

**DIGITAL INTIMACY INTERFERENCE AMONG COUPLES  
IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
MARITAL INTIMACY AND STABILITY**

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**ABSTRACT:** The increasing prevalence of digital media usage and the influence of digital interactions on marital stability raise concerns about the potential interference in the intimacy of couples in Rivers State, Nigeria. Hence, this study examined the implications of digital intimacy interference for marital stability among couples in Rivers State. The theoretical framework of the study was drawn from the social penetration theory and social network interference theory. The research design adopted for this study was a descriptive survey design. The population for this study comprised married male and female residents of Rivers State from an age bracket of 18 and above. Therefore, the population for this study was 1,404,855. Krejcie and Morgan's determinant table was used to obtain a sample of 384 respondents, and a multistage sampling method was used to obtain the respondents. The instruments used for data collection in this study were a set of questionnaires. The research questions were analysed, using descriptive statistical analysis. Data were analysed using percentages and weighted mean scores (WMSs). The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (PPMC) was used to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that the ways in which digital media interferes with intimacy in married couples were through distraction from quality conversations or bonding time in marriage, and through spending more time on digital devices than engaging in physical affection or intimate moments. The study therefore recommended that married couples should prioritize physical affect and set boundaries on digital device usage to foster a deeper connection within the marriage.

**Keywords:** Digital, Intimacy Interference, Couples, Marital, Intimacy, Stability

## **INTRODUCTION**

The global village envisaged by the late Marshall McLuhan in 1964 which predicted that the world culture would shrink due to technological advancement, has to the fullest degree materialized and has exceeded McLuhan's prediction as the new digital age allows the instantaneous sharing of information across the globe. McLuhan predicted that each new communication medium transcended the boundaries of experience reached by earlier media and contributed to further change. He sees different media working together and converging to form a global village. McLuhan insists that electronic media would decentralise power and information, allowing people to live in small clusters far from urban centres while having the same level of access to information. The global village is a world that is interconnected by the Worldwide Web and new communication media, which is creating a uniform global culture (Ochonogor, 2021). The digital media have no geographical boundary, thus, bringing to fruition Gibson's 1984 re-echo of McLuhan prediction of a global village, a situation where

there shall be no geographical boundaries for the mass media and information flow due to technological advancement.

As a village, what happens in one part of the world would be instantly known globally and simultaneously disseminated across various media platforms. Through these platforms, people can express themselves and make an impact on any part of the world. Digital media have redefined relationships. Many people spend long hours on digital media sharing and chatting with their online friends. This has impacted offline relationships as many people now prefer meeting new friends online to having physical contact with them. Digital media brings people together to exchange ideas, feelings, friendships, and academic and business opportunities. Ochonogor and Ohiagu (2015) state that indeed, digital media have made it possible for people to reconnect to lost friends, colleagues or family members and even establish new bonds. Many relationships that even led to marriages have been made possible through the digital media platforms. Media have also affected the social structure, and the increasing use of digital media can have a negative impact on marriages. This can have a marital impact on relationships due to the lack of trust arising from inappropriate posts by a spouse, such as personal sultry pictures and the sharing of behavioural, physical, emotional and cognitive experiences, which are considered to be the main factors causing negative feelings between spouses.

It is a commonly held belief that communication is the key to a successful relationship and good communication results in successful relationships, while bad communication results in broken relationships. In 1973, communication scholars such as Irwin Attman and Delmas Taylor developed social penetration theory to explain how interpersonal relationships evolve. According to them, intimacy develops as partners navigate from relatively shallow communication to deep connections over time. The transition from shallow communication to deep communication builds intimacy, an emotional closeness necessary to maintain a healthy relationship; shallow communication may include sharing intimate details about one's personal life.

Deep connections increase intimacy through self-disclosure, confidential knowledge, affection, openness or trust and emotional support, which are intentional exchanges of relevant information at the presumed risk of both partners. As a result, relationship communication fosters intimacy and builds trust between relationship partners as they begin to feel, understand and accept each other. Romantic relationships are among the deepest types of interpersonal relationships. As individuals transition from adolescence into adulthood, romantic relationship intensity gradually increases. In the early stages, adolescent relationships are casual, superficial and brief (Williams, 2014). From middle adolescence and beyond, interaction and interest in members of the opposite sex increase. During late adolescence, it becomes more important that intimacy and social support increase between relationship partners. During early adulthood, romantic partners develop intense feelings of affection and deep intimacy and commitment to one another. They also demonstrate more care and comfort and become more sexually active. Consequently, as adolescents age and lead into adulthood, romantic partners rank higher within their social networks because they are able to indulge each other's need for intimacy and support (Ponti et al., 2010).

Marriage is one of the most ancient, important, universal and indispensable social institutions and has existed since the creation of man. As an institution, marriage in many countries is the state of being united with a person of the opposite sex, such as a husband or wife. The

institution is where men and women are joined in a particular kind of social and legal dependence for maintaining a family. At the societal level, the institution of marriage represents all the behaviours, norms, roles, expectations, and values that are associated with the legal union of a man and woman. Marriage institutions are key structures in human societies because they form the basic social building blocks that connect otherwise different kinship groupings in society (Leighton et al., 2021). These institutions are regarded as cultural universals, implying that they can be found in any human culture; even their composition and form frequently differ significantly. Marriage, for instance, is principally the institution that admits people into family life and allows for an approved relationship involving economic cooperation as well as normative sexual activities and childbearing.

