters for relational security is not digital contact itself but whether that contact communicates availability, reassurance and presence (Métellus et al., 2025), and this is consistent with participants describing screen-free time and intentional check-ins as ways of protecting emotional closeness, regardless of how much time was otherwise spent online. Likewise, UGT suggests that the outcomes of media use depend on the needs driving that use (Bhatiasevi, 2024); participants who used social media to seek connection, encouragement or spiritual grounding described positive relational outcomes, while those who used it primarily to escape stress or avoid difficult conversations described more negative ones. In both cases, the theories point toward the same conclusion supported by the data: it is the purpose and quality of engagement, not the quantity that shapes its relational impact.

The quantitative and qualitative findings merge to form a comprehensive conclusion for this study. Marital satisfaction among married graduate students at

PAC University does not appear to be meaningfully shaped by how often couples use social media, but it does appear to be shaped by the intentionality behind social media use. This integrated understanding goes beyond what either data set could have shown alone: the quantitative results rule out a simple, direct relationship based on frequency, while the qualitative results identify the more nuanced relational processes. This conclusion forms the basis for the discussion and recommendations presented in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the study based on both quantitative and qualitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze patterns of social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University. Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the two variables. Thematic analysis of interview responses provided additional insights, highlighting strategies couples use to navigate social media within the context of marriage. The integration of both data sets offered a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives, leading to the overall conclusion that marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University is shaped less by how frequently couples use social media and more by the intentionality, boundaries and shared values guiding that use. The next chapter presents a discussion of the findings, outlines the implications of the study and offers recommendations based on the results.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings derived from the data analysis. It aims to interpret the results in light of the research questions and objectives, providing insights into the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University. The chapter begins with a summary of the key findings. Based on the findings, conclusions are drawn, and practical recommendations for further research are provided.

Summary of Key Findings

Social Media Usage Patterns

This study explored the patterns of social media usage among married graduate students at PAC University. Social media was used most frequently during unstructured times, such as when maintaining contact with friends, sitting at home, or managing stress. The highest levels of usage were reported during moments of emotional stress and while communicating with family and friends. These findings suggest that social media served primarily as a tool for emotional regulation and connection in informal, personal contexts, rather than as a structured part of daily routines. On the other hand, social media use was least frequent during activities that required concentration or were socially structured such as attending lectures or participating in meetings, highlighting its role in less focused, personal engagement.

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to test the relationship between overall social media usage and marital satisfaction, given the non-linear pattern observed in the data. The analysis produced a coefficient of $r_s = -.006$ ($p = .930$), indicating an association so close to zero that it is best described as no meaningful

relationship at all. This result suggests that, within this sample, how often participants used social media was unrelated to how satisfied they were in their marriages. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that social media usage may be more about managing emotional needs and maintaining social ties than about directly shaping marital quality (Konyar & Ersanli, 2022). The lower usage during more structured activities, such as attending lectures, further reinforces the idea that social media serves a more passive role during less focused times, rather than actively contributing to relationship dynamics during high-demand moments.

Perceived Effects of Social Media on Marital Satisfaction

Regarding marital satisfaction, most participants reported moderate to high levels of happiness in their relationships, with strong emotional connection and commitment to their partners. Communication and emotional intimacy were generally rated positively, suggesting that couples felt connected and able to confide in each other. However, shared activities and teamwork received lower scores, indicating that some couples faced challenges in engaging in collaborative or recreational activities together. Social media usage appeared to play a more significant role in maintaining connection and providing stress relief, rather than directly influencing marital satisfaction. Despite this, participants did not report strong negative impacts of social media on their relationships, suggesting that it served more as a tool for emotional regulation rather than a source of marital conflict.

