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Article

Social Media Use and Marital Cohesion-Related Outcomes among Married Couples: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Global Evidence (2015–2026)

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Abstract: Social media and marital life increasingly intersect within contemporary family systems, yet robust evidence on whether this digital integration strengthens or undermines marital cohesion-related outcomes remains limited. The gap that the current systematic review and meta-analysis address is that no dedicated global meta-analysis has synthesised evidence on the topic of social media use and marital cohesion-related outcomes among married couples based on global studies published between 2015 and 2026. The research performed a thorough search of Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and reference lists. The inclusion criteria were empirical quantitative studies that reported cohesion-related outcomes in married couples. The quality of the studies was evaluated with the help of the JBI Critical Appraisal Tools. The effect sizes were transformed to the Fisher z and pooled with a random-effects model. Heterogeneity was assessed using Cochran's Q, I^2, and τ^2. Exploratory subgroup analysis was conducted by type of digital exposure, while publication-bias assessment was interpreted cautiously because fewer than ten studies were included in the primary meta-analysis. The results indicate that there is a weak negative correlation between the use of social media and marital cohesion-related outcomes, and the heterogeneity of the results is significant between studies. Routine or communication-oriented shared use showed negligible or slightly positive associations with marital cohesion-related outcomes, whereas problematic, excessive, intrusive, or conflict-related use demonstrated stronger negative associations. These results indicate that social media is not always positive or negative to married couples; instead, its relational effects are determined by the use of social media, the context of use, and the patterns of behaviour. The review offers the initial dedicated international synthesis of this evidence base and identifies the necessity to tackle problematic digital behaviours, enhance couple communication skills, and create family policies that acknowledge intimate relationships as an important area of technology influence.

Keywords: *Social media, marital cohesion-related outcomes, married couples, marital interaction, digital communication*

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Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has been integrated into the social and family life infrastructure. Adults are turning to digital platforms more and more not just to entertain and exchange information, but also to sustain intimate relationships, organize family life, express emotional experiences, and control social presence (Bandura, 2001; Orben, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). This change is especially important to married couples since the relational life is currently negotiated in both online and offline environments that are interconnected. Social media is thus not just a technological device, but a social space that can influence communication patterns, expectations, emotional boundaries, and couple dynamics (Hertlein, 2012; Katz et al., 1973).

The concept of marital cohesion-related outcomes is a key aspect of marital and family functioning, which is often used to describe emotional attachment, connectedness, mutual involvement, relational intimacy, and enduring affective involvement among family members (Olson, 2000). In marriage, trust, mutual responsiveness, constructive communication, conflict regulation, and relational unity are used to strengthen cohesion.

Digital distraction could also be a factor that undermines marital relationships by lowering responsiveness, engagement, and quality of face-to-face interaction (Bavelas et al., 2000). Social media can serve as a means of communication for couples, as a shared experience, and as a way to be emotionally accessible, but can also be distracting, allow for surveillance, lead to jealousy, cause boundary issues, and replace face-to-face interaction (Bowen, 1978; Hertlein, 2012; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). It also can worsen social comparison, as partners are faced with idealized depictions of relationships online (Festinger, 1954). This is mirrored in the empirical evidence. While there are some studies that indicate that digital communication can be used in an intentional manner to maintain emotional connection and family bonding, others have suggested that problematic or intrusive use of digital communication has been associated with lower relationship quality, conflict, and less emotional presence (Coyne et al., 2011; Andreassen, 2015; Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013). The evidence, however, is scattered with little synthesis specifically on married couples and marital cohesion-related outcomes in 2015–2026.

This gap is both theoretically and practically important. From a family systems perspective, changes in one communicative domain may alter the functioning of the wider relational unit (Bowen, 1978). Clarifying whether social media use is associated with stronger or weaker cohesion—and under what conditions—has implications for marital counselling, digital well-being interventions, family education, and social policy (World Health Organization, 2021). Accordingly, the present study conducts a systematic review and meta-analysis of global empirical research published between 2015 and 2026 in order to synthesise the evidence base, estimate the pooled association between social media use and marital cohesion-related outcomes among married couples, examine heterogeneity exploratory subgroup analysis, and derive evidence-based implications for practice and policy. The guiding research question was: What is the overall relationship between social media use and marital cohesion-related outcomes among married couples across global studies published between 2015 and 2026?

Methodology

The review methodology was structured using the PICOS framework to define the eligibility boundaries, research scope, and study selection criteria. The framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
PICOS Framework

Component	Description
P (Population)	Married couples / married adults in legally recognised or socially recognised marital unions
I (Intervention / Exposure)	Social media use, including frequency, intensity, duration, platform engagement, communication use, problematic use, compulsive use, or digital interaction patterns
C (Comparison)	Lower vs higher use; non-problematic vs problematic use; low-frequency vs high-frequency users; comparison groups where available; or correlational contrast in observational studies
O (Outcome)	Family cohesion, marital satisfaction, marital interaction, marital conflict, relationship satisfaction, communication quality, relationship quality, marital closeness, family functioning, and other validated cohesion-related marital outcomes.
S (Study Design)	Quantitative observational studies (cross-sectional, longitudinal, cohort), quasi-experimental studies, and studies reporting sufficient statistics for effect size computation

Research Design and Search Strategy

The study was done in the form of a systematic review and meta-analysis following the PRISMA 2020 statement (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). It emphasized quantitative empirical research that explored the relationship between marital cohesion-related outcomes and social media among married couples. In view of the anticipated nature of the evidence being primarily observational and non-randomised, a design-sensitive synthesis method was used. When similar and/or convertible effect-size data were available, the studies were first summarised narratively and then quantitatively synthesised (Cohen, 1988; Higgins et al., 2023).

A literature search was performed on the platforms Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, PubMed, PsycINFO and Google Scholar. The searches were for English-language studies published between 1 January 2015 and 30 April 2026. The search strategy involved using words associated with social media, married couples, marital or family cohesion-related outcomes, and quantitative associations.