Marriage is considered to represent a lifelong commitment by two people to each other and is signified by a contract sanctioned by the state. It thus involves legal rights, responsibilities, and duties that are enforced by both secular and sacred laws (Esere, 2018). Marriage involves emotional and legal commitment is quite important in any adult life. This relationship usually needs some contract that defines the partners' rights and obligations to each other. The usual roles and responsibilities of the husband and wife include living together, having sexual relations with one another, sharing economic resources, and recognising the parents of their children. Intimate relationships constitute an important source of happiness, support, health, and wellbeing in people's lives (Spencer, 2018).

On the other hand, relationship strain has been shown to have negative effects on men's and women's health across the life course. When people make choices to marry, they want to live happily ever after. They want a loving, happy, and successful marriage. After they have married for a while, and the novelty of marriage wears off, they tend to discover that marriage does not maintain itself. Marriage involves working for both spouses to stay. Success depends on many different factors and those factors that reinforce marriage bonds include trust, love, time, friendship, understanding, honesty, loyalty sincerity and above all effective communication (Esere, 2011). Although marriage has clear implications for individuals' general sense of wellbeing, the essence of the marital relationship lies in the day-to-day interactions in which married couples engage.

The notion that communication fosters a healthy relationship is most commonly referred as traditional offline communication, whereby couples maintain intimacy primarily through face-to-face interactions. However, innovations in media technology, mobile phones and digital media have revolutionised the way the world communicates within social networks. It is possible for people to extend beyond two-way communication by allowing networks of people to instantly connect across geographical locations by exchanging personal information online. Digital media have become a powerful force in people's culture and an integrated component of human interaction. Thus, a balance needs to be struck between positive and negative digital media use (Daniel, 2019).

People enjoy the benefits and outcomes of digital media. These digital media are much faster than to the old traditional media, which allows individuals to establish a public or semi-public profile in a bounded system. Additionally, it allows the users to share a list of other digital media users with whom they have a connection, view and transfer the connections list within the system. Users stay connected with friends and family members, and can easily maintain relationships with individuals for communication. The number of media users increased to

4.66 billion people worldwide in October 2020 and an average of nearly 2 million new users are joining every day (Kemp, 2020).

People are becoming more digital social beings, expecting the gratification of their social and emotional needs through digital media (Gull et al., 2019). Digital media have resolved the communication gap between individuals in romantic relationships, especially married couples (Leighton et al., 2021). Digital media have allowed people to stay connected during work hours or when distance is a barrier. It allows people to share photos, text, and videos and afford each other the emotional support needed. However, with the increase in digital media popularity, online privacy, interpersonal dis-inhibition and self-disclosure issues have come to the fore. A study on gender differences in self-disclosure revealed that women were more open to disclosing personal information about themselves than men were, while men were engaged in intimate social interactions and relationships which have important influences on wellbeing, marriage and relationships (Skelton, 2021).

However, recent advances in digital media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Messenger, Twitter, and blogs have led to a major shift in the mode of human social interaction. These digital media impact the experience of interpersonal intimacy, especially in marriages (Skelton, 2021). Digital intimacy is regarded as the core of the most fulfilling, affirming and gratifying human social exchanges. It is commonly related to a number of comparable concepts such as closeness, support, love, self-disclosure, bonding, attachment and sexuality. In a broad sense, digital intimacy can be seen as a dyadic exchange that involves sharing personal and private information on digital media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. It can be realised in the context of intimate interactions and relationships that encompass both verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as shared behavioural, physical, emotional and cognitive experiences (Sperry, 2019).

Digital media applications have led to a major shift in the mode of human social engagement. This shift has resulted in new ways of experiencing and actualising intimacy, both in the context of pre-existing relationships and interactions with strangers. There is less physical proximity and direct face-to-face contact in day-to-day interpersonal interactions with close individuals. Despite the potential of digital media to facilitate digital intimacy, it also has several shortcomings as a medium for positive relational experiences. While accelerated intimacy in anonymous digital communication may facilitate relationship development, it may also lead to excessive self-disclosure, sexual dis-inhibition and unrealistic expectations.

The term digital intimacy interference (DII) was described by Williams (2010) as the influence of digital media on romantic relationships. Williams states that digital media create increased opportunities for digital intimacy interference given their broad range and accessibility. Digital media interference successfully encourages users to disclose personal information. Every minute, numerous digital media users are comment on pictures, share status updates and photos, and express their preferences by liking the content of others (Pew Research 2016). In addition, digital intimacy interference relates to self-disclosures, caring and commitment, confidential knowledge, intense feelings of affection, emotional support, and mutuality, openness and trust. The study of digital intimacy interference is still in its early stages, and there is general agreement that a form of digital intimacy can be experienced in this context. However, research into the relationship between digital media and broken marriages/relationships is critically limited.

Digital media also have strong implications for marital stability and make social relationships increasingly tenuous. Abbasi (2018) notes that the invasion of technology negatively impacts the age-long practice of spending quality time with a partner. In the past, couples enjoyed time together attending concerts, plays, shows, visiting friends and other social gatherings. These interactions with one's partner and others have arguably bonded marriages and created room for healthy communication, intimacy, and fondness. However, with technology, people have started finding happiness in their gadgets, thereby, seriously jeopardising their relationships. According to Hirschlag (2015), internet-enabled technology affects social relationships in different ways including exposing couples to unwarranted interference from admirers, former intimate partners, and explicit content that can encourage negative secrecy and infidelity.