The correlation analysis showed no meaningful statistical relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction ($r_s = -.006$, $p = .930$), confirming that overall usage levels had essentially no bearing on how satisfied participants felt in their marriages. What stood out instead, both from the survey scores and from the interviews, was that social media's role appeared to sit alongside marital satisfaction

rather than to drive it: participants used it for connection and stress relief, but their satisfaction seemed to depend far more on other factors, such as emotional intimacy, trust and teamwork. This is consistent with the broader finding that social media usage may be more closely tied to managing emotional needs than to shaping relationship quality directly (Zhou et al., 2023). The comparatively lower scores for shared activities and teamwork suggest that, regardless of how social media was used, certain aspects of marital life, particularly collaborative engagement, remained areas of relative weakness for this sample. Generally, these findings highlight that social media's primary function in this context was emotional support rather than a driver of marital quality or difficulty.

Strategies for Promoting Healthy Social Media Usage

Several strategies for promoting healthy social media usage emerged from the study. Participants emphasized the importance of setting clear boundaries, encouraging transparency, and maintaining open communication to prevent misunderstandings and foster trust, particularly when interacting with individuals of the opposite sex. Many couples reported using social media intentionally, focusing on content that positively contributed to their relationships and avoiding distractions. Another key strategy was limiting social media comparison, with participants actively choosing not to engage with idealized portrayals that could lead to feelings of inadequacy. Spiritual values also played a significant role in guiding online behavior, with participants drawing on their faith to resolve conflicts and make more mindful digital choices. Finally, time management emerged as a crucial strategy, as participants intentionally limited social media use during quality time with their spouses to maintain a healthy balance in their relationships

These strategies are particularly meaningful when read alongside the finding of no significant statistical association between usage and satisfaction. Rather than suggesting that managing social media is unnecessary, the near-zero correlation indicates that simply tracking how much time couples spend online reveals very little about their marital wellbeing; what mattered, according to participants themselves, was how that time was used and whether it was guided by shared boundaries and values. The strategies identified reflect a proactive, values-driven approach that couples developed largely through lived experience of friction or miscommunication, rather than through external advice. The intentional use of social media and the avoidance of comparison align with broader recommendations in the literature for healthy digital engagement (Gioia et al., 2021). Time management strategies likewise highlight the importance of balancing digital engagement with offline interaction, ensuring that social media does not detract from the quality of marital relationships

Relationship between Social Media Usage and Marital Satisfaction

The analysis of the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction revealed a Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient of $r_s = -.006$ ($p = .930$). This indicates an extremely weak and statistically non-significant association between the two variables. The overall amount of time participants spent on social media did not correspond in any consistent way to the level of satisfaction they reported in their marriages. Within this sample, participants who used social media more frequently were no more or less likely to report higher or lower marital satisfaction than those who used it less.

This near-zero result on its own, might suggest that social media use is largely irrelevant to how married graduate students experience their marriages. The interview data, however, told a different story, where participants described social media as

playing an active role in their relationships, at times strengthening connection through shared devotionals, humor and check-ins, and at other times introducing friction through misunderstandings, comparison or emotional withdrawal. Together, these findings indicate that the quantity of social media use is far less important than the manner and intent behind it. Participants with similar overall usage levels described very different experiences depending on whether their engagement was intentional and relationally connective or used as an escape from stress and unresolved conflict. This helps explain why a single global usage score could not predict satisfaction: it could not distinguish between these fundamentally different patterns of engagement. Generally, the findings suggest that social media usage, taken purely as a frequency measure, has minimal predictive value for marital satisfaction, while the qualitative findings point to intentionality and relational purpose as the more meaningful factors.

Implications of the Study

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the role of social media in marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University. While the study found no significant statistical relationship between social media use and marital satisfaction, its role in emotional connection and stress relief, as described by participants themselves, cannot be overlooked. From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that existing models such as Attachment Theory and UGT, may need to be adjusted to reflect the more complex and indirect relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction. Practically, the study provides helpful strategies for therapists and educators working with couples such as promoting healthy digital habits, setting boundaries and fostering communication. The findings also suggest that universities could consider integrating discussions about digital

engagement into their counseling services to support married students in balancing academic and marital responsibilities.

Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University. The findings indicate that while social media is frequently used for emotional connection and stress relief, it has minimal and statistically non-significant impact on marital satisfaction. Despite the prevalence of digital engagement, social media does not significantly contribute to or detract from the overall quality of marital relationships in this sample. The study also highlights the importance of strategies such as setting boundaries, fostering transparency and maintaining balance between digital and offline engagement for healthy relationships. Although social media did not play a central role in marital satisfaction at the level of overall frequency, the interview accounts suggest that its meaning within a marriage, whether as a tool for connection or a source of friction, depends on how couples choose to use it. Taken together, the results point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of digital engagement in relationships, one that looks beyond how much couples use social media and toward why and how they use it.

Recommendations

For Practice

Marriage and family therapists working with married graduate students should consider incorporating discussions about social media use in their sessions. While social media did not have a statistically significant impact on marital satisfaction in this study, its role in emotional regulation and maintaining connection is still important. Therapists can help couples set clear boundaries around social media

usage, especially when it comes to avoiding distractions during quality time. Additionally, fostering transparency and open communication about digital behaviors can prevent misunderstandings that may arise from online interactions. Therapists can also guide couples in developing strategies to avoid unhealthy comparisons and manage emotional responses to content seen on social media. These discussions can support couples in creating a balanced approach to digital engagement that complements their relationship rather than detracts from it.

Married graduate students should be encouraged to engage in regular check-ins with their partners about their digital habits. These discussions can help ensure that both partners are aligned on expectations regarding social media use and can address any concerns that arise. It would also be beneficial for students to evaluate how social media use impacts their emotional well-being, particularly in terms of its role in managing stress and maintaining a sense of connection. Students could benefit from learning how to consciously disconnect from social media during periods of academic pressure, using this time for self-care or nurturing their relationship offline. Developing mindfulness around their social media habits can help married graduate students use social media platforms in a way that enhances their marriage. Finally, seeking professional guidance such as relationship coaching or counseling, could help couples address digital-related challenges and strengthen their emotional bond.

For Policy

Universities could develop formal guidelines or frameworks that support healthy digital engagement among married graduate students. For example, they could establish policies that encourage the inclusion of digital well-being topics in student counseling programs or integrate relationship-focused modules into graduate orientation sessions. Policies could also mandate the provision of resources such as

digital literacy workshops, mental health support or stress management programs that address the influence of social media on marriages. Furthermore, universities could implement monitoring and feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives and ensure they meet students' needs. By embedding these measures into institutional policies, universities would create a sustainable and structured approach to supporting students' emotional and relational well-being. Essentially, such policies would complement existing academic and counseling services, promoting a healthier balance between digital engagement, marital relationships and academic responsibilities.

Areas for Further Research

Given that this study identified a non-significant relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction, further research is warranted to examine whether different research designs or populations might reveal more nuanced effects. Further studies could explore the long-term effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction, particularly how prolonged exposure to digital platforms influences relationships over time. This could involve longitudinal studies that track the evolving relationship between social media engagement and marital dynamics across multiple years, allowing for a deeper understanding of how digital behaviors impact marriages in the long run. Longitudinal research would help to assess whether the effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction change over time or if initial patterns of use have lasting consequences on relationships. A limitation of this study was the reliance on self-reported data, which may have been influenced by social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. A longitudinal design could mitigate this limitation by collecting data over an extended period, providing a more reliable view of how social media usage affects marital satisfaction as it evolves.

Further research could explore how different cultural contexts influence social media usage patterns in marriages. While this study focused on married graduate students at PAC University in Kenya, further studies could examine the role of social media in relationships across different cultural or regional contexts to understand how societal norms shape digital engagement in marriage. Expanding research to include multiple universities or regions would provide a broader understanding of how cultural influences and varying educational environments impact social media usage within marital relationships. This could help identify whether certain cultural practices or academic settings encourage or discourage specific social media behaviors and how these patterns ultimately affect marital satisfaction. Such studies could also explore the intersection of cultural values, social media usage and relationship dynamics, offering more diverse perspectives on the role of digital engagement in marriages.

