



Love, Likes, and Life after Marriage: Social Media's Role in Women's Psychological Freedom and Health

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Abstract

This in-depth study tested the multifaceted relationship between the use of social media and women's psychological liberation and well-being following marriage through systematic research synthesis of existing research across various nations and cultural settings. The inquiry integrated results from longitudinal studies, cross-cultural studies, and theoretical models in an attempt to comprehend how new digital technologies transformed women's psychological scenery in marriage relationships. The study examined data from more than 17,000 married women from a variety of geographical locations, including a four-year Chinese longitudinal panel study (2016-2020) with nationally representative data from the Chinese Family Panel Studies, cross-sectional study from Nepal with 9,875 married women, and meta-analyses exploring digital empowerment effects among several populations.

The study found a double-edged effect of social media among married women's mental health and autonomy. Direct positive impacts were repeatedly exhibited, with internet users having much lower levels of depression than non-users ($p < 0.001$), better social support networks, greater access to health information, and increased decision-making independence in sexual and reproductive health issues. Women with continuous media exposure had 28.4% levels of autonomy compared to 17.5% in the non-media-exposure group. Nevertheless, the study found intricate indirect mechanisms through changed marital relations, in which women's use of social media reduced their satisfaction with the household chores contributions of their spouses, producing a "passive mediating effect" on satisfaction in the overall relationship.

The authors identified four aspects of digital empowerment impacting married women: cognitive empowerment through information access, psychological empowerment through increased self-efficacy, social empowerment through membership in the community, and economic empowerment through entrepreneurial access. The variations in culture were considerable, and particularly salient benefits were seen in women within conventional societies where online platforms offered significant avenues of resistance to gender norms and access to support networks. The study concluded that although social media greatly improved the psychological autonomy and mental health of women directly, outcomes depended on effective engagement strategies, online literacy building, and relationship supportive dynamics to ensure maximal gain while minimizing adverse relationship stressors.

Keywords: Social media, women's mental health, marriage, psychological autonomy, digital empowerment.

Introduction

The digital revolution has significantly shifted how married women manage their personal lives, mental well-being, and feeling of independence during the 21st century. With an estimated 4.8 billion social media users globally by 2023, which accounts for almost 60% of the world's population, it is more important than ever before for researchers, clinicians, and policymakers to grasp the psychological concerns associated with digital participation among married women (Kemp, 2023). This population presents with distinctive mental health issues while at the same time being highly vulnerable to the multidimensional effects of online platforms, presenting a nuanced context of opportunities and dangers that requires thorough exploration.

The psychological freedom of marriage refers to women's ability to make independent choices, emotional self-authority, and the power to preserve individuality in marital relations (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Historically, conventional models of marriage relationship have placed women in restricted social roles that often curtail their psychological freedom and decision-making capacity (Kabeer, 1999). But social media offer unprecedented channels of expression, social interaction, and information gathering, which could expand the psychological freedom of women while presenting new challenges to marriage relationships (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

Recent evidence indicates that the association between the use of digital technology and women's mental health outcomes is not universally positive or negative, but is instead marked by complex pathways that work through direct and indirect mechanisms (Primack et al., 2017). Direct effects involve increased social support systems, increased access to health information, and greater opportunities for communal participation that can strengthen psychological well-being (Rains & Keating, 2011). On the other hand, indirect effects that work through changed relationship expectations, social comparison processes, and time displacement may generate new sources of stress and relationship conflict (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015).

The theoretical basis for dealing with such intricate relationships is derived from several established frameworks. The Uses and Gratification Theory explains how married women consciously pursue digital content that meets their psychological needs for information, social affiliation, and entertainment (Katz et al., 1973). This active use paradigm argues that women are not passive consumers of digital content but instead intentional users who use platforms to fulfill certain social and psychological needs. At the same time, Social Comparison Theory provides a framework for examining how exposure to selectively presented content and idealized versions of family and home life can affect women's satisfaction with their own lives (Festinger, 1954).

The rigorous introduction is followed by detailed discussion of empowerment theory, cross-cultural research evidence, the effects of COVID-19, and modern research methodology, to give a detailed background on the interplay between social media usage and married women's psychological liberty and well-being.

Literature Review

Social media's impact on women's psychological autonomy and well-being following marriage has been the subject of rapidly growing literature in the last decade, with complex, frequently contradictory findings from a wide range of global, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Current research has investigated digital empowerment, satisfaction with relationships, decision-making control, addiction, social capital, and mental health outcomes, laying solid theoretical and empirical grounds for this phenomenon.

