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The Influence of Digital Communication Culture on Emotional Intimacy in Contemporary Marriages

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how digital communication culture influences emotional intimacy in contemporary marriages, focusing on the lived experiences of married individuals in Pakistan. The study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data from 24 married participants (12 men and 12 women) residing in urban areas of Pakistan. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, marital duration, and professional background. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with the aid of NVivo software. The data were coded inductively, allowing key themes and subthemes to emerge from the participants' narratives. Analysis yielded four main thematic categories: (1) digital affection and emotional expression, including the use of emojis, text rituals, and photo sharing as symbols of love; (2) digital miscommunication and conflict, where delayed replies, tone misinterpretation, and online surveillance contributed to emotional tension; (3) digital presence and perceived availability, highlighting the paradox of physical proximity and emotional distance caused by screen distractions; and (4) boundaries, privacy, and digital autonomy, reflecting how couples negotiate trust, control, and identity in digital spaces. Participants emphasized both the enriching and disruptive potentials of digital tools in shaping emotional closeness, conflict resolution, and relational satisfaction. Digital communication plays a dual role in modern marital intimacy, acting as both a facilitator of emotional connection and a source of misunderstanding and disconnection. The findings underscore the need for intentional digital boundaries, shared communication norms, and culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions to support marital intimacy in digitally saturated environments.

Keywords: digital communication, emotional intimacy, marriage, qualitative research, social media, marital relationships, Pakistan, digital culture, couple communication, technology and relationships

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Introduction

In the evolving landscape of human relationships, the advent of digital communication technologies has profoundly reshaped the foundations of emotional intimacy within marriages. The transition from analog to digital modes of interaction has created new avenues for couples to maintain closeness, while simultaneously introducing complexities that challenge traditional relational dynamics. Emotional intimacy—defined as a deep sense of connection, trust, and shared understanding between spouses—now unfolds not only in physical settings but also through smartphones, apps, and social media platforms (Khojastehmehr et al., 2021). As couples navigate this digital terrain, the quality, rhythm, and symbolism of communication become central to shaping marital closeness and distance.



Digital communication culture, characterized by text messaging, voice and video calls, social media interactions, and algorithm-driven content exposure, has emerged as both a facilitator and disruptor of emotional bonds. On one hand, it enables constant contact, virtual affection, and immediacy of support, thereby reinforcing perceived presence and relational satisfaction (Dessyrianti & Setiawan, 2023; Farhan & Ismail, 2022). On the other hand, overexposure to online distractions, misinterpretations of digital tone, and breaches of privacy pose risks to the emotional core of contemporary marriages (Durmuş, 2024; Yahiiaiev et al., 2020). This dual role of digital communication has led scholars to explore its nuanced impact on intimacy formation, conflict patterns, emotional regulation, and partner responsiveness in married life.

Recent empirical studies have demonstrated that social media and messaging platforms mediate not only the frequency of interaction but also the nature and interpretation of emotional signals (Mehmood et al., 2025; Sohn et al., 2018). For example, digital cues such as emojis, typing indicators, or “seen” receipts now carry emotional weight, often becoming proxies for verbal affirmation or affection. In dual-earner households, where physical co-presence may be limited, such cues can provide critical reassurance and a sense of relational continuity (Dessyrianti & Setiawan, 2023). However, when expectations of availability are mismatched, or digital expressions fail to resonate emotionally, couples may experience misattunement and frustration. This paradox raises the question: does digital communication cultivate intimacy, or does it manufacture illusions of it?

Cultural narratives surrounding digital intimacy vary significantly across contexts. In societies such as Pakistan—where socio-religious norms intersect with increasing digital penetration—marriages are experiencing a generational tension between traditional forms of emotional expression and technologically mediated ones (Haque et al., 2022; Rahma & Salma, 2025). The performative dimension of online relationships, such as public displays of affection on social media or visibility of marital milestones, has introduced a layer of “extimacy”—a term describing the public sharing of intimate life to gain social validation (Mateus, 2024). While such acts may enhance partner validation, they can also subject couples to external scrutiny, peer comparison, and heightened anxiety around self-presentation and partner loyalty.