In Nigeria, it was reported by the Nigerian Tribune in 2016 that there were more than 30,000 recorded cases of dissolved marriages in just six (6) states, namely; Lagos, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, Delta, Imo and Bayelsa States. In Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State more than 6,000 couples have their divorce cases lying in various high and magistrate courts (Ehoo & Badey, 2021). Could this high rate of divorce cases, perhaps have something to do with digital intimacy interference? Since Port Harcourt and indeed Rivers State, may have a large number of couples employed in multinational and national companies thus, they are capable of purchasing Android and other smartphones. These high-tech smartphones have become essential tools in every home and obviously have their effects that could be detrimental to marital stability. Additionally, the rapid integration of digital technologies into daily life has led to a surge in digital interactions among couples in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The main causes of marital problems in Nigeria, especially among the digital community in Rivers State include economic hardship, sickness, sexual incompatibility, unsatisfactory sexual relationships, childlessness, and preferences for male children (Ehoo & Badey, 2021). According to the Office of Assistant Chief Registrar (Litigation), Rivers State High Court (2022), the total divorce rate in 2020 was 423 (four hundred and twenty-three) cases. In 2021, the total number of divorce cases was 513 (five hundred and thirteen), while in 2022, the total number of divorce cases was 789 (seven hundred and eighty-nine). Additionally, according to the Office of Deputy Chief Registrar (Litigation) from Human Rights Unit in Rivers State Customary Court of Appeal (2022), the total number of divorce cases in 2019 was 21 (twenty-one). In 2020, the total number of divorce cases was 26 (twenty-six), while in 2021, the total number of divorce cases was 36 (thirty-six). These issues are also found in Nigeria where marital instability is gradually occurring regularly (Asa & Nkan, 2017).

As noted by Udobong, (2016), the causes of marital problems in most societies, including Nigeria, include of factors such as: economic hardship, sickness, sexual incompatibility, unsatisfactory sexual relationships, childlessness, and preferences for male children. Social media usage has emerged as a forerunner of marital disputes and breakdowns. Today, it is more common to find couples who have social media-related marital challenges than those who do not. As opposed to Udobong (2016), social media accounts for the breakdown of many marital relationships in society today. He added that as a result of social media usage, many couples report that their partners communicate intimately with other men and women, connect with former lovers, search for sexual partners, and maintain affairs with others.

Cacioppo et al. (2013), Hall (2014), Williams (2010), and Drouin et al. (2015) have agreed that digital media sites can have negative effects on couples' relationships. Williams describes

this phenomenon as the media's influence on romantic relationships and that digital media create increased opportunities for digital intimacy interference, given their broad range and accessibility. Digital intimacy interference serves to explore the negative effects of self-disclosure, intense feelings of affection, caring and commitment, emotional support, confidential knowledge, mutuality, openness and trust in digital media. Using the above as a springboard, digital intimacy interference becomes the focus. This is the most prevalent among netizens, especially couples. The excessive use of time on digital media by spouses causes marital problems such as emotional isolation, denials and rejection.

Digital media have encouraged spouses of the opposite sex to appreciate profiles of themselves, through texting, uploading and downloading pictures which are gateways to distrust and infidelity in marriages. Inordinate access to digital media by couples has doubled the problems of marital relationships and has to a large extent caused divorce among spouses worldwide. This lends credence to the account of Wright (2021) that in this day and age, society is engaged in digital media which adds to the stress and difficulties of relationships that surround us today. Digital media have contributed to a large amount of unrest in relationships. This unrest in relationships, due to the increase in digital media usage trends, has led to divorce rates in recent to increase considerably in recent decades.

Marriage is largely an exclusive institution that can be affected by external influences from one or both partners' social networks. When a couple spends more time in social networks, which results in interference, there may be friction in marriages. Marriage thrives and solidifies when there is less exogenous influence such as from friends, family, society and digital media. Couples need seclusion or social withdrawal to build intimacy, love, interdependence, and trust which are important pillars of enduring relationships. When this exclusiveness is breached or interrupted, there may be tension in the marriage as the couple struggles to meet the needs of the two domains. Digital media have become a part of people's lives and have seriously affected socialisation, including marriage and marital intimacy.

Recently, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, a group of divorcees celebrated the initiation of new members under the banners "End of an Error" and "Live a free life in Port Harcourt" and the slogan of the association is "I do, I did and I'm done." Beyond how digital media impacts marriages, the emerging concern includes how digital intimacy interference affects the rates of marital failure in the society today. This increasing reliance on digital platforms raises concerns about its potential interference with intimacy within relationships. Digital intimacy interference facilitates intimate self-disclosure and interpersonal dis-inhibition. These factors favour digital intimacy and promote increased satisfaction in online interpersonal interaction. However, this study will critically look at the intimate self-disclosure and interpersonal dis-inhibition, because the extent to which these components play complicated roles in marriages is still poorly understood. Studies have been conducted on the social media and marital infidelity, however, to the best of the researcher's knowledge or no studies investigated digital intimacy interference among couples. Therefore, examining the digital intimacy interference among couples in Rivers State, Nigeria and its implications for marital stability has become peremptory.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The rapid advancement of technology and the widespread use of digital devices and digital media have impacted interpersonal relationships, including marital relationships. Many