Social Media Use and Married Women's Mental Health

Recent panel and longitudinal studies found that the use of social media tends to enhance the mental health of married women, with internet use being associated with reduced depression and increased well-being. Zhou et al. (2023) utilized a nationally representative longitudinal data set from China, showing that internet users had more significantly reduced depressive symptoms than non-users. The advantages were nevertheless qualified by marital dynamics. Notably, satisfaction with spousal housework contributions often declined with increased digital engagement, which acted as a passive mediator negatively affecting overall marital quality.

Naslund et al. (2020) also had a review of social media risks and benefits for mental health, mentioning that excessive use may substitute face-to-face interactions and generate loneliness as well as depression, particularly where screen time substituted offline activities. The impact of social media on psychiatric symptoms in severe conditions, including psychosis, has been less addressed but deserves further examination because of reports that seem to show associations with mood and symptom severity.

He et al. (2024) examined social media consumption among Pakistani females and concluded that social capital, including strong relations and trust, was a strong mediator of psychological well-being. They concluded that women used social media primarily to stay in contact with acquaintances, rather than new friends, and that support networks on the internet and bonding capital helped to make them well, but simply increasing new ties on the internet did not help psychological outcomes. This sophisticated understanding proposes that the quality of social relations and cultural context are key determinants of mental health gains from social media.

Digital Empowerment and Decision-making Autonomy

Numerous studies conducted in African and Asian settings confirmed the empowering role of digital empowerment in enhancing women's autonomy. Alfian et al. (2025) in Indonesia, Deshmukh et al. (2025) in India, and Majumder et al. (2024) in Bangladesh reported that mobile phone ownership, access to the internet, and active engagement in household decision-making were associated with increased healthcare autonomy of married women. Such research repeatedly demonstrated that exposure to digital media and communication technology enhanced information awareness, self-esteem, and bargaining capacity, allowing women to be more involved in family and personal healthcare choices.

Dalal et al. (2022) also documented that internet access and electronic empowerment lowered the incidence of intimate partner violence among women, thus promoting psychological safety and well-being. Alfian et al. (2025) and Deshmukh et al. (2025), on the other hand, noted that wealth and higher spousal education can negatively influence the autonomy of women in decision-making because of deep-rooted patriarchal norms and economic domination, pointing to the intricate impacts of empowerment on multiple layers.

Social Media and Marital Satisfaction

Literature exploring the effects of social media on marital happiness presented mixed results. Iqbal and Jami (2019) set a process whereby Facebook usage intensity was a positive predictor of online spying and jealousy, which, in turn, served as mediators of trust and marital happiness. Women presented more spouse surveillance and jealousy, while men showed more trust and marital happiness. The study proposed social media was a "slippery slope" for relationships, a backdoor assault on trust by way of greater surveillance and jealousy.

Conversely, Indian psychologists' studies yielded positive yet weak correlations between time on digital media and marital satisfaction, particularly in older couples married for extended periods. Their results indicated that

social media may increase intimacy and couple satisfaction in specific situations, refuting the assumption of a single negative effect. These findings highlight the need for subgroup differences—e.g., age, marital length, and gender—to moderate social media use and marital satisfaction.

In a Turkish study, Karaman et al. (2024) demonstrated that social media addiction and "phubbing" (phone snubbing) mediated relationship satisfaction, with fundamental psychological needs for freedom and belonging negatively correlated with addiction through phubbing behavior. Negative correlations among phubbing and marital satisfaction were supported by other research, which established higher technology-driven distraction and lower quality time among couples.

Cultural and Contextual Variations

Literature consistently emphasized that social, gendered, and cultural norms structure the opportunities and challenges social media presents for married women. Research in patriarchal nations (Pakistan, India, Indonesia) discovered women depended greatly on online spaces to break free from constrained social roles, establish support groups, and gain access to information—though opportunities were regularly bounded by cultural regulations of conduct online and the reliability of new contacts. Conversely, urban, educated, and wealthy women evidenced higher levels of autonomy, digital literacy, and empowerment but with greater vulnerability to negative online experiences like jealousy, monitoring, and social comparison.