Furthermore, digital infrastructures do not merely host intimate exchanges; they shape them. As Ridder and colleagues note, platforms are designed with specific affordances and constraints that mediate how intimacy is initiated, maintained, and perceived (Ridder et al., 2020). Algorithmic filtering of content, behavioral surveillance through online activity, and the gamification of interaction (e.g., Snapstreaks, likes) subtly co-produce emotional intimacy in ways that are often invisible but psychologically potent. Such mechanisms can influence expectations around partner engagement, digital availability, and symbolic expressions of love, often leading to asymmetries in digital labor and emotional investments within the marriage (Fu, 2024).

Psychological studies have underscored the importance of trust, communication competence, and perceived responsiveness in maintaining marital intimacy in digitally mediated relationships (Inayah et al., 2025; Obradović & Obradović, 2021). Communication breakdowns—whether due to delayed replies, ambiguous textual tone, or excessive screen time—can produce emotional disconnection and erode trust, particularly in conflict-laden interactions (Durmuş, 2024; Malhotra, 2023). Some couples adopt compensatory strategies such as video calls, digital rituals, or scheduled “tech-free” time to reclaim lost intimacy and foster reconnection (Alimoradi et al., 2019; Hani et al., 2024). Nevertheless, such efforts may not equally serve all couples, especially those experiencing pre-existing vulnerabilities such as low emotional expressiveness, cultural mismatch, or digital overdependence.

In the realm of affective labor, digital culture introduces both agency and surveillance. On one hand, digital platforms empower individuals—especially women—to assert emotional needs, initiate conversations, and express affection without time-place constraints (Burge, 2024). On the other hand, constant monitoring of partner behaviors, such as checking last-seen timestamps or scrutinizing likes and comments, may contribute to increased relational anxiety and emotional fatigue

(Timoshkin, 2023; Yahiaiev et al., 2020). As Pazil's research on long-distance friendships shows, even seemingly benign digital signals can become emotionally charged in the absence of physical cues, underscoring the need for shared interpretive frameworks between partners (Pazil, 2018).

A socio-semiotic perspective reveals how digital culture redefines what is considered emotionally meaningful. For instance, symbolic interactions—such as tagging a partner in a meme, using personalized GIFs, or updating relationship status—are often experienced as expressions of love and attention (Bantugan, 2024; Mateus, 2024). These acts, though performative, may fulfill psychological needs for validation, identity reinforcement, and emotional reassurance. However, they also risk commodifying intimacy, reducing it to clickable gestures that may not reflect deeper emotional engagement (Prigozhin, 2020). In this regard, some scholars argue that the digitalization of affection contributes to a culture of “managed vulnerability,” where emotions are curated for visibility but not always processed in depth (Thelandersson, 2020).

Cross-cultural examinations have further revealed that the digital transformation of intimacy is not monolithic. In Asian, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian contexts, emotional intimacy in marriages is increasingly negotiated through hybrid modes—blending verbal, textual, visual, and performative communication (Manasikana & Noviani, 2021; Mehmood et al., 2025). In these settings, digital communication may serve as a buffer against social constraints, allowing couples to express vulnerability, desire, or disagreement in more mediated and culturally acceptable ways. Simultaneously, these same technologies can amplify tensions, especially in extended family systems where digital visibility invites social interference (Farhan & Ismail, 2022; Haque et al., 2022).

From a therapeutic and interventionist standpoint, the evolving interplay between digital communication and emotional intimacy invites a reevaluation of marital counseling practices. Traditional models that emphasize face-to-face emotional disclosure may need to be adapted to account for how couples bond, argue, and reconcile through digital interfaces (Khojastehmehr et al., 2021; Kim & Cho, 2023). Therapists and counselors increasingly incorporate discussions about texting patterns, social media boundaries, and online emotional triggers into their sessions, reflecting the growing relevance of digital culture in relational wellbeing.