Table 2

Search Strategy

Concept	Core terms	Synonyms / related terms
Social media exposure	"social media", "social networking site*", SNS, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, X, Twitter	"problematic social media use", "social media addiction", phubbing, "digital communication", "online interaction", "platform use"
Population	"married couple*", spouse*, husband*, wife*, marriage, marital	"cohabiting couple*" may be searched during scoping but excluded at screening unless married data are separable
Outcome	"marital cohesion-related outcomes", "marital cohesion", "family connectedness", "family bonding"	"relational closeness", "family functioning", "marital interaction", "relationship quality", "dyadic adjustment", "communication quality"
Study type	quantitative, correlat*, longitudinal, cohort, cross-sectional	regression, association, predictor, effect

Full exemplar Boolean string

Terms were combined using AND between concept blocks as:

Search Element	Terms
Social Media	"social media" OR "social networking sites" OR SNS OR Facebook OR Instagram OR WhatsApp OR TikTok
Population	"married couples" OR spouses OR marriage OR marital
Outcome	"marital cohesion-related outcomes" OR "family functioning" OR connectedness OR "relationship quality"
Design	quantitative OR survey OR correlational OR observational

Database adaptation notes

A search strategy was tailored to each database. For Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO, searches were conducted on the titles, abstracts, and keywords, if available. Field tags and MeSH-informed terms were used, if applicable, in PubMed. A shortened search string was used for Google Scholar and the most relevant recent results were screened. Hand searching of reference lists of included studies and relevant reviews was also conducted to identify further eligible studies.

Eligibility Criteria

To ensure conceptual relevance, methodological consistency, and availability of data suitable for meta-analysis, eligibility criteria were defined.

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Empirical quantitative studies	Qualitative studies, commentaries, editorials, letters, opinion pieces
Studies published between 2015 and 2026	Studies published outside 2015–2026
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference abstracts without usable full data, theses, dissertations, book chapters, non-peer-reviewed reports
Studies involving married couples or married adults	Studies on adolescents, dating samples, general adults, or family samples where married-couple data cannot be isolated

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies examining social media use, problematic social media use, platform engagement, or closely related digital interaction variables	Studies focused on general internet use, television, gaming, or smartphone use without a clear social-media component
Studies reporting marital cohesion-related outcomes or conceptually proximate measurable outcomes that can be justified as cohesion-related	Studies with outcomes unrelated to family or marital relational functioning
Studies reporting sufficient statistics for effect-size conversion	Studies with inadequate statistical reporting and no retrievable data

Studies were only included if they reported specific marital or family cohesion related outcomes including marital satisfaction or dyadic adjustment, family functioning, quality of communication, or relational closeness. Only studies on general well-being or mental health were included. Copied records were transferred to a reference management program, deduplicated and filtered by title, abstract, and full text. Where possible, screening decisions were reviewed and differences discussed. The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021) was used to document the last process.

Data Extraction

A structured data extraction form was created and pre-tested prior to the full coding. Data extracted consisted of the author, year of publication, country, sample size, participant characteristics, study design, social media exposure, marital cohesion-related outcome, measures, covariates, reported statistics, key findings, and quality appraisal results (Higgins et al., 2023). If more than one eligible effect was reported in a study, a pre-specified hierarchy was used to prevent unit-of-analysis issues. The most direct outcome related to cohesion was retained and effect sizes were meta-analytically pooled, if applicable, following accepted procedures (Cohen, 1988; Higgins et al., 2023).

Quality Appraisal

The Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Tools were used to evaluate the methodological quality of the evidence, as the majority of the evidence was from observational designs. Cross sectional studies were conducted using the JBI analytical cross sectional checklist and the cohort checklist was used where applicable. Yes, No, Unclear, and Not applicable were used to rate items. Quality appraisal did not automatically exclude studies from interpretation and sensitivity analysis unless there were significant methodological flaws.

Statistical Analysis

Pearson's r was chosen as the main effect size measure as the majority of eligible studies reported associations between social media exposure and marital cohesion-related outcomes. Convertible statistics were transformed to r where necessary. Effect sizes were transformed to Fisher's z to pool and then back transformed to Pearson's r for interpretation (Cohen, 1988; Higgins et al., 2023). A random-effects model was used because there was anticipated variation between countries, samples, platforms, exposure types and outcome measures. The pooled effect size, standard error, 95% confidence interval, Z statistic and p value were reported, with significance defined as $p < .05$.

Heterogeneity Assessment

Cochran's Q, I^2 and τ^2 were used to measure between-study heterogeneity. Q tested for the presence of more variation than sampling error, I^2 estimated the percentage of variance attributable to heterogeneity, and τ^2 estimated between-study variance. Heterogeneity was anticipated as the concept of exposure varied from Facebook use intensity, partner phubbing, social media addiction, to addictive short video use, and the pooled estimate was viewed with caution.

Moderator and Subgroup Analysis

The primary meta-analysis included only five studies, so a formal moderator analysis was not performed. Rather, exploratory subgroup analysis was conducted based on the three types of digital exposure: partner phubbing, addictive or problematic media use, and Facebook use intensity. These subgroup results were considered as exploratory (Higgins et al., 2023).

Publication Bias

Since the primary meta-analysis contained less than ten studies, caution was taken in evaluating publication bias. Funnel plot inspection was performed for transparency but Egger's test, Begg's test and fail-safe N were not formally interpreted because of low statistical power. Publication bias was not reliably confirmed or ruled out (Higgins et al., 2023; Page et al., 2021).