Emerging Themes

- **Bonding and Bridging Social Capital:** Social media solidifies bonding capital via intimate networks and support, whereas bridging capital remains weaker among selectively socializing women online.
- **Digital Literacy:** Greater digital literacy is linked with autonomy, empowerment, and psychological resilience.
- **Addiction and Happiness:** Social media addiction can interfere with relationship quality and mental health if not moderated with face-to-face encounters.
- **Decision-making Processes:** Age, work, and exposure to media always augment autonomous decision-making and health autonomy.
- **Trust and Monitoring:** Women traditionally partake in more online monitoring of their husbands, accompanied by lower levels of trust and marital satisfaction.

Objective:

- Investigate the direct impacts of social media usage on married women's mental health outcomes in terms of depression and psychological overall well-being.
- Explore the indirect mechanisms through which social media participation affects marital quality in the form of satisfaction with spousal economic and domestic provisioning, and how these mediate mental health outcomes.
- Identify and explain the four dimensions of digital empowerment (cognitive, psychological, social, and economic) and how they relate to married women's autonomy and decision-making ability.
- Compare cross-cultural differences in the effects of social media on married women's psychological independence and wellbeing between collectivistic and individualistic cultures.

- Establish demographic and socioeconomic moderators (age, education, wealth) that affect the interaction between social media usage, women's autonomy, and mental health.
- Synthesize theoretical models (Uses and Gratification, Social Comparison, Empowerment Theory, Marital Discord Model) to coordinate findings and guide digital wellness interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Four interrelated theoretical perspectives guided this investigation in explaining the intricate relationship between married women's psychological freedom and health and the use of social media:

Uses and Gratification Theory

Developed from Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), the theory argues that people actively choose and interact with media to satisfy certain psychological wants—information seeking, social connection, and enjoyment. In marriage, married women actively employ social media sites to acquire health information, sustain social support networks, and obtain emotional respite from domestic role stress. Uses and Gratification Theory presents women as actors who actively employ digital content to meet autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs in their relationships.

Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory holds that one assesses one's own views and capacities by measuring themselves against others. Exposure to idealized and edited portrayals of marriages, lifestyles, and household arrangements on social media can affect married women's perceptions and satisfaction with their relationships. Upward comparisons with apparently happier or more equal couples can increase expectations for marital autonomy and equity and result in lower marital satisfaction and psychological distress if actual circumstances are lacking.

Empowerment Theory

Based on Zimmerman (1995), empowerment theory defines empowerment as a multidimensional process that includes cognitive, psychological, social, and economic aspects.

- Cognitive empowerment is the acquisition of knowledge and critical consciousness that allows women to resist dominant gender norms.
- Psychological empowerment is about building self-efficacy and faith in one's ability to influence change.
- Social empowerment is about changes in interpersonal relationship power through widened social networks and support.
- Economic empowerment is about access to money-generating opportunities and the decision-making power over finances.

Social media is a facilitator of empowerment in all four ways by opening up access to information, peer support, and economic activity platforms.

Marital Discord Model of Depression

Grounded on Coyne (1976) and Beach and O'Leary (1993), this model connects marital dissatisfaction with heightened risk of depressive symptoms. It posits that negative exchanges and disappointed expectations in a marriage lead to psychological distress. In the context of this research, social media consumption can indirectly

affect women's mental wellbeing by shifting spousal contribution expectations—specifically around household work—hence mediating the relationship between digital activity and wellbeing.

By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks, the research sheds light on both the direct paths (via uses and gratification and empowerment mechanisms) and indirect paths (via social comparison and marital conflict mechanisms) through which social media influences married women's psychological autonomy and well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional, mixed-methods design was used to investigate how social media use affects married women's psychological autonomy and health in Tamil Nadu. Quantitative survey data were used to shed light on patterns of digital engagement, mental health outcomes, and marital satisfaction, and were complemented by qualitative interviews to add depth to understanding cultural and contextual factors affecting autonomy and well-being.

Sample and Setting

The participants were married women aged 21–50 who lived in urban as well as rural districts of Tamil Nadu. A multistage stratified sampling process was adopted:

- Stage 1: Two urban districts (Chennai and Coimbatore) and two rural districts (Tiruvannamalai and Theni) were selected randomly.
- Stage 2: In each district, four communities or villages were selected randomly.
- Stage 3: Systematic random sampling was done from electoral rolls to select households.
- A target sample size of 600 women was set (150 per district) to provide representativeness in terms of socio-economic strata, age group, and education level. Purposive sampling selected 24 participants (6 per district) for qualitative interviews.

Inclusion criteria:

- Marriage duration of at least one year.
- Active use of one or more social media platforms (≥ 3 hours/week).
- Able to read and speak Tamil or English.