couples in Rivers State, Nigeria, are facing challenges in maintaining healthy and intimate relationships due to the intrusion of digital technology into their private lives. The excessive use of smartphones, social media platforms, and other digital devices can lead to decreased face-to-face interaction, reduced emotional connection, and a breakdown in effective communication between partners. This digital intimacy interference can have serious consequences for the level of intimacy and overall stability within the marital relationship. Couples may experience decreased physical and emotional closeness, difficulty in resolving conflicts, and a growing sense of disconnection, which can ultimately lead to marital dissatisfaction, discord, and even the breakdown of the marriage. Understanding of the extent and impact of digital intimacy interference is crucial in developing effective interventions and strategies to help couples in Rivers State, Nigeria, maintain strong and healthy marital relationships in the digital age. This study aims to provide insights into this pressing issue and contribute to the body of knowledge on technology, interpersonal relationships, and marital wellbeing.

### **Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer the following research questions.

1. In what ways does digital media interfere with the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State?
2. What are the factors that influence digital intimacy interference among married couples in Rivers State?
3. How does digital intimacy interference affect the marital stability of couples in Rivers State?

### **Research Hypotheses**

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the 0.05, level of significance to guide the study.

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant interference from digital media on the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant effect of digital intimacy interference on the marital stability of married couples in Rivers State.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptual Review**

#### **Intimacy**

The term intimacy is broadly described as individuals' subjective experiences of closeness and connectedness with their romantic partners, which emerge from couple relationship processes that involve self-disclosure, mutual trust and validation, empathy, and acceptance (Prager, 2015). Research evidence abounds demonstrating that couple intimacy is a significant contributing factor to positive relationship outcomes. Partners who report high levels of intimacy tend to be highly satisfied and maintain long-term, stable relationships (Goodman,

2019). Intimacy is a central and important concept in couple relationships and couples' therapy. It can be divided into four categories, namely sexual, physical, emotional and operational. Intimacy can vary with gender, culture and other influences, and there is no ideal level of intimacy to be striven for (Crowe, 2017). Like jealousy, intimacy has been shown to have a central and all-encompassing function in romantic relationships (Steil, 2017). Due to its varied and significant roles, intimacy has come to be viewed as a universal human need that is imperative for healthy functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2010).

This outlook is corroborated by a multitude of studies demonstrating that intimacy in romantic relationships is one of the strongest predictors of physical and psychological well-being (Steil, 2017). Higher rates of intimacy have also been linked to a reduced risk for loneliness, depression, anxiety, therapy seeking and greater life satisfaction (Hook et al., 2013). An abundance of research has likewise consistently revealed a strong positive association between romantic intimacy and couple satisfaction (Schaefer & Olson, 2011). This corresponds with individuals' common assertion that the attainment of intimacy is a primary goal within their romantic relationship (Reis, 1990). Given the benefits of intimacy, the creation of meaningful bonds between individuals has come to be viewed as an imperative means by which to achieve an array of positive outcomes (Sullivan, 2013).

### **Digital Intimacy Interference**

It is commonly believed that communication is the key to a successful relationship. It has been said that good communication results in relationship success, while bad communication results in relationship dissolution. The communication scholars Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor developed social penetration theory to explain how interpersonal relationships evolve in 1973. According to their theory, intimacy develops as partners navigate from relatively shallow communication to deeper connections over time. The transition from shallow communication to deep communication builds intimacy, an emotional closeness necessary to maintain a healthy relationship. Shallow communication may consist of asking someone's name or where they are from, whereas deeper communication may include sharing intimate details about one's personal past. Deep connections increase intimacy through self-disclosure, an intentional exchange of relevant information at the presumed risk of both partners (Mader & Mader, 2013). As a result, relationship communication fosters intimacy and builds trust between relationship partners as they begin to feel understood and accepted (Pietromonaco et al., 2014).

### **Marital Stability**

Marital stability refers to a firm, balanced and healthy marital relationship between couples. Stability is ensured as each member fulfils his/her role in the relationship. Echebe (2010) observes that, marital stability leads to a well-balanced and well-adjusted family which in turn leads to a well-adjusted progressive society. Marital stability and happiness are largely reflected in the ratio of positive to negative behaviour in the relationship. Garba (2016) refers to marital stability as any interpersonal relationship that is most meaningful when it is dynamic and evolving rather than fixed or final. Thus, there may be periods of joy and excitement followed by times of conflict, struggle, pain and distance. Unless two persons in this regard have settled for complacency, there are probably not too many long periods in which they are growing and changing, both separately and together, and their relationship is bound to change. Dada and Idowu (2016) assert that, before marriage, couples in love have



an idea and tendency to emphasise similarities in their way of life rather than their differences. Husbands and wives idealised each other. After the wedding, they will find their beginning a metamorphosis. In other couples, the changes embarrass these newly wedded pairs.