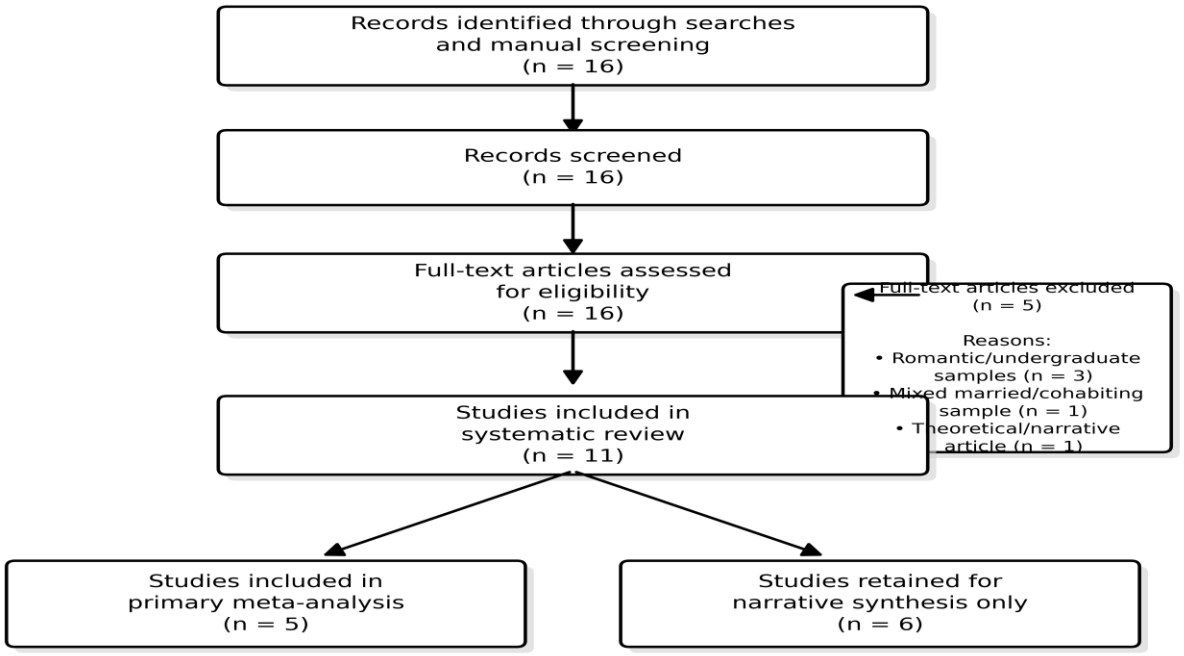
Software

Metafor package was used to perform analyses in R. The package was employed for effect-size transformation, random-effects modelling, estimation of heterogeneity, influence diagnostics, subgroup analysis, and assessment of publication-bias. Restricted maximum likelihood (REML) was used to estimate the random-effects model and a p value of less than .05 was considered significant.

Results

Study Selection

Sixteen full-text records were identified for eligibility assessment using researcher-led searches and manual screening. Studies were only included if they included married couples, married people, husbands, wives, or spouses. Articles that were only about dating relationships, undergraduate samples, or mixed married/cohabiting samples (where the married data were not separated), or non-empirical articles were not included. After screening, 11 studies were included in the systematic review, with five of them being eligible for the primary meta-analysis. The remaining six studies were included in the narrative synthesis due to their relevance, but failing to report a directly extractable or convertible effect size. The process of selecting studies is shown in Figure 1.



Note. The flow diagram shows the screening of full-text studies. Only studies involving married couples or married individuals and social media-related marital outcomes were retained.

Figure 1. Flow Diagram of Study Selection

Characteristics of Included Studies

The following characteristics of included studies were used to identify them:

The characteristics of the 11 studies included are summarised in Table 4, which were published between 2019 and 2026 in Pakistan, China, Kenya, Iran, Palestine, Turkey and Nigeria. The samples consisted of married persons, married couples, older married couples and husband–wife dyads, ranging in size from 160 to 470.

The studies differed in their definition of social media exposure, ranging from general social media usage, to Facebook usage intensity, partner phubbing, addictive short video usage, and social media addiction. Outcomes were also different and included marital satisfaction, marital conflict, husband–wife interaction, communication, cohesion, quality time, and overall marital relationship.

The majority of studies employed a cross-sectional quantitative design, with one study employing a dyadic actor–partner interdependence model. Meta-analysis was favored for direct Pearson correlations, while studies reporting regression coefficients, ANOVA, chi-square tests, path coefficients, or non-standard outcomes were included in the narrative synthesis.

Table 4

Characteristics of Included Studies

Study	Country	Sample / N	Design	Exposure Variable	Marital Outcome	Instruments / Measures	Reported Statistic	Effect Size	Meta-analysis Eligibility	DOI
Iqbal & Jami (2019)	Pakistan	302 married Facebook users	Cross-sectional model-testing	Facebook use intensity	Marital satisfaction	Facebook Use Intensity; Marital Satisfaction Scale; Facebook Jealousy; Online Surveillance; Trust Scale	r = −.01 (Facebook intensity & marital satisfaction)	r = −.01 (direct, non-sig.)	Eligible; weak direct effect. Best discussed with mediation context	10.33824/PJPR.2019.34.1.11
Wang & Zhao (2022)	China	470 married adults	Cross-sectional mediation	Partner phubbing	Marital satisfaction, interaction, conflict	Partner Phubbing Scale; Positive Marital Interaction Scale; Marital Disagreements Scale; ENRICH satisfaction subscale	r = −.35, p < .001	r = −.35	Eligible	10.1177/08944393211072231
Mutua, Wachira & Mwiti (2022)	Kenya	369 couples + clergy/ministers	Explanatory mixed-method survey	Social media use (married couples)	Marital satisfaction, cohesion, communication, quality time	Validated questionnaires, interviews, focus groups; SPSS correlation	Social media use significantly influenced all outcomes	Exact r not visible; full table needed	Systematic review eligible; meta-analysis pending exact statistic	10.71274/ijpp.v10i4.206