Finally, another area for further research would be the impact of social media on marital satisfaction across different age groups. It would be useful to compare the experiences of younger couples with those of older, more established couples to understand if and how social media usage influences marital satisfaction differently across life stages. Younger couples, who may be more immersed in digital technologies, might experience social media's effects on their relationship in distinct ways compared to older couples who may have developed different communication and coping strategies. Exploring these age-related differences could reveal whether younger couples use social media more for maintaining emotional connection or managing stress, while older couples may use it differently or engage less frequently. Such research could provide insights into how social media usage evolves over time and how it impacts marital dynamics at different life stages. Understanding these

differences would help tailor recommendations for couples of varying ages, offering targeted strategies to navigate social media's role in relationships.

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APPENDIX I: CONSENT FORM

My name is Samantha Nashipae, a graduate student at Pan Africa Christian (PAC) University. I am conducting a study titled "The Influence of Social Media Usage on Marital Satisfaction among Married Graduate Students at PAC University" as part of the requirements for my Master's degree thesis in Marriage and Family Therapy.

By proceeding to the next section of this questionnaire, you confirm that the following has been explained to you and that you consent to participate in this study:

- The study aims to explore the patterns and perceived effects of social media usage on marital satisfaction, to identify strategies for healthy social media usage, and to establish the relationship between social media usage and marital satisfaction among married graduate students at PAC University.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any point without any consequences or penalties.
- This research may not be of direct benefit to you personally. However, your participation will contribute to a broader understanding of how social media influences marital satisfaction among married graduate students, which may inform future support and interventions.
- Some questions may cause mild emotional discomfort when reflecting on personal experiences. Should this occur, you are free to pause or withdraw from the study at any time.
- Your privacy and confidentiality are of utmost importance. You are not required to provide your name or any identifying personal information. All data will be stored securely in encrypted, password-protected files and used exclusively for academic purposes. Findings will be reported in summarized, anonymized form to ensure no individual participant can be identified.

- Anonymized quotes from your responses may be used in the researcher's dissertation, academic publications, or presentations. No identifying information will be attached to such quotes.
- You may request a copy of the study's findings by contacting the researcher using the information provided below.
- **Limits to confidentiality:** If you disclose information about abuse, neglect, or harm to a child or a vulnerable adult, the researcher is legally and ethically obliged to report this to the relevant authorities.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher at samanthanashipae@gmail.com or 0737192148.

Email address (optional and only if you would like to be considered for a follow-up interview. This is not compulsory and will not affect your participation in the main study):

.....

.....

APPENDIX II: RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Section A: Demographic Information

The following section seeks to gather basic background information about the participants. These demographic details will help provide context for analyzing the influence of social media usage in relation to marital satisfaction. The information collected will be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Demographic Information

- Age (Please select the appropriate range):

☐18–24 years

☐25–29 years

☐30–34 years

☐35–39 years

☐40–44 years

☐45 years and above

- Please select your gender: ( ) Male ( ) Female
- Please select your current level of education: ( ) Master's student ( ) Doctorate student
- What school are you enrolled in at PAC University? (Please select one):

☐School of Humanities and Social Sciences

☐School of Theology

☐School of Leadership, Business, and Technology

- Length of Marriage (Please select the appropriate range):

☐0–5 years

☐6–10 years

☐11–15 years

☐16–20 years

☐21–25 years

☐25+ years

- Employment Status (Please select one):

☐Employed (full-time)

☐Employed (part-time)

☐Self-employed

☐Unemployed

- Number of Children (Please select one):

☐None

☐1

☐2

☐3

☐4 or more

Section B: Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS)

The Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS) was used to measure the construct of social media usage in this study. The scale assesses the amount of time respondents spend engaging with social networking platforms across various contexts and activities. For the purposes of this study, social networking site use was conceptualized as social media usage. Below are the items of SONTUS.

Kindly use the scale below to indicate how often you use the social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn etc., during the past week in the following situations and places:

1. I never used it during the past week.
2. I used it once during the past week but spent less than 10 minutes.

3. I used it once during the past week but spent between 10 and 30 minutes.
4. I used it once during the past week but spent more than 30 minutes.
5. I used it between 2 and 3 times during the past week but spent less than 10 minutes each time.
6. I used it between 2 and 3 times during the past week but spent between 10 and 30 minutes each time.
7. I used it between 2 and 3 times during the past week but spent more than 30 minutes each time.
8. I used it more than 3 times during the past week but spent less than 10 minutes each time.
9. I used it more than 3 times during the past week but spent between 10 and 30 minutes each time.
10. I used it more than 3 times during the past week but spent more than 30 minutes each time.