Despite the rich body of literature exploring digital intimacy, several gaps remain. Much of the current research is concentrated in Western contexts or among young, dating populations. Far less is known about how digital communication culture impacts emotional intimacy within married couples in collectivistic and religiously conservative societies such as Pakistan. Moreover, existing studies often adopt quantitative measures, overlooking the subjective, lived experiences of couples as they navigate emotional closeness through screens. This qualitative study aims to fill that gap by exploring the lived experiences of married individuals in Pakistan regarding how digital communication influences their emotional intimacy.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an exploratory approach to understand the nuanced influence of digital communication culture on emotional intimacy within contemporary marriages. The qualitative methodology was chosen due to its capacity to capture the depth and complexity of interpersonal phenomena such as emotional closeness, digital interaction patterns, and marital dynamics.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of diverse marital experiences across age, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. A total of 24 married individuals (12 women and 12 men) residing in various urban centers of Pakistan participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 years and had been married for a minimum

of three years, ensuring that they had sufficient relational history to reflect on patterns of digital communication and its emotional implications. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new conceptual insights were emerging from additional data.

Measures

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method was chosen to facilitate open dialogue while maintaining focus on core themes related to digital communication practices and emotional intimacy. The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing participants' experiences with text messaging, social media, voice and video calls, digital misunderstandings, and the impact of online communication on emotional closeness, conflict, and trust in their marriages.

Each interview lasted between 45 to 70 minutes and was conducted in Urdu or English, depending on the participant's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. To ensure ethical compliance, participants were provided with informed consent forms, and the study protocol was approved by an institutional ethical review board.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis method as described by Braun and Clarke. After transcription, all data were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. An inductive approach was used, allowing patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data without being constrained by predefined categories.

Initial coding involved identifying significant units of meaning related to emotional connection, digital habits, and relational dynamics. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, including "digital expressions of affection," "tech-facilitated conflict," "presence versus absence in digital spaces," and "emotional distancing through screen time." Coding was iterative, and the research team continuously refined the thematic map until a coherent structure representing the participants' lived experiences was achieved.

Trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process. Reflexivity was also practiced to minimize researcher bias, with memos maintained to document analytic decisions and reflections throughout the study.

Findings and Results

A total of 24 participants (12 males and 12 females) took part in the study, all of whom were legally married and residing in various urban regions of Pakistan, including Lahore (n = 8), Karachi (n = 6), Islamabad (n = 5), and Peshawar (n = 5). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 50 years, with the majority (n = 15) between 30 and 40 years old. Regarding educational background, 10 participants held a bachelor's degree, 9 held a master's degree, and 5 had completed only secondary education. In terms of marital duration, 7 participants had been married for 3–5 years, 10 participants for 6–10 years, and the remaining 7 for over a decade. All participants reported regular use of digital communication platforms, including WhatsApp (n = 24), Facebook (n = 18), Instagram (n = 13), and video calling apps such as Zoom or Google Meet (n = 9). The sample included both dual-income couples (n = 14) and households with one working spouse (n = 10), allowing for a diverse range of experiences regarding digital communication practices in marital relationships.

Table 1. Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts on the Influence of Digital Communication Culture on Emotional Intimacy in Contemporary Marriages