Study	Country	Sample / N	Design	Exposure Variable	Marital Outcome	Instruments / Measures	Reported Statistic	Effect Size	Meta-analysis Eligibility	DOI
Riahifar, Abdollahi & Vakili (2024)	Iran	160 married social media users (Tehran)	Descriptive correlational / PLS	Social network use	Marital satisfaction (interpersonal mindfulness as moderator)	Social Networks Questionnaire; ENRICH Marital Satisfaction; Interpersonal Mindfulness Scale	Path coeff.: β = −0.456, t = 13.52, p = .001	β = −0.456 (path coeff., not zero-order r)	Eligible with caution (path coefficient, not r)	10.61838/kman.aftj.5.3.2
Deng et al. (2024)	China	264 older married couples	Cross-sectional dyadic APIM	Addictive short-video platform use	Marital satisfaction & negative emotions	Short-Form Video Addiction Questionnaire; ENRICH satisfaction subscale; negative emotion items	Husband r = −.119; Wife r = −.119 (actor-level)	r = −.119 (actor-level; dyadic dependency noted)	Eligible with dyadic caution	10.3390/bs14050364
Jabali, Hamamra & Mahamid (2024)	Palestine	388 participants/couples (West Bank)	Cross-sectional survey	Social media usage patterns	Husband–wife interaction & perceived marital relationship	Author-developed 23-item social media interaction questionnaire	F = 4.014, p = .008	F convertible with caution; non-standard outcome scale	Systematic review eligible; meta-analysis caution	10.1057/s41599-024-04289-3
Ayhan et al. (2026)	Turkey	461 married individuals (≥1 year)	Descriptive cross-sectional	Social media addiction score	Marital satisfaction	Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale; Marital Satisfaction Scale	β = −0.115, t = −2.527, p = .012	β = −0.115 (adjusted regression β)	Eligible with caution (adjusted β, not zero-order r)	10.7454/hubs.asia.v30.i1.1628
Omokhabi, Omokhabi & Oloyede (2025)	Nigeria	345 married couples	Cross-sectional survey	Social media use: types, frequency, purposes	Marital conflict	Social Media Use questionnaire; Social Media Impact on Marital Conflict questionnaire	ANOVA: F = 2.156, p = .001	F convertible with caution; df structure broad	Systematic review eligible; meta-analysis caution	10.21107/sml.v8i1.27215
Zahra, Shabbir, Naeem & Mazloum (2025)	Pakistan	250 married people	Cross-sectional correlational	Partner phubbing	Marital satisfaction	Partner Phubbing Scale; ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale	r = −.515, p < .01; β = −.515, R^2 = .265	r = −.515	Eligible; quality appraisal recommended	Not reported
Agbor (2026)	Nigeria	366 respondents (385 sampled couples)	Descriptive survey	Social media engagement: duration, content type, format	Marital satisfaction & divorce propensity	Structured 4-point Likert questionnaire; Chi-square tests	χ^2(family income) = 114.898; χ^2(marriage duration) = 2.353	No clean r extractable	Systematic review only; exclude from meta-analysis unless raw data obtained	10.5281/zenodo.19068339
Anjum, Siddiquei & Rasool (2025)	Pakistan	300 married individuals	Cross-sectional correlational	Social media addiction	Marital satisfaction & psychological distress	Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale; DASS-21; Couple Satisfaction Index-32	r = .02, non-significant	r = .02 (non-sig.)	Eligible statistically; quality concerns noted (age statistics questionable)	10.63056/ACAD.004.04.1077

Quality Appraisal

The Joanna Briggs Institute Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist was used for quality appraisal. The studies included were of moderate to high methodological quality. Validated marital measures were used in stronger studies, and the married samples were well defined and extractable associations were reported. Typical study flaws were cross-sectional studies, self-report measures, convenience sampling, inadequate confounder control, and inadequate reporting of effect sizes.

Table 5

Quality Appraisal and Synthesis Decision for Included Studies

Study	Design	JBI Tool Used	Quality Level	Main Methodological Concern	Use in Synthesis
Iqbal and Jami (2019)	Cross-sectional model-testing study	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	High	Cross-sectional design limits causal inference, although the married sample and measures are clearly reported.	Meta-analysis
Wang and Zhao (2022)	Cross-sectional mediation study	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	High	Mediation was tested using cross-sectional data; causal direction cannot be confirmed.	Meta-analysis
Mutua, Wachira, and Mwiti (2022)	Explanatory mixed-method / cross-sectional survey	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Moderate	Reliance on self-report and incomplete reporting of extractable effect-size statistics.	Narrative synthesis only
Riahifar, Abdollahi, and Vakili (2024)	Descriptive correlational / PLS structural model	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Moderate	Convenience sampling and reporting of path coefficients rather than direct zero-order correlations.	Narrative synthesis only / caution
Deng et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional dyadic APIM study	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	High	Strong dyadic design, but dependency between spouses must be handled carefully in meta-analysis.	Meta-analysis with dyadic caution
Jabali, Hamamra, and Mahamid (2024)	Cross-sectional survey	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Moderate	Outcome focuses on husband–wife interaction rather than a standardised marital satisfaction scale.	Narrative synthesis only
Ayhan et al. (2026)	Descriptive cross-sectional study	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	High	Reports adjusted regression coefficients; direct zero-order association needs confirmation.	Narrative synthesis only / caution
Omokhabi, Omokhabi, and Oloyede (2025)	Cross-sectional survey	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Moderate	ANOVA-based reporting does not provide a clean direct effect size for pooling.	Narrative synthesis only

Study	Design	JBI Tool Used	Quality Level	Main Methodological Concern	Use in Synthesis
Zahraa, Shabbir, Naeem, and Mazloum (2025)	Cross-sectional correlational study	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Moderate	Effect size is clear, but reporting quality and journal visibility require caution.	Meta-analysis
Agbor (2026)	Descriptive survey	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Low to Moderate	Chi-square reporting does not provide a clean direct effect size; journal details require verification.	Narrative synthesis only
Anjum, Siddiquei, and Rasool (2025)	Cross-sectional correlational study	JBI Analytical Cross-Sectional Checklist	Moderate	Effect size is extractable, but descriptive age statistics appear inconsistent with the reported age range.	Meta-analysis with caution

Main Meta-Analysis

The quality of the evidence included was overall moderate to high. Validated measures of marital satisfaction were employed in stronger studies, and samples of married participants were clearly defined, and statistical associations were extractable. Limitations included were cross-sectional designs, self-report data, convenience or snowball sampling, limited control of confounders, and lack of reporting of effect-size data. These limitations informed the decision to include studies either in the meta-analysis or narrative synthesis.