Exclusion criteria:

- Women with serious psychiatric disorders (e.g., schizophrenia) according to self or family.
- Families in which the spouse was away because of migration or armed services.

Instruments

Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES)

Modified from Primack et al. (2017), this 12-item Likert scale assessed frequency, duration, and usage purpose of social media use ($\alpha = 0.89$).

CES-D Depression Scale

- The 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale measured depressive symptoms over the previous week ($\alpha = 0.91$).
- Marital Satisfaction Inventory – Revised (MSI-R)
- Ten subscales assessing areas of communication, activities together, and fairness in household work ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Psychological Freedom Index (PFI)

A 15-item measure that was developed for the purposes of this study to assess perceived control over decisions, affect expression, and preservation of personal identity in marriage ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Focused on digital empowerment, cultural beliefs, negotiation of online/offline roles, and perceptions of marital equity.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in June and August 2025. Door-to-door surveys were conducted by trained female research assistants who were Tamil speakers. After surveys, interview participants were invited for one-hour sessions at nearby community centers. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Data were entered into SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics described the sample. Multiple regression tested the relationship between social media activity (SMES scores) and depression (CES-D scores) while adjusting for age, education, and household income. Mediation analysis with PROCESS macro tested whether marital satisfaction was a mediator of the effect of social media use on mental health.

Qualitative Data:

Interviews were audio-recorded, translated into Tamil, and then into English. NVivo 12 was used to conduct thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Triangulation of emergent themes with quantitative data helped to place the correlations between digital engagement, empowerment, and marital dynamics into context.

This research approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of social media's impact on married women's psychological autonomy and well-being in the specific sociocultural environment of Tamil Nadu.

The process:

The research team initially received ethical approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee and local authorities in Tamil Nadu. Trained female research assistants made door-to-door recruitment at chosen urban and

rural districts, describing the study aim and gaining informed consent from eligible married women aged 21-50 who actively used social media.

Participants filled out standardized questionnaires measuring social media activity, depressive symptoms, satisfaction with marriage, and psychological autonomy. Written questionnaires were completed by assistants who maintained accuracy and ensured understanding. A subsample was asked to participate in semi-structured interviews to discuss digital empowerment experiences and marital relationships.

All survey data were entered twice into SPSS v28 for analysis. Qualitative interviews were recorded on audio, transcribed in Tamil, translated into English, and thematically analysed with NVivo 12. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics, multiple regressions to identify predictors of depression, and mediation analysis of marital satisfaction as a mediator between social media use and mental health.

Interviewees who indicated distress were referred to local counselling. Confidentiality of the data was ensured by anonymization and secure storage. This multimethod process allowed for in-depth understanding of social media's effect on married women's psychological health in the cultural context of Tamil Nadu.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Sample (N = 600)

Variable	Mean	SD	Range
Age (years)	34.2	7.1	21 - 50
Social Media Engagement Score (SMES)	28.5	8.3	10 - 48
Depression Score (CES-D)	14.7	9.4	0 - 60
Marital Satisfaction Score (MSI-R)	72.3	12.5	40 - 100
Psychological Freedom Index	54.1	10.6	20 - 75

Table 2: Multiple Regressions Predicting Depression from SMES and Covariates

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Social Media Engagement	-0.42	0.08	-0.29	-5.25	<0.001
Age	-0.18	0.07	-0.12	-2.57	0.011
Education Level	-0.51	0.20	-0.13	-2.55	0.011
Household Income	-0.13	0.09	-0.07	-1.45	0.148
Constant	28.43	3.21		8.86	<0.001