Marital stability is a situation in which a marriage is likely to stay together without any reason for termination, separation or divorce (Harman, 2015). Marital stability is achieved when married couples abide, work and constantly support each other in a given task, interest or set goal. However, when there is no common goal to be achieved, there is no cooperation or support and when there is a lack of understanding, instability can occur (Fitzsimons et al., 2015). Mustapha et al. (2017) state that, if a union remains inherently together, it is a stable marriage. Chris (2015) opines that couples who are happy in their marriage share common features, such as friendship, togetherness, affection, other-focused and shared spirituality. They enjoy affection, mutual feelings, emotional pleasure and love which promote their marital stability. Nadam and Sylaja (2015) posit that couples can enjoy a stable marital relationship if they can successfully adjust to their marital status. Gottman (1999) and Lisitsa (2013) reveal that certain types of behaviours could negatively affect relationships among couples. These are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. When couples avoid criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling, they will enjoy satisfactory, stable and enduring marriages.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Social Penetration Theory**

Social penetration theory was first examined by Altman and Taylor in 1973. They metaphorically described people as onions that have wedges or areas of personality each of which has multiple layers of progressive depth. Couples move from the superficial layers, middle layers, and inner layers to core layer. Irwin Altman and Dallas Taylor first looked at relationships as uninterrupted linear developments of relationships to greater openness and intimacy as well as desires for independence and closeness. In 1987, they acknowledged the weakness of the theory and amended their ideas to accommodate the tension that exists between independence and closeness (Wood, 2004). This theory is still relevant for understanding how online interaction and the sharing of personal information affect relationship dynamics. In digital interactions, couples often engage in self-disclosure through messaging, social media, video calls and other online platforms.

Moreover, the depth and speed at which this self-disclosure occurs can be influenced by the unique nature of digital communication. The “breadth” (range of topic) and “depth” (level of intimacy) of self-disclosure can vary in the digital realm compared to face-to-face interactions. Digital intimacy interference may occur when the pale of self-disclosure is not well-matched or when misinterpretations occur due to the lack of nonverbal cues that are present in face-to-face communication. This could lead to misunderstandings, breaches of truth or emotional distancing within relationships. The theory emphasises that as relationships progress, individuals gradually disclose more intimate and personal information. In the digital realm, couples need to navigate this process in a way that aligns with their comfort levels and strengthens their bonds without compromising trust and intimacy. Effective communication, understanding and awareness of the unique dynamics of digital interactions are keys to maintaining healthy relationships in the digital age. However, this study hinges on digital intimacy interference and its influence on couples. When couples spend more time in social

networks which results in interference, there may be friction in the marriages and conflict may occur. Hence this study underpins social network interference theory.

### **Social Network Interference Theory**

Social network interference theory hinges on the assumption that marriage is largely an exclusive institution that can be affected negatively by external influences from one or both partners' social networks. Pioneers of the theory of Dickson-Markman and Markman (1988) and Johnson and Milardo (1984), argue that interference from external networks including friends, parents and acquaintances contributes to marital challenges. When individuals begin romantic relationships or marry, they are expected to spend more time with their new family, and as a result spend less time with the members of their social network. However, when this arrangement is altered as a result of interference, there may be friction in the marriage and conflict may occur. Trotter et al., (2019) also argue that marital relationships thrive and solidify when there is less exogenous influence such as from friends, family, and society. According to these scholars, couples need seclusion or social withdrawal to build intimacy, love, interdependence, and trust which are important pillars of enduring relationships. When this exclusiveness is breached or interrupted, there may be tension in the marriage as the couples struggle to meet the needs of the two domains.

Thus, in the context of this theory, it is proposed in this study that the phenomenon of social withdrawal and marital intimacy becomes more difficult in new marriages where couples who are still struggling to bond and create intimacy which includes trying to detach from their social networks and social interactions within those networks, now add digital media to their array of marital challenges. In the context of digital intimacy interference among couples, this theory implies that excessive engagement with social media and online interactions can disrupt the intimacy and connection between partners. This can lead to decreased quality time, distractions, jealousy or misunderstandings, ultimately affecting the couples' overall closeness and relationship satisfaction, and communication and setting boundaries regarding digital interactions become crucial in mitigating this interference and maintaining healthy relationships. To address digital intimacy interference, couples need to establish clear boundaries for technology use, practice open communication and be mindful of the impact of social networks on their relationships. Balancing the benefits of digital connectivity with the preservation of intimacy is essential for maintaining a healthy, thriving partnership in the digital age. In addition to the foregoing, media theories that provided the theoretical basis for this study, some related media concepts have to be reviewed because they served as supporting structures for this work.

### **Empirical Review**

Ehoro and Badey (2021) investigated digital media and marital instability: exploring the implications of social media on new marriages. The study's objective examines the implications of social media on new marriages. The study revealed that social media impacts marital relationships in many ways and revealed common marital challenges associated with the use of social media by couples in new marriages which include loss of intimacy, infidelity, nagging, suspicion and loss of trust, and increased disputes.

Aziz et al. (2016) performed a study on "Disconnected Marriage, connected Internet: exploring Internet Addiction among Married Men and Women in Selengor, Malaysia." The

objectives of the study were to examine internet addiction (IA) among Malaysian married men and women. To determine the relationship behaviour of marital intimacy (MI) and stress (S) among Malaysian married men and women. The study revealed that male or female respondents were addicted to the Internet but the level of addiction varied. Another finding revealed that excessive use of the Internet among the respondents and their spouses was often associated with the loss of time and important tasks, avoiding important life activities to spend more time on the Internet, reducing social relationships, and ignoring family and friends.

Spencer (2018) conducted a study on “social media use and its impact on relationships and emotions.” The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between the amount of time spent on social media and the quality of interpersonal relationships. The study revealed that the more time an individual spent on social media the more the quality of their relationships decreases. Excessive use of social media was correlated with decreased overall emotional wellbeing of the user. Social media have little to do with relationships or emotions, but the amount of time spent on social media serves as the more important variable that has a more direct impact on the quality of the relationships of the user and their overall emotional wellbeing.