Five studies were selected for the primary meta-analysis because they gave either directly extractable or statistically usable Pearson correlation coefficients. The common effect size measure was Pearson's r and the random-effects model was chosen because of the variability in country, sample characteristics, type of exposure, and measures used.

There was a small to moderate and negative pooled correlation between social media-related exposure and marital satisfaction: $r = -.21$, $SE = 0.109$, 95% CI [−.40, .004], $Z = -1.92$, $p = .055$. This indicates that the more one was exposed to social media, the lower their marital satisfaction, but the result was slightly non-significant. The individual and pooled effects are shown in Table 6.

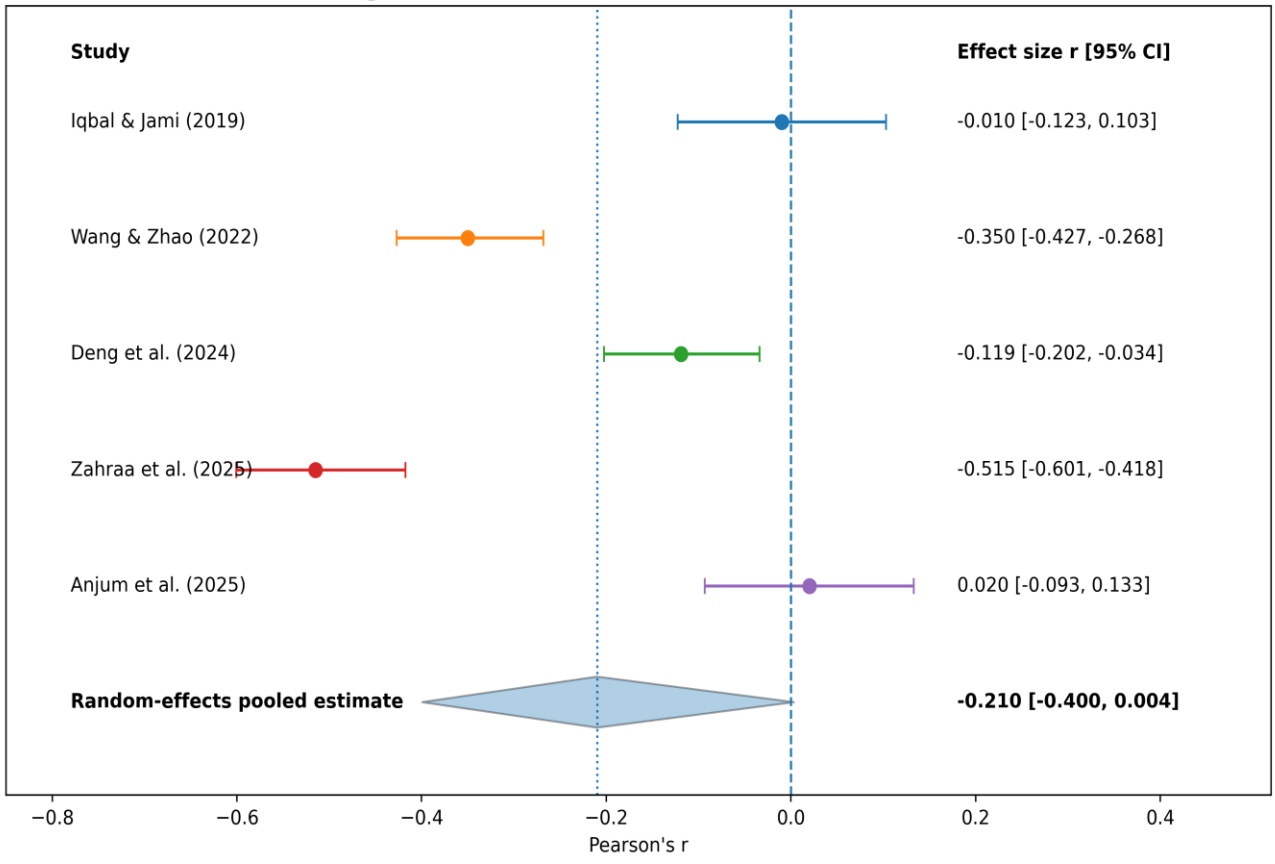
Table 6

Main Meta-Analysis Results Based on Directly Extractable Effect Sizes

Study	Country	N	Exposure	Outcome	Effect Size Used	Direction
Iqbal and Jami (2019)	Pakistan	302	Facebook use intensity	Marital satisfaction	r = −.01	Negative / negligible
Wang and Zhao (2022)	China	470	Partner phubbing	Marital satisfaction	r = −.35	Negative
Deng et al. (2024)	China	264 couples	Addictive short-video platform use	Marital satisfaction	r = −.119	Negative
Zahraa et al. (2025)	Pakistan	250	Partner phubbing	Marital satisfaction	r = −.515	Negative
Anjum et al. (2025)	Pakistan	300	Social media addiction	Marital satisfaction	r = .02	Positive / negligible

The individual effects were directionally inconsistent in magnitude, ranging from negligible associations to moderate negative associations. The strongest negative association was observed for partner phubbing.

Figure 2. Forest Plot of Overall Effect Size



Note. Negative values indicate that higher social media-related exposure is associated with lower marital satisfaction. The pooled estimate was calculated using a random-effects model.