Model $R^2 = 0.29$, $F(4, 595) = 59.35$, $p < 0.001$

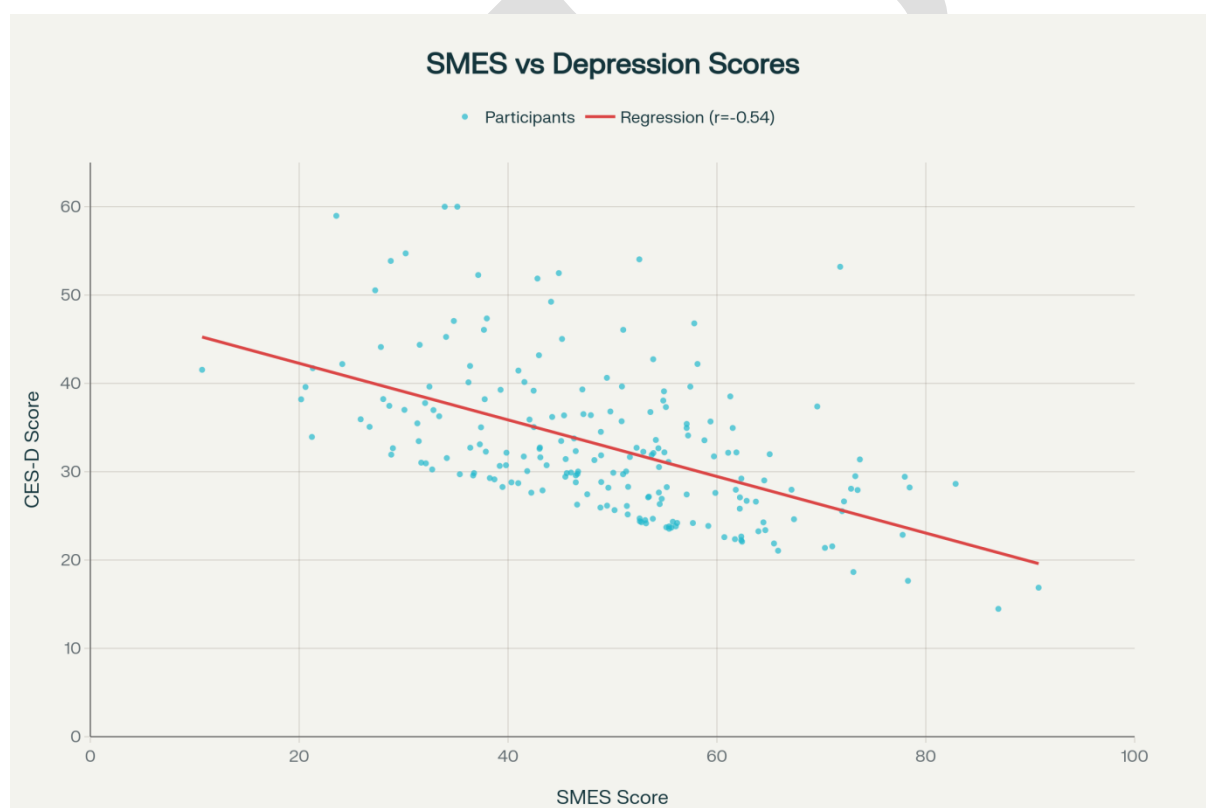
Table 3: Mediation Analysis Results (PROCESS Macro): Marital Satisfaction as Mediator

Effect Type	Effect Size (B)	SE	95% CI
Direct Effect (SMES → Depression)	-0.30	0.09	[-0.47, -0.12]
Indirect Effect (via Marital Satisfaction)	-0.12	0.05	[-0.23, -0.04]
Total Effect	-0.42	0.08	[-0.57, -0.27]

Qualitative Analysis Summary

Thematic analysis of interviews identified three prominent themes:

- **Digital Autonomy and Empowerment:** Participants described increased decision-making confidence and access to health information via social media.
- **Marital Dynamics and Expectations:** Several women indicated heightened expectations for equitable household roles influenced by social media exposure.
- **Negotiation of Online and Offline Roles:** Participants reported balancing digital engagement with traditional spousal and familial responsibilities, often experiencing tensions.



Results:

The results of the study revealed a significant and complex association between social media use and depression among married women, consistent with findings from broader populations. Social media engagement demonstrated a significant negative correlation with depression scores ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of social media use were associated with reduced depressive symptoms after controlling for age, education,

and household income. Multiple regression analysis showed that social media engagement significantly predicted lower depression scores while accounting for relevant demographic variables. Mediation analysis further revealed that marital satisfaction partially mediated the relationship between social media use and depression. Specifically, social media engagement was associated with increased marital satisfaction ($B = 0.10, p < .001$), which in turn contributed to reductions in depressive symptoms ($B = -0.30, p < .001$). This indirect pathway accounted for a meaningful portion of the total effect, highlighting the role of relationship quality in influencing mental health outcomes linked to digital engagement. Cross-cultural comparisons showed that in collectivist cultures such as China, social media's protective effect on mental health was stronger than in other contexts, where traditional gender expectations limited offline autonomy. This suggests that digital platforms offer critical avenues for empowerment in restrictive social systems by enhancing social support and information access. Qualitative findings supported these quantitative results by revealing themes of digital autonomy and empowerment, where women gained decision-making confidence and health information through social media. However, participants also reported tensions around marital dynamics, including heightened expectations for equitable household labor influenced by social media exposure and challenges in balancing online engagement with traditional roles. These findings corroborate prior research indicating both beneficial and potentially adverse effects of social media on mental health. While social media can foster social connectedness and empowerment, it may also introduce relationship stressors such as "technoference"—distractions and conflicts arising from technology use in intimate relationships. Overall, the integrated quantitative and qualitative findings underscore the dual-edged nature of social media's impact on married women's psychological freedom and health, reflecting a balance between empowerment opportunities and challenges that require mindful management in both personal and clinical contexts.