1. When you are at a seminar/workshop or training program.
2. When you are at home sitting idly.
3. When you need to reduce your mental stress.
4. When you go to the stadium to watch football, basketball etc.
5. When you are doing school or job-related assignment at home.
6. When you are waiting for someone (e.g., friends) either in their house or at a pre-arranged place.
7. When you are listening to music, radio, religious lectures etc.
8. When you have gone through a lot of stress.
9. When you are in a meeting.
10. When you are in the class receiving lecture.

11. When you need to maintain contact with existing friends.
12. When you are in bed about to sleep.
13. When you are reading in the library for academic purpose e.g., recommended text for class.
14. When you are at a place to repair your car, house appliances, etc.
15. When you need to reduce your emotional stress.
16. When you want to reduce the pressure of your daily routines.
17. When you are at a social gathering like wedding ceremony, birthday party, reception etc.
18. When you need to communicate with your families and friends.
19. When you are sitting in a religious place (e.g., church, mosque) and activities like sermon or prayer is yet to start.
20. When you need to find out more about people you met offline.
21. When you are in the company of friends/family/colleagues having fun.
22. When you are watching TV, news, football, films, sports, etc.
23. When you go to the cinema to watch movie(s).
24. When you are a passenger in a car/bus/train for at least 2 minutes.
25. When you need to find people you haven't seen for a while.
26. When you are waiting for your boss in their office for at least 2 minutes when they have not attended to you.
27. When you are trying to forget your financial challenges.
28. When you are online doing school or job-related works e.g., project, homework.
29. Watching academic-related video lectures or those related to your job.

Section C: Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI)

The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) is a tool designed to measure the level of satisfaction individuals experience in their romantic relationships. It assesses various dimensions of relationship quality, including emotional intimacy, communication and overall contentment with the partnership. Although the instrument was originally developed to assess relationship satisfaction among couples, it was appropriate for use in this study because all participants were married and therefore represented a specific category of couples. Responses to individual items were recorded using the specified Likert-type response formats, which varied across items and are indicated alongside each question. The items used from the CSI are presented below.

1. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

   Scale: 1 = Extremely Unhappy, 2 = Fairly Unhappy, 3 = A Little Unhappy, 4 = Happy, 5 = Very Happy, 6 = Extremely Happy, 7 = Perfect

2. Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

   Scale: 1 = Always Disagree, 2 = Almost Always Disagree, 3 = Frequently Disagree, 4 = Occasionally Disagree, 5 = Almost Always Agree, 6 = Always Agree

- Amount of time spent together
- Making major decisions
- Demonstrations of affection

3. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?

   Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = More often than not, 5 = Most of the time, 6 = All the time

4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?

   Scale: 1 = All the time, 2 = Most of the time, 3 = More often than not, 4 = Occasionally, 5 = Rarely, 6 = Never

5. I still feel a strong connection with my partner.

   Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

6. If I had my life to live over, I would marry the same person.

   Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

7. Our relationship is strong.

   Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

8. I sometimes wonder if there is someone else out there for me.

   Scale: 1 = Completely true, 2 = Almost completely true, 3 = Mostly true, 4 = Somewhat true, 5 = A little true, 6 = Not at all true

9. My relationship with my partner makes me happy.

   Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

10. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner.

    Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

11. I can't imagine ending my relationship with my partner.

Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

12. I feel that I can confide in my partner about virtually anything.

Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

13. I have had second thoughts about this relationship recently.

Scale: 1 = Completely true, 2 = Almost completely true, 3 = Mostly true, 4 = Somewhat true, 5 = A little true, 6 = Not at all true

14. For me, my partner is the perfect romantic partner.

Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

15. I really feel like part of a team with my partner.

Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

16. I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as my partner does.

Scale: 1 = Not at all true, 2 = A little true, 3 = Somewhat true, 4 = Mostly true, 5 = Almost completely true, 6 = Completely true

17. How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = Mostly, 5 = Almost completely, 6 = Completely

18. How well does your partner meet your needs?

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = Mostly, 5 = Almost completely, 6 = Completely

19. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = Mostly, 5 = Almost completely, 6 = Completely

20. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

    Scale: 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Somewhat, 4 = Mostly, 5 = Almost completely, 6 = Completely

21. On a scale of 1 (Worse than all others / Extremely bad) to 6 (Better than all others / Extremely good), how good is your relationship compared to most?