Figure 2. Forest Plot of Overall Effect Size

Heterogeneity

Cochran's Q, I^2, and τ^2 were used to assess heterogeneity. The heterogeneity statistics indicated substantial between-study variability, $Q(4) = 72.95$, $p < .001$, $I^2 = 94.5\%$, and $\tau^2 = 0.056$. This degree of heterogeneity was anticipated as the studies included differed in the type of exposure, such as Facebook use intensity, partner phubbing, social media addiction, and use of addictive short video platforms. They also varied in terms of country, sample composition and measurement instruments.

The high I^2 value suggests that a significant proportion of the observed variation in the effect sizes was due to true differences between the studies, rather than to sampling error. Thus, the combined estimate should be used with caution and should not be considered as proof of a homogeneous effect of all social media-related exposures.

Table 6a

Pooled Meta-Analytic Estimate

k	Model	Effect Size Metric	Pooled Effect	SE	95% CI	Z	p
5	Random-effects model	Pearson's r	−0.21	0.109	−0.40 to 0.004	−1.92	.055

Table 6b

Heterogeneity Statistics

k	Q	df	p	I^2	τ^2	Interpretation
5	72.95	4	< .001	94.5%	0.056	Very high heterogeneity

Exploratory Subgroup Analysis by Type of Digital Exposure

Because of the limited number of studies in the primary meta-analysis, only exploratory descriptive subgroup analysis was performed. Studies were categorized based on type of digital exposure measured. Partner phubbing was the most strongly negatively associated with marital satisfaction, while general Facebook use intensity was not directly associated with marital satisfaction at all. The pattern indicates that the relationship-intrusive digital behaviours, not social media use per se, are more likely to be linked to marital dissatisfaction.

The subgroup results should, however, be interpreted with caution as only one or two studies were included in each of these subgroups. Thus, the analysis was considered as hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory.

Table 7

Exploratory Subgroup Analysis by Type of Digital Exposure

Subgroup / Exposure Type	Included Studies	k	Pooled r	95% CI	Interpretation
Partner phubbing	Wang and Zhao (2022); Zahraa et al. (2025)	2	−.41	−.47 to −.35	Moderate negative association; phubbing appears to be the most consistently harmful exposure.
Addictive / problematic media use	Deng et al. (2024); Anjum et al. (2025)	2	−.05	−.13 to .04	Very small and non-significant association; findings vary by platform, sample, and measurement.
Facebook use intensity	Iqbal and Jami (2019)	1	−.01	−.12 to .10	Negligible direct association; indirect pathways through jealousy and surveillance may be more relevant.

Publication Bias

Caution was used in assessing publication bias due to the limited number of studies (n = 5) in the primary quantitative synthesis. For transparency, funnel plot inspection was conducted, but with the limited number of studies, the visual asymmetry could not be interpreted with confidence.

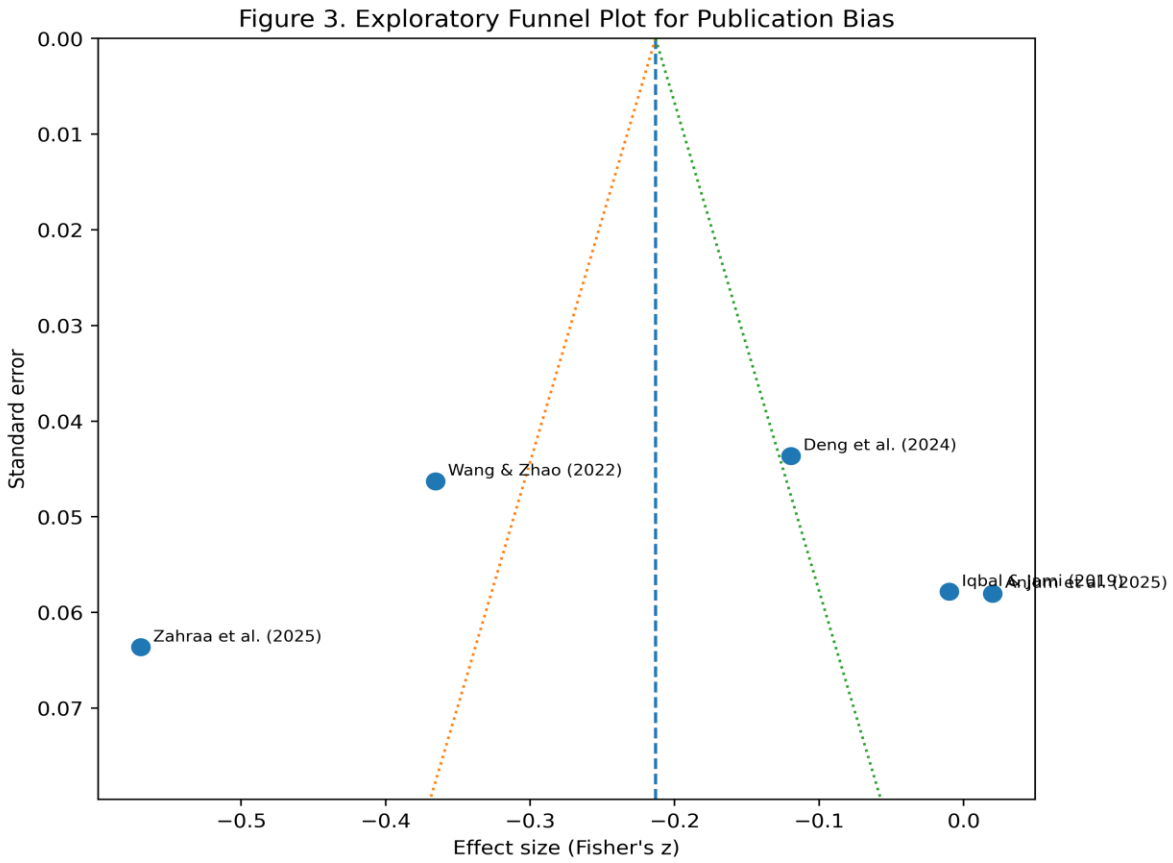
Formal small-study effect tests (e.g., Egger's regression test and Begg and Mazumdar's rank correlation test) were not formally interpreted because these tests are underpowered and may be misleading if fewer than 10 studies are available.