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Digital Affection and Emotional Expression	Emoji and Text-Based Affection	Use of heart emojis, “I miss you” texts, spontaneous compliments, pet names in chat, emotional tone in texts
	Virtual Love Languages	Sharing memes of affection, voice notes as intimacy, romantic goodnight texts, playlist sharing
	Frequency of Digital Check-ins	“Good morning” messages, lunch updates, check-in calls, end-of-day chats, being “digitally present”
	Visual Intimacy via Media Sharing	Sharing selfies, photo memories, video clips, family albums, status updates with spouse
	Celebration and Acknowledgment Online	Anniversary posts, public appreciation on Facebook, tagging in couple quotes, birthday greetings
2. Digital Miscommunication and Conflict	Misreading of Digital Tone	Absence of punctuation, lack of emojis misinterpreted, short replies seen as anger, ghosting impressions
	Delayed Responses and Perceived Neglect	“Left on seen”, waiting hours for a reply, ignored messages, anger over non-responsiveness
	Public vs. Private Disagreements	Arguments in comment sections, passive-aggressive posts, family seeing online conflict
	Control and Surveillance Behaviors	Checking last seen, location tracking apps, screen time suspicion, message deleting paranoia
	Overdependence on Digital Medium for Conflict Resolution	Avoiding face-to-face arguments, texting instead of talking, unresolved issues over chat
3. Digital Presence and Perceived Availability	Parallel Presence (Digital but Distant)	Browsing during conversations, scrolling during meals, watching reels alone, background presence
	Expectation of Constant Availability	24/7 access, “Why didn’t you reply?”, online = must reply, digital immediacy pressure
	Shared Digital Spaces	Watching YouTube together, co-browsing on phones, commenting on same posts, playing mobile games together
	Digital Rituals	Goodnight messages, video calls before bed, daily GIF exchange, prayer reminders
	Disruption of Offline Quality Time	Ignored during dates, phones on dinner table, TV and phone combo distraction, notifications in conversations
4. Boundaries, Privacy, and Digital Autonomy	Negotiation of Digital Boundaries	Discussing app usage, phone password sharing rules, “Do Not Disturb” periods, time-off agreements
	Individual vs. Shared Accounts	Joint Facebook accounts, WhatsApp group overlap, email access sharing, couples using each other’s phones
	Trust and Privacy in Messaging Apps	Checking each other’s messages, asking for chats to be shown, conflict over private inbox
	Digital Detox and Reconnection Strategies	Weekend phone-free rules, app uninstalling agreements, social media breaks, walking without phones
	Exposure to External Relationships Online	Likes from others, commenting on opposite-gender posts, emotional infidelity suspicion, past ex reappearing
	Digital Identity and Self-Presentation in Marriage	How one presents themselves online, posting selfies without spouse, influencer behaviors, overly curated image

1. Digital Affection and Emotional Expression

Emoji and Text-Based Affection. Participants frequently mentioned the use of emojis and affectionate phrases as a form of emotional expression in digital conversations. Emojis like hearts, kisses, and smiley faces were viewed as symbolic yet meaningful. One participant shared, *“When he sends me just a heart emoji, I know he’s thinking of me even if he’s busy.”* Others described using pet names in chat or short, emotionally warm texts to maintain a sense of closeness during the day.

Virtual Love Languages. Several participants spoke about using digital platforms to express affection in creative ways. These included sending personalized memes, audio messages, and curated playlists. One woman explained, *“He once made a playlist and named it after me. I listen to it when I miss him, and it brings us closer.”* Such actions were perceived as modern adaptations of traditional love expressions.

Frequency of Digital Check-ins. Regular digital check-ins were noted as essential to sustaining emotional intimacy. Participants highlighted good morning texts, midday updates, and end-of-day conversations as ways of feeling connected. A male respondent explained, *“Even if we’re not together, texting her after lunch makes her feel I’m with her.”* This habit created a rhythm of emotional presence throughout the day.

Visual Intimacy via Media Sharing. Sharing photos, video clips, or snapshots of daily life was another recurring pattern. Couples often exchanged selfies, vacation photos, or even humorous content. One participant noted, *“When I send her a picture of my lunch or the place I’m sitting in, it’s like I’m inviting her into my world.”* These visual exchanges served to reinforce emotional bonds.

Celebration and Acknowledgment Online. Digital platforms were commonly used to publicly affirm love and appreciation during anniversaries or birthdays. Several participants mentioned how posting about one another on Facebook or Instagram helped validate the relationship. As one respondent stated, *“He posted our wedding picture on our anniversary—it meant a lot to me.”* These acts, though virtual, were seen as emotionally potent.

2. Digital Miscommunication and Conflict

Misreading of Digital Tone. A prevalent theme was the ease with which tone and intention are misinterpreted in digital texts. The absence of vocal tone or facial cues often led to misunderstanding. One woman explained, *“If he replies ‘ok’ without an emoji, I start overthinking. Is he angry? Distant?”* Participants stressed how even minor textual cues could spark emotional tension.

Delayed Responses and Perceived Neglect. Delays in digital replies often triggered feelings of rejection or emotional abandonment. Many shared experiences of conflict resulting from being “left on seen.” As one male participant revealed, *“When she reads my message but doesn’t reply for hours, I feel ignored, like I don’t matter.”* The expectation of immediacy has raised emotional stakes in marital communication.

Public vs. Private Disagreements. Social media platforms occasionally became battlegrounds for couples. Participants reported arguments unfolding in comment sections or through indirect posts. One woman said, *“He once liked his ex’s photo and I commented sarcastically—his whole family saw it.”* These digital confrontations created emotional rifts that often extended offline.