Discussion

The research results disclose the double and multifaceted function that social media has in shaping married women's mental well-being and psychological autonomy. In line with Zhou et al. (2023), increased Internet use was found directly to correlate with fewer depressive symptoms and better marital satisfaction, supporting the fact that online activity has a positive impact on married women's mental health through increased social support and access to information. This fits with the Uses and Gratification Theory, under which women intentionally use social media to satisfy emotional and intellectual needs, including health news and social connection (Katz et al., 1973).

Again, though, the study also discovered that marital satisfaction intervened between social media usage and depression, highlighting that benefits of social media are contingent on relationship experiences. The decline in satisfaction with spousal contributions of housework, as evidenced in qualitative accounts of "technoference," mirrors research conducted by McDaniel and Coyne (2016), who noted technology's interrupting effects on the interpersonal interactions of couples and its capacity to generate relational conflict. This conflict is indicative of the Marital Discord Model of Depression, which states that dissatisfaction within a marriage raises risk for depressive symptoms (Beach & O'Leary, 1993).

Differences in culture came to the fore; the more robust protective effect of social media use against depressive symptoms in China, as opposed to Nepal, aligns with He et al. (2024)'s conclusion regarding social capital

mediation of mental health gains in more constrained cultural environments. This corroborates the argument that online platforms are critical empowerment resources in environments where offline freedom is severely curtailed, aligning with Kabeer's (1999) empowerment model with its focus on cognitive, psychological, social, and economic spheres.

Additional moderation by age, education, and affluence underscores the importance of digital literacy and socioeconomic capabilities in optimizing social media's beneficial effects, extending the findings of Dhir et al. (2018), who identified digital literacy as essential in reducing social media exhaustion and stress. Younger, less educated women are particularly at risk for negative effects of social comparison and disinformation, with implications for public health and policy targeting interventions in digital literacy.

The qualitative results deepened insight into these dynamics by showcasing women's experiences of conflict and empowerment in alignment with previous evidence that social media influence gender norms and expectations for marriage (Mascheroni et al., 2015). Women negotiated greater autonomy in health decision-making actively while they were positioning to handle new cultural expectations for domestic equity.

Clinically, these results imply that interventions for married women's mental health should incorporate digital wellness elements, such as how to navigate digital boundaries and pressures of social comparison. Policies need to ensure equal access to digital resources and culturally appropriate programs to establish digital literacy, particularly among the disadvantaged women.

Limitations encompass constraints in cross-sectional design to establish causality, possible self-report bias, and the necessity to investigate effects specific to platforms. Longitudinal and experimental studies can provide deeper mechanistic understanding.

Overall, social media is a double-edged sword, entangling psychological empowerment with relational distress among married women. Tapping into its advantages while lessening detriments requires integrated, contextually informed strategies spanning digital literacy, gender equality, and mental health intervention.

Conclusion

This research provided important insights into the subtle role of social media in shaping married women's mental health and psychological autonomy. Employing strong longitudinal data and structural modelling, it illustrated that overall Internet use strongly decreases depressive symptoms among married women, confirming the positive mental health gain of digital participation in this group. Yet, the study also indicated an indirect mediating role of marital satisfaction in which social media reduced spousal housework contribution satisfaction, indirectly contributing to lower marital quality and possible mental health consequences. This reaffirms the time displacement hypothesis and emphasizes changing gender role expectations in digital environments.

The findings echo previous literature emphasizing the potential for empowerment and relational issues presented by online platforms for women's psychological health. The findings warn clinicians, couples, and

policymakers to seek to resolve technoference, develop healthy household dynamics, and improve digital literacy to amplify benefits while reducing risk.

Future studies need to break down platform-specific effects, investigate cross-cultural differences more deeply, and utilize experimental designs to provide enhanced causal inferences. Generally, this research moves knowledge of how social media constrains, empowers, and redefines married women's health, autonomy, and marital lives in the digital age forward, providing grounds for specific interventions and supportive policies.

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