As a result, it was not possible to assess the reliability of the presence or absence of publication bias. There is a possibility of publication bias, which should be taken into account when interpreting the pooled results.

Table 8

Publication Bias Assessment

Test / Method	Result	Interpretation
Funnel plot inspection	Conducted visually	Visual interpretation was limited because only five studies were included in the primary meta-analysis.
Egger’s regression test	Not formally interpreted	Egger’s test was not considered reliable because k < 10.
Begg and Mazumdar rank correlation test	Not formally interpreted	Begg’s test was not considered reliable because of the small number of included studies.
Fail-safe N	Not prioritised	Fail-safe N was not emphasised because the pooled effect was marginal and heterogeneity was very high.
Overall judgement	Inconclusive	Publication bias could not be ruled out, but formal tests were underpowered.



Note. The funnel plot is presented for transparency only. Because the meta-analysis included five studies, funnel-plot asymmetry should not be interpreted as definitive evidence for or against publication bias.

Figure 3: Funnel Plot

Summary of Key Findings

Table 9 summarises the key findings of the systematic review and meta-analysis. In general, the findings indicate that social media behaviours do not have a consistent negative impact on marital outcomes. Instead, the highest negative correlations were found when digital use was intrusive, addictive, or interfering with in-person interactions with one's spouse.

The overall effect of the five meta-analysed studies was negative, although not quite significant, and the heterogeneity was large. So, the results must be taken as a probable pattern of relationships and not as causal evidence.

Table 9
Summary of Key Findings

Finding Area	Summary of Evidence	Strength of Evidence	Interpretation
Overall association	The pooled effect from five meta-analysed studies indicated a negative association between social media-related exposure and marital satisfaction.	Moderate but limited	Greater digital interference or problematic use tended to be associated with lower marital satisfaction.
Magnitude of effect	The pooled estimate was small-to-moderate, $r = -0.21$, 95% CI [−0.40, 0.004].	Limited	The association was negative but marginally non-significant, suggesting cautious interpretation.
Heterogeneity	Heterogeneity was very high, $I^2 = 94.5\%$.	Strong evidence of variability	Differences in exposure type, country, measurement tools, and sample characteristics likely explain variability.
Partner phubbing	Partner phubbing showed the strongest negative pattern across subgroup findings.	Moderate	Direct smartphone-related interruption of spousal interaction may be more damaging than general social media use.
General social media use	General Facebook or social media use intensity showed weak or inconsistent direct associations.	Limited	Frequency or duration of use alone may be less important than how use disrupts marital interaction.
Narrative synthesis	Studies not included in the pooled model generally supported the view that excessive or intrusive social media use may affect communication, cohesion, conflict, and marital satisfaction.	Moderate	The broader systematic review supports a relational-disruption explanation.
Publication bias	Publication bias could not be reliably assessed because $k < 10$.	Inconclusive	Bias cannot be ruled out; results should be interpreted conservatively.
Overall conclusion	Evidence suggests that problematic, intrusive, or addictive social media-related behaviours are associated with poorer marital cohesion-related outcomes.	Moderate but cautious	The evidence supports a negative relational pattern, but causal claims cannot be made due to cross-sectional designs.

Table 9 summarises the main findings of the review. The evidence suggests that social media-related behaviours are not always negative; the strongest negative correlations seem to be when digital use becomes intrusive, addictive, or interferes with in-person interactions with one's spouse. The overall effect was negative but not statistically significant, and there was significant heterogeneity. The results should therefore be viewed as indicative of a likely relational risk pattern, and not as causal evidence.

Discussion

This systematic review and meta-analysis aimed to explore the relationship between social media-related exposure and marital cohesion-related outcomes in married couples and married people. The review used a strict married-sample criterion and 11 studies were included in the systematic review, with five studies having sufficiently direct data for the primary meta-analysis. Overall, the results indicated a negative trend: greater digital intrusiveness, addictive use and/or relational disruption were correlated with lower marital satisfaction and related outcomes.

The pooled meta-analytic estimate was negative and small to moderate in size, r = −.21, 95% CI [−.40, .004] but did not meet the conventional threshold for statistical significance. This result should not be interpreted as an indication that the use of social media has no relevance for marriage. Instead, the findings are a result of the significant differences in the definition of digital behaviour across studies. The direct association of general Facebook use intensity with marital satisfaction was negligible, while partner phubbing had a stronger and more consistent negative association. Theoretically, this distinction is important because it implies that the relational nature of digital behaviour could be more significant than the time spent online.

The most negative relationships were found in the research on partner phubbing. Partner phubbing is a direct disruption of partner interaction, when one partner's attention is drawn away from the relationship to the smartphone or digital device. This behaviour can be felt by the other spouse as rejection, neglect or emotional unavailability. This interpretation aligns with social exchange theory which suggests that satisfaction in a relationship is influenced by the rewards, costs, fairness, and emotional investment in the relationship. Digital behaviour can be distracting, unresponsive, and can take away time from the relationship, which can lead to increased relational costs and decreased perceived marital quality.

The results are also consistent with displacement explanations. Too much or too much of the right kind of social media can take time away from communicating, emotionally connecting, engaging in shared activities, and resolving conflict. Such displacement can compromise the cohesion and exacerbate conflict in marital relationships, particularly those in which daily negotiation of responsibilities and emotional needs are necessary. This could be the reason why research on direct interference (e.g., phubbing, addictive short video use) revealed more negative patterns than research on general social media use.

But the evidence is not conclusive that all social media use is bad for marriage. Certain social media activities can facilitate communication, emotional bonding, and relationship maintenance, particularly when couples engage in these activities intentionally and openly. The issue seems to arise when use is excessive, secretive, addictive, provoking jealousy, or interfering with face-to-face interaction. Thus, the review suggests a conditional conclusion: social media is not necessarily harmful to marital relationships, but problematic patterns of use can negatively affect marital satisfaction, communication, marital cohesion and conflict management.