Control and Surveillance Behaviors. Monitoring behaviors were common, with participants citing experiences of being checked on through app activity, last-seen indicators, or deleted messages. As one participant admitted, *“She asks why I was online but didn’t reply, or why I deleted a chat—sometimes I feel like I’m under digital watch.”* These practices fueled suspicion and reduced trust.

Overdependence on Digital Medium for Conflict Resolution. Many couples reported handling conflicts primarily through text messages rather than in person. This often led to unresolved issues or escalated misunderstandings. A participant noted, *“We argue through WhatsApp and then ignore each other. It just builds distance instead of solving anything.”* The lack of emotional nuance in text was seen as a limitation in conflict management.

3. Digital Presence and Perceived Availability

Parallel Presence (Digital but Distant). Despite physical proximity, many participants described feeling emotionally disconnected due to digital distractions. One woman explained, *“We’re in the same room, but he’s scrolling his phone, not really with me.”* This digital disconnection was experienced as a subtle form of emotional absence.

Expectation of Constant Availability. Marital expectations have evolved with the digital age. Participants reported pressure to respond immediately to messages. A husband stated, *“If I don’t reply in five minutes, she thinks I’m ignoring her.”* This constant demand for availability often led to stress and emotional friction.

Shared Digital Spaces. Some participants shared that joint digital activities—such as watching videos together or playing mobile games—served as bonding moments. A participant remarked, *“We always watch funny videos on YouTube together. It makes us laugh and feel close.”* These shared experiences fostered a sense of companionship.

Digital Rituals. Routine digital habits, like goodnight messages or daily check-ins via call or chat, were seen as symbols of emotional consistency. One participant shared, *“No matter how late he comes home, he always sends me a goodnight voice note.”* These rituals cultivated emotional reassurance.

Disruption of Offline Quality Time. Several participants reported that their offline moments were frequently disrupted by digital distractions. Phones at the dinner table, notifications during conversations, and scrolling during shared time were common complaints. A woman noted, *“I try to talk, but he’s replying to emails. I feel invisible.”*

4. Boundaries, Privacy, and Digital Autonomy

Negotiation of Digital Boundaries. Couples described ongoing negotiations around digital boundaries—what to share, when to reply, or how to manage screen time. One participant explained, *“We agreed not to use phones after 10 p.m. It helps us talk more before sleeping.”* These agreements were seen as essential for protecting emotional space.

Individual vs. Shared Accounts. There was variation in how couples managed their digital identities. Some preferred joint accounts to foster transparency, while others emphasized personal space. A respondent shared, *“We have a shared Instagram, but I still like having my own WhatsApp—it’s about balance.”*

Trust and Privacy in Messaging Apps. Checking each other’s messages was a source of both reassurance and conflict. One participant said, *“I let her read my messages when she’s anxious. But sometimes I feel it invades my space.”* These practices highlighted the tension between transparency and autonomy.

Digital Detox and Reconnection Strategies. Several couples adopted digital detoxes as a way to restore intimacy. Weekend phone bans or social media breaks were cited as helpful. As one participant put it, *“When we go to the beach, we keep our phones off. It’s like we rediscover each other.”*

Exposure to External Relationships Online. Online interactions with outsiders—such as liking or commenting on others’ posts—sometimes created jealousy or emotional insecurity. One woman stated, *“He commented on a girl’s photo. It wasn’t flirty, but I felt betrayed.”* These digital micro-interactions had real emotional consequences.

Digital Identity and Self-Presentation in Marriage. How individuals portrayed themselves online also influenced emotional closeness. Some felt that curated online personas created distance. A participant explained, *“She posts like she’s single—no mention of me. It hurts.”* The digital self was seen as an extension of the relational self.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the influence of digital communication culture on emotional intimacy in contemporary marriages through a qualitative lens, using semi-structured interviews with 24 married individuals in Pakistan. The findings yielded four main thematic categories: digital affection and emotional expression; digital miscommunication and conflict; digital presence and perceived availability; and boundaries, privacy, and digital autonomy. Each category included rich subthemes that illuminated how couples navigate emotional closeness in a technology-saturated environment. These results suggest that digital communication has become not merely a tool for interaction but a dynamic environment in which emotional intimacy is constantly shaped, negotiated, and sometimes destabilized.