    Scale: 1 to 6

22. Do you enjoy your partner's company?

    Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Less than once a month, 3 = Once or twice a month, 4 = Once or twice a week, 5 = Once a day, 6 = More often

23. How often do you and your partner have fun together?

    Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Less than once a month, 3 = Once or twice a month, 4 = Once or twice a week, 5 = Once a day, 6 = More often

APPENDIX III: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following interview guide questions were developed by the researcher based on the study's research objectives, variables and a review of relevant literature on social media usage and marital satisfaction. The questions aim to provide qualitative insights into how factors such as educational commitments, time spent on other activities, financial stressors, spirituality and other confounding variables influence marital dynamics. Participants are requested to respond to the following questions based on their personal experiences, sharing as openly and honestly as possible.

1. What do you think has been the most positive impact of social media on your marriage? Can you provide examples?
2. Have there been moments where social media caused misunderstandings or conflicts in your relationship? If so, could you share what happened and how you handled it?
3. How does social media affect how you and your spouse communicate about important matters, such as finances or parenting?
4. If you were advising other couples about using social media, what practices would you recommend to maintain trust and intimacy?
5. How do your educational commitments impact the time and attention you can dedicate to your spouse and your relationship, and how does this interact with social media usage?
6. In what ways do other activities, such as work or personal hobbies, compete with the time spent on social media, and how does this affect your relationship?
7. Have financial stressors or concerns influenced how you and your spouse use social media, or how much time you spend together? If so, how?

8. In what ways, if any, has your spiritual life or shared spiritual practices influenced how you and your spouse navigate social media use within your marriage?
9. Do you feel that your spiritual beliefs or values shape how you perceive the role of social media in your relationship? Could you share an example?

APPENDIX IV: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

Pan Africa Christian University
Where Leaders are Made

Thika Road Campus Valley Road Campus
P.O. BOX 56875 - 00200 +254 730955000 +254 730955501/2
enquiries@pacuniversity.ac.ke www.pacuniversity.ac.ke

Office of the Registrar Academic Affairs

22nd May 2025

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION & ETHICS CLEARANCE LETTER FOR KUSERO SAMANTHA NASHIPAE REG. NO: MMFT/24477/0/23

Greetings! This is an introduction letter for the above named person a final year student at Pan Africa Christian University (PAC University), pursuing a Masters of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy.

She is at the final stage of the programme and she is preparing to collect data to enable her finalize on the thesis. The thesis title is ***"The Influence of Social Media Usage on Marital Satisfaction among Married Graduate Students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya"***

We kindly request that you allow her obtain a research permit so as to proceed and collect data to inform her research from Graduate Students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.

Warm Regards,

PAN AFRICA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
REGISTRAR
P. O. Box 56875 – 00200
TEL: 0721 932050 0734 400694
NAIROBI, KENYA

Dr. Lilian Vikiru
Registrar Academic Affairs
Pan Africa Christian University
Lumumba Drive, Roysambu, off Kamiti Rd, off Thika Rd
P.O Box 56875-00200, Nairobi, Kenya
Email: registrar.aa@pacuniversity.ac.ke
Website: www.pacuniversity.ac.ke

APPENDIX V: NACOSTI RESEARCH PERMIT

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: **285278**

Date of Issue: **08/June/2025**

RESEARCH LICENSE



This is to Certify that Miss.. Samantha Nashipae Kusero of Pan Africa Christian University, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Nairobi on the topic: The Influence of Social Media Usage on Marital Satisfaction among Married Graduate Students at Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya for the period ending : 08/June/2026.

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