The high level of heterogeneity ($I^2 = 94.5\%$) suggests that the studies included were not measuring a common effect. This variation may have been due to differences in country, culture, definitions of exposure, measures of outcomes, and sample characteristics. For instance, the definition of social media use in marriage could vary by collectivist and individualist cultures, by early and long-term marriages, and by age groups. Digital displacement can manifest differently for older couples than younger couples, especially if one partner relies more on the other for emotional support and companionship.

The narrative synthesis reinforced the overall interpretation by demonstrating that several studies that were not incorporated into the pooled model also supported the overall relational-disruption pattern. These studies indicated that social media usage could have an impact on marital conflict, communication, marital cohesion, husband-wife interaction, and quality time. However, some of these studies did not provide directly extractable effect sizes or provided effect sizes in a format not appropriate for the main pooled analysis. Their presence in the narrative synthesis ensured that the evidence was broadened but also statistically sound in the meta-analysis.

In practice, the results indicate that marital counselling and family education programs should emphasize not only reducing the use of social media in marriage, but also enhancing the boundaries of social media in marriage. It can be helpful for couples to talk about their expectations regarding phone use during meals, conversations, at bedtime, during leisure time, and at times when emotions are high. Jealousy, surveillance, secrecy, online alternatives, compulsive checking behaviours are also addressed. This is especially significant as digital conflict can feel normal or insignificant in the short term but can lead to emotional separation and unhappiness over time.

These findings should be interpreted cautiously. The majority of studies included were cross-sectional and used self-report measures, limiting the ability to make causal inferences. It is possible that unhappy spouses use social media more often, not that social media use leads to unhappiness. Alternatively, there may be third variables that affect the relationship between social media use and marital dissatisfaction,

such as personality, attachment anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, or prior marital conflict. The results are thus "associational," and do not prove cause.

Limitations

There are some limitations of this review that should be taken into account in interpreting the results. Firstly, the number of studies in the primary meta-analysis was limited. A total of 11 studies met the criteria for inclusion in the systematic review, but only five studies had data that could be directly extracted or statistically pooled into an effect size for analysis. This reduced the statistical power of the meta-analysis and hampered the possibility of testing for moderators and/or publication bias.

Second, there was significant variation between the studies included. There were differences among the studies in terms of the country, cultural context, sample characteristics, type of digital exposure, and marital outcome measures. Some studies assessed general social media or Facebook use, while others focused on partner phubbing, social media addiction, or addictive use of short video platforms. The differences reduce the usefulness of the pooled effect as a representative of a single uniform relationship.

Third, the majority of the studies included were cross-sectional observational studies. Thus, no causal inferences can be made. The negative link between intrusive digital behaviour and marital satisfaction could suggest that the use of digital media is a risk for marital dissatisfaction, but it could also be a sign of reverse causality, where dissatisfied partners use digital media more often. Other factors like pre-existing marital conflict, psychological distress, attachment insecurity, loneliness, and personality characteristics may also account for the relationship.

Fourth, self-report measures were extensively used in the review. There is a possibility of recall bias, social desirability bias, and subjective interpretation in the self-reported social media use, partner phubbing, marital satisfaction, and marital conflict. Very few studies relied on behavioural logs, partner-reported measures or longitudinal data; this decreases the confidence in the accuracy of the reported associations.

Fifth, a few relevant studies were included in the narrative synthesis but not the primary meta-analysis because they did not report a direct Pearson correlation or a clearly convertible statistic. This could have limited the extent of the quantitative synthesis. This was, however, the only way to maintain the statistical rigour and prevent mixing non-equivalent effect estimates.

Lastly, the extent of publication bias was not reliably assessed as there were fewer than ten studies included in the main meta-analysis. The funnel plots were performed for transparency only and formal

tests (e.g. Egger's and Begg's tests) were not applied. Thus, publication bias and/or small-study effects may not be excluded.

Further studies need to address difficulties in methodology and concepts found in this review. To better understand the relationship between problematic SUS and poor marital outcomes or the other way around, more longitudinal and dyadic studies are required. Researchers should examine social media use in general and relationally disruptive behaviours (RDBS) such as partner phubbing, online monitoring, jealousy, compulsive checking. Standardised, validated measures of marital outcome should also be used in future research to enhance the comparability of research. Future meta-analyses should include complete statistical reporting, including correlations, confidence intervals, regression coefficients, standard errors, and sample sizes. Additional and higher quality evidence is also required from underrepresented areas, as well as intervention studies evaluating digital-boundary, communication, mindfulness and counselling programmes.

Conclusion

This systematic review and meta-analysis aimed to explore the relationship between social media-related exposure and marital cohesion-related outcomes in married couples/individuals. Based on a strict married-sample criterion, 11 studies were included in the systematic review and five studies in the primary meta-analysis. The combined results showed a small to moderate negative correlation between exposure to social media and marital satisfaction, but this was just shy of statistical significance.

The results indicate that social media use cannot be considered as a one-size-fits-all threat to marriage. Instead, the evidence points to the most problematic forms of digital behaviour being the intrusive, addictive and disruptive forms of digital engagement with face-to-face spousal interaction. Partner phubbing had the strongest negative pattern, while the direct association with the general intensity of Facebook use was negligible. This is significant because it implies that the relational context and meaning of digital behaviour may be more important than the amount of time spent online.

The review is supportive of a cautious interpretation of the relational-risk: problematic online use of social media could lead to decreased marital satisfaction, communication, cohesion, and conflict management, especially through decreased attention, emotional responsiveness, and shared couple time. Most of the studies included were, however, cross-sectional, and self-report questionnaires were used, which means that causal inferences cannot be made. Longitudinal, dyadic, and intervention studies are required to further elucidate mechanisms and provide evidence-based guidance for healthy digital boundaries in marriage.

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