Participants consistently emphasized the emotional significance of small digital gestures—emojis, affectionate texts, video calls, and photo sharing—as part of a broader repertoire of intimacy-building behaviors. These findings align with prior research highlighting how digital cues such as emojis, typing indicators, and personalized content function as modern expressions of

affection that reinforce perceived connection (Mateus, 2024; Sohn et al., 2018). The emotional weight attributed to these symbolic exchanges suggests that digital culture has introduced new forms of “love language,” with participants often interpreting such gestures as extensions of their partner’s attentiveness and emotional presence (Mehmood et al., 2025). In line with Dessyrianti and Setiawan’s findings, these practices appear especially important in dual-earner marriages, where physical presence may be limited and emotional connection must be maintained asynchronously (Dessyrianti & Setiawan, 2023).

However, the study also revealed how these same digital gestures could become sources of conflict or miscommunication. Several participants reported emotional dissonance arising from delayed responses, ambiguous tone in text messages, or lack of acknowledgment on social media. This reflects what Ridder et al. describe as the infrastructural fragility of digital intimacy—where relational meaning is embedded in platform-specific behaviors that are highly interpretable (Ridder et al., 2020). Misreading a short reply or being “left on seen” was experienced as emotional rejection by some participants, a finding consistent with prior research indicating that digital silence can evoke feelings of abandonment or neglect (Yahiaiev et al., 2020). Moreover, the expectation of constant digital availability emerged as a recurrent pressure point in many marriages, echoing Sohn et al.’s argument that digital connectivity breeds emotional expectations that are often unsustainable (Sohn et al., 2018).

Another salient theme was the phenomenon of “parallel presence”—a state where spouses are physically co-present but emotionally disengaged due to digital distractions such as social media scrolling, gaming, or content streaming. Participants described feeling ignored, invisible, or emotionally sidelined when their partners prioritized screen interactions over shared offline moments. This finding is particularly relevant in the context of Thelandersson’s conceptualization of “mediated intimacies,” where the interface between technology and affective labor often displaces embodied relational presence (Thelandersson, 2020). Participants’ accounts suggest that digital cohabitation does not automatically translate into emotional closeness; instead, it may lead to an experience of emotional distancing masked by physical proximity.

In this context, couples adopted various strategies to reestablish emotional connection, such as engaging in digital rituals (e.g., nightly goodnight texts or shared media viewing), implementing tech-free time, or negotiating digital boundaries. These coping strategies resonate with the findings of Alimoradi et al., who demonstrated that intentional digital intimacy behaviors could enhance sexual and emotional satisfaction in relationships (Alimoradi et al., 2019). Similarly, couples in this study emphasized the role of digital rituals as relational anchors—reliable, emotionally significant patterns that provided stability and reassurance amid the flux of daily life. This aligns with Inayah et al.’s application of Uncertainty Reduction Theory in early marital stages, which suggests that predictable communication routines foster trust and emotional closeness (Inayah et al., 2025).

Yet, the boundary between healthy digital intimacy and emotional surveillance was often blurred. Many participants reported feelings of being monitored or emotionally micromanaged through digital tools—such as frequent checking of last-seen status, questioning over deleted messages, or pressure to share passwords. These patterns echo concerns raised by Hani et al. regarding how digital platforms facilitate interpersonal control disguised as care or connection (Hani et al., 2024). As Pazil notes in the context of long-distance friendships, the intensity of emotional monitoring in digital spaces may not reflect deep trust but rather heightened insecurity (Pazil, 2018). In the marital context, such practices risk undermining emotional autonomy and reducing intimacy to behavioral compliance.

The public nature of social media also emerged as a site of emotional negotiation. For some couples, public acknowledgment on digital platforms—such as posting photos together, celebrating anniversaries online, or tagging each other in romantic content—was viewed as affirming and intimacy-enhancing. For others, it created pressure to perform relational happiness for an audience, introducing comparison and insecurity. This duality is captured in Mateus’s analysis of “extimacy,” where private

affection becomes a public currency with both relational and reputational consequences (Mateus, 2024). Moreover, women participants were more likely to interpret social media posts (or their absence) as reflections of emotional investment, mirroring the gendered patterns of affective labor discussed by Burge in her study on cross-cultural marriage narratives (Burge, 2024).