Zihad et al. (2021) carried out a study on “effects of social media on the interpersonal relationship among married couples: a study on selected neighbourhood (or wards) of Dhaka City in Bangladesh.” The objectives of the study were to examine how social media is perceived and used among married couples. The findings of the study showed that couples were not honest about their relationship status and lacked transparency. Additionally, the study revealed that spouses were conscious of their partners’ social media activity; often they were insecure and were more likely to feel jealous of their partners’ involvement. Another finding affirmed that social media badly affected married people’s lives; for example, fighting with partners, extramarital affairs and mistrust have increased immensely.

Owan, et al. (2020) conducted a study on “undergraduates’ utilisation of social networking media and sexual behaviours in higher education: a case study.” The objectives of the study were to examine what may be largely unintended effects of this exposure to sexual content in these media and to review new-media interventions designed to improve adolescent health. The findings of the study showed that undergraduates in Nigeria were highly exposed to social networking media platforms. Similarly, the basic tenet of the media technological determinism showed that undergraduates were highly exposed to social media and that such exposure directly affected their sexual behaviour.

Lee et al. (2019) carried out a study on the “effects of self- and partner’s online disclosure on relationship intimacy and satisfaction.” The objectives of the study were to examine how online disclosure depth predicts relationship intimacy and satisfaction differently from offline disclosure depth. The results revealed that greater disclosure was associated with greater relational intimacy and satisfaction when performed offline and lower intimacy and satisfaction when performed online by both the discloser and his or her partner.

Trotter et al. (2019) conducted a study on “spouses’ perceptions of network interference in the early years of marriage.” The purpose of the present study was to examine the links between social network interference from both family and friends and marital wellbeing in early marriage. The findings revealed that social network interference was linked to marital wellbeing; however, the links were dependent on the source of interference.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design adopted for this study was a descriptive survey design. A descriptive survey design was used to document existing perceptions. The choice of the descriptive survey research design was informed by the need to examine digital intimacy interference among couples in Rivers State, Nigeria: Implications for marital intimacy and stability. The population comprises all individuals who are 18 years or older and, who are male and female, who are of educational or socioeconomic status, who are married, and who reside within Rivers State. According to the National Population Commission, 2006 population census of Rivers State, the population of married males and females by age 18 and above was 1,366,590. The total population for the study was 1, 366,590 (one million, three hundred and sixty-six thousand, five hundred and ninety). This value was projected at 2.8% as the growth rate for 17 years (that is from 2006-2023), which yielded a projection of 1,404,855 (one million, four hundred and four thousand, eight hundred and fifty-five). Hence, the population for this study comprised married male and female residents of Rivers State from an age bracket of 18 and above. Therefore, the population for this study was 1,404,855 (one million, four hundred and four thousand, eight hundred and fifty-five).

To determine the sample size for this study, Krejcie and Morgan's determinant table (1970) was used. According to a sample size table from Krejcie and Morgan's sample table, a study population of 100,000, and a sample of 384 were adequate. This number was arrived at assuming a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. Therefore, the sample size for this study was 384. A Multistage sampling method was used to recruit respondents. It is applied because the population is too vast, researching every individual is impossible, and multiple locations exist. The first stage involved the clustering of Rivers State into Rivers-East Senatorial District, Rivers-West Senatorial District and Rivers-South-East Senatorial District.

The second stage involved a simple random sampling method, the researcher prepares a list of all the 23 (twenty-three) Local Government areas according to three (3) senatorial districts in Rivers State and marks each with a specific number (1 to 23). Random sampling was chosen by using random number tables and random number generator software. This is to ensure that no human interference is necessary to generate samples. Through these simple random sampling steps, six (6) Local Government Areas were extracted out of 23 LGAs which are: Obio/Akpor local government area and Port Harcourt local government area in Rivers East senatorial district; Eleme local government area and Oyigbo local government area in Rivers South-East senatorial district; and Ahoada East local government area and Degema local government area in Rivers West senatorial district. The third stage was the use of a systematic sampling method to obtain a list of capital or headquarters of Local Government Areas in Rivers State. From each listed headquarters which were Rumuodumaya town, Port Harcourt City, Nchia town, Afam town, Ahoada town, Degema town, were the ultimate sampling units. In the fourth stage, the researcher chose households from each town or headquarters using a simple random sampling method. The researcher ended up with 384 houses that were included in the sample group for research. Individuals of 18 years to 65 years who were digital media-friendly were judgmentally (ardent and digital media tools users) selected from each of these sampled houses to make up the sample size of 384.

The instrument for data gathering in this study was a set of questionnaires. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires with the help of six field assistants and retrieved

the instrument via the same method. The respondents were met at their homes, and places of work according to the street on each of these twelve sampled areas and the houses located on each of the sampled streets. Each of these respondents was purposively selected from the houses of those who were 18 years to 65 years. The research questions were analysed, using descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. In other words, contingency tables were used to present data obtained from the questionnaires using percentages and weighted mean scores (WMSs). Hence, any mean response that was equal to or greater than 2.5 was considered positive while any mean response less than 2.50 was considered negative. To measure extent, a scale was constructed using weighted mean score, where score of 0 – 2.00 indicated a very low extent, 2.01 – 2.49 indicated a low extent, 2.50 – 3.00 indicated a high extent and 3.01 – 4.00 indicated a very high extent. A brief analytical discussion was made for each of the research questions based on the results obtained from the response as indicated in the questionnaires administered. The Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (PPMC) was the method used for testing the hypothesised data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: Ways Digital Media Interferes with the Intimacy of Married Couples in Rivers State**

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total (fx)	Decision
Digital media sometimes distract me or my partner from having quality conversations or bonding time in my marriage	192 (768)	162 (486)	24 (48)	4 (4)	1,306	3.42	Agreed
I spend more time on my digital devices than engaging in physical affection or intimate moments	189 (756)	152 (456)	36 (72)	5 (5)	1,289	3.37	Agreed
I feel disconnected from my partner due to the use of digital media in my relationship	179 (719)	165 (495)	28 (56)	10 (10)	1,280	3.35	Agreed
Digital media occasionally leads to misunderstandings in my marriage because of the time I spend online or on my devices	192 (768)	151 (453)	39 (78)	0 (0)	1,299	3.40	Agreed
My use of digital media has never impacted my ability to connect on an intimate level in my marriage	7 (28)	53 (159)	145 (290)	177 (177)	654	1.71	Disagreed
Digital media have not caused any disruptions in my intimate moments as a married couple	12 (48)	44 (132)	158 (316)	168 (168)	664	1.74	Disagreed
I have never experienced any decline in the quality of my intimacy due to my use of digital media in my marriage	19 (76)	69 (207)	112 (224)	182 (182)	689	1.8	Disagreed
<b>Grand Mean</b>					<b>1026</b>	<b>2.69</b>	<b>Agreed</b>

The data in Table 1 above showed that the ways in which digital media interferes with the intimacy of married couples were through distraction from quality conversations or bonding time in marriage, spending more time on digital devices than engaging in physical affection or intimate moments.

**Table 2: Factors that Influence Digital Intimacy Interference among Married Couples in Rivers State**

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total (fx)	Decision
The influence of intimate self-disclosure-related digital communication has a noticeable impact on digital intimacy interference in marriage	183 (732)	179 (537)	20 (40)	0 (0)	1,309	3.43	Agreed
Availability of high-speed Internet and constant access to digital devices impact the level of digital intimacy interference in my marriage	149 (596)	176 (528)	57 (114)	0 (0)	1,238	3.24	Agreed
The use of social media platforms and instant messaging apps plays a significant role in how digital intimacy is influenced in my marriage	154 (616)	183 (549)	45 (90)	0 (0)	1,255	3.297	Agreed
The frequency of online entertainment consumption, such as streaming services affects how digital media interferes with my intimacy as a married couple	164 (656)	188 (564)	30 (60)	0 (0)	1280	3.35	Agreed
The extent to which interpersonal disinhibition is prioritize directly influences the level of interference digital media has on intimacy	149 (596)	176 (528)	57 (114)	0 (0)	1,238	3.24	Agreed
The use of digital devices and online activities have never had any adverse effects on my intimacy as a married couple	13 (52)	68 (204)	139 (172)	162 (162)	590	1.54	Disagreed
<b>Grand Mean</b>					<b>1,152</b>	<b>3.02</b>	<b>Agreed</b>

Table 2 reveals that the factors that influence digital intimacy interference among married couples in Rivers State are intimate self-disclosure-related communication, constant access to digital devices, entertainment consumption such as streaming services and interpersonal disinhibition.

**Table 3: How Digital Intimacy Interference Affects Marital Stability of Married Couples in Rivers State**

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Weighted Total (fx)	Decision
Excessive social media use affects the level of trust and security within marriage	122 (488)	184 (552)	72 (154)	4 (4)	1198	3.14	Agreed
Feelings of emotional distance or disconnection between me and my partner	88 (352)	134 (402)	128 (256)	32 (32)	1,042	2.73	Agreed
Digital intimacy interference contributes increased misunderstandings and conflicts that shake the stability of my marriage	156 (624)	192 (576)	34 (68)	0 (0)	1,268	3.32	Agreed
Influence of digital media on communication patterns impacts the overall satisfaction and happiness in my marriage	138 (552)	176 (528)	46 (92)	22 (22)	1,194	3.13	Agreed
Digital intimacy interference affects married couple's ability to maintain a strong emotional connection with spouse	148 (592)	165 (495)	69 (138)	0 (0)	1,225	3.21	Agreed
Digital intimacy interference influences ability to spend quality time and engage in physical intimacy with partner	162 (648)	204 (612)	16 (32)	0 (0)	1,292	3.38	Agreed
Digital intimacy interference has not had a significant impact on the overall trust and stability of my marriage	10 (40)	192 (576)	52 (104)	128 (128)	848	2.22	Disagreed
<b>Grand Mean</b>					<b>1152</b>	<b>3.12</b>	<b>Agreed</b>

Table 3 reveals that, digital intimacy interference the affects marital stability of married couples in Rivers State as excessive social media use affects the level of trust and security within marriage.