Participants' accounts also revealed that the meaning of digital intimacy is highly contextual. Cultural and religious norms in Pakistan shape what is considered appropriate, expressive, or transgressive in marital communication. For instance, some participants hesitated to express affection openly online due to familial or societal scrutiny, while others used private digital spaces (e.g., encrypted messaging) to maintain emotional closeness. This cultural ambivalence reflects Rahma and Salma's analysis of social change and marriage behavior in Muslim contexts, where traditional values coexist with emerging digital norms (Rahma & Salma, 2025). The transformation of intimacy, therefore, does not occur in a vacuum but is deeply embedded in cultural scripts, gender expectations, and familial dynamics.

Additionally, digital engagement with external networks (e.g., ex-partners, colleagues, influencers) occasionally triggered emotional insecurity, suspicion, or jealousy. The perception that one's partner was emotionally invested elsewhere—despite no physical infidelity—was described by some participants as “digital betrayal.” This aligns with Timoshkin's work on cross-border intimacy and nationalism, where the emotional implications of online interactions transcend physical boundaries and cultural codes (Timoshkin, 2023). It also parallels Malhotra's clinical observations on sociocultural disruptions in marital intimacy, where digital engagement can serve both as an escape and a threat to relational stability (Malhotra, 2023).

Interestingly, not all participants viewed digital intimacy negatively. Some regarded digital tools as essential for maintaining emotional equilibrium, especially in long-distance or high-conflict marriages. In these cases, text messaging or video calling provided a “buffer zone” that allowed emotional regulation before confrontation. This resonates with Manasikana and Noviani's findings on how media technologies facilitate both distancing and closeness in Indonesian marital contexts (Manasikana & Noviani, 2021). Similarly, Fu's study on adolescents' marriage attitudes suggests that digital engagement may serve as a preparatory space for future relational behavior, fostering communicative confidence and emotional resilience (Fu, 2024).

Taken together, the findings of this study underscore that digital communication culture is not a monolithic force but a fluid and context-dependent matrix in which emotional intimacy is co-constructed. Digital interactions can deepen relational meaning, provide emotional scaffolding, and sustain affection across time and space. At the same time, they can destabilize intimacy through overexposure, emotional misattunement, and surveillance. As digital infrastructures become further integrated into everyday life, understanding how couples negotiate emotional closeness within these spaces becomes vital for both scholars and practitioners.

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 married individuals in urban Pakistan, which may not fully capture the diversity of marital experiences across rural, less connected, or culturally distinct populations. Second, the self-reported nature of the data may have been influenced by social desirability bias, especially regarding sensitive issues like digital jealousy or surveillance. Third, the study did not account for same-sex couples or polyamorous relationships, whose experiences of digital intimacy may differ substantially. Additionally, technological literacy and access were not controlled for, which may influence how participants engage with digital tools. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not account for how digital communication patterns evolve over time within long-term relationships.

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of digital communication on emotional intimacy, examining how patterns of online interaction evolve through different stages of marriage. Including participants from varied geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds would enrich the analysis and enhance generalizability. Comparative studies between digitally “native” couples and those with less technological exposure could also reveal generational shifts in digital intimacy

norms. Furthermore, mixed-method designs that incorporate behavioral data (e.g., text frequency, emoji use, or screen time) alongside qualitative narratives could offer a more holistic understanding of relational dynamics. Finally, research into therapeutic interventions that address digital miscommunication could offer practical tools for couples navigating tech-mediated emotional landscapes.

Marriage counselors and therapists should integrate digital communication analysis into their assessment of marital satisfaction and emotional intimacy. Training couples to develop shared digital boundaries, clarify emotional expectations in text-based exchanges, and distinguish between performative and authentic digital intimacy may help prevent misunderstandings. Educators and religious leaders could also promote digital literacy in premarital counseling programs, equipping couples with skills to manage online boundaries and conflicts constructively. Additionally, couples should be encouraged to co-create digital rituals that reinforce affection and mutual presence while balancing online interaction with offline connection.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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