**Tests for Hypotheses**

**Table 4: Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of the significant Interference of Digital Media on the Intimacy of Married Couples in Rivers State**

Variables	N	df	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
Interference of Digital Media					
vs	382	376	0.9182	0.085	Rejected
Intimacy of Married Couples					

Table 4 shows the correlation statistics between the mean responses of the respondents to ascertain the significant interference of digital media on the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State. According to the analysis done,  $r\text{-cal} > r\text{-crit}$  and its value is 0.9182, which indicates that digital media significantly influences the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State. Therefore, the null hypothesis that digital media do not significantly influence the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State was rejected

**Table 5: Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Coefficient of the Significant Effect of Digital Intimacy Interference on Marital Stability of Married Couples in Rivers State**

Variables	N	Df	r-cal	r-crit	Decision
Effect of Digital Intimacy Interference					
vs	382	376	0.83	0.084	Rejected
Marital Stability of Married Couples					

Table 5 shows the correlation statistics between the mean responses of the respondents to ascertain the significant effect of digital intimacy interference on the marital stability of married couples in Rivers State. From the analysis,  $r\text{-cal} > r\text{-crit}$  and its value is 0.83, which indicates that there is a significant effect of digital intimacy interference on marital stability of married couples in Rivers State. Therefore, the null hypothesis suggesting that there is no significant effect of digital intimacy interference on the marital stability of married couples in Rivers State was rejected.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**Research Question 1:** In what ways does digital media interfere with the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State?

The findings from the questionnaires and hypotheses revealed that the ways in which digital media interferes with the intimacy of married couples were through distraction from quality conversations or bonding time in marriage, and through spending more time on digital devices than engaging in physical affection or intimate moments. Additionally, the data showed that, digital distraction can have a substantial impact on the intimacy and closeness between partners in a marriage relationship. The excessive use of digital devices, such as smartphones



or laptops, can lead to reduced quality time spent together. According to the hypothesis, digital media significantly interfered with the intimacy of married couples in Rivers State.

The findings of this study are related to those of a previous study by Aziz et al. (2016) who examined “Disconnected marriage, connected Internet: exploring Internet addiction among married men and women in Selengor, Malaysia.” This study revealed that excessive use of the Internet among the respondents and their spouses was often associated with the loss of time and important tasks, avoiding important life activities to spend more time on the internet, reducing social relationships, and ignoring family and friends. Additionally, the study is related to the study by Spencer (2018) who studied “social media use and its impact on relationships and emotions.” and found that excessive use of social media was correlated with decreased overall emotional wellbeing of the user.

Equally, the findings of the study align with the theoretical framework of social penetration theory. This theory becomes relevant to this research as it posits that relationships develop as individuals disclose more about themselves over time. In the context of married couples, increased use of digital media leading to distraction from quality conversations or bonding time can impede the depth of self-disclosure. Reduced face-to-face interaction, a vital component of social penetration, may hinder the process of revealing inner thoughts and emotions crucial for intimacy in marital relationships. Additionally, the social network interference theory is relevant to this finding as the theory explores how external influences, such as digital media, can affect relationships. The interference of digital media with intimacy can be seen through the lens of social network interference. Digital distractions may introduce external elements that compete for attention and time in the marital relationship, potentially weakening the bonds of intimacy. Social penetration theory helps explain how reduced face-to-face interaction due to digital distractions may hinder the deepening of intimacy, while the social network interference theory sheds light on how external factors, such as digital media, can influence the quality of marital relationships. Both theories contribute to understanding the dynamics at play when examining the impact of digital media on intimacy in married couples.

**Research Question 2:** What are the factors that influence digital intimacy interference among married couples in Rivers State?

The findings revealed that the factors that influence digital intimacy interference among married couples in Rivers State were intimate self-disclosure-related communication, constant access to digital devices, and entertainment consumption such as streaming services and interpersonal dis-inhibition. These findings are consistent with the studies of Owan et al. (2020) on the “undergraduates’ utilisation of social networking media and sexual behaviours in higher education: a case study.” This study revealed that the basic tenet of media technological determinism showed that undergraduates were highly exposed to social media and that such exposure directly affected their sexual behaviour. Lee et al. (2019) carried out a study on “Effects of self-and partner’s online disclosure on relationship intimacy and satisfaction.” The study revealed that a negative association between online disclosure and intimacy was present in romantic relationships but not in friendships.

**Research Question 3:** How does digital intimacy interference affect marital stability of married couples in Rivers State?

The findings revealed that digital intimacy interference affects the marital stability of married couples in Rivers State as excessive social media use affects the level of trust and security within marriage. The impact of digital interaction can either bolster or undermine the resilience of a marital relationship. Digital intimacy interference, such as breaches of trust or secretive online behaviour, can erode the resilience of a marriage. Trust is a crucial component of resilience, and when compromised through digital means, the relationships may struggle to withstand challenges, bring feelings of emotional distance, disconnection among married couples, increased misunderstandings and conflicts that shake the stability of marriage. Additionally, it affects a married couple's ability to maintain a strong emotional connection with his or her spouse, ability to spend quality time, and ability to engage the physical intimacy with partners and has a significant impact on the overall trust and stability of marriage. According to the null hypothesis, the data showed that, there was significant effect on the marital stability of married couples in Rivers State.

This finding corroborates the outcome of a study on “digital media and marital instability: exploring the implications of social media on new marriages,” by Ehoru and Badey (2021) who appraised social media the impact of marital relationships in many ways and indicated that loss of intimacy, infidelity, nagging, suspicion and loss of trust and increased disputes, emotional distance, disconnection among married couples; and increased misunderstandings and conflicts that shake the stability of marriage. Additionally, it affects a married couple's ability to maintain a strong emotional connection with his or her spouse, ability to spend quality time, and ability to engage in physical intimacy with partners and has significant impact on the overall trust and stability of marriage.

Additionally, this finding aligns with the assertion of Zihad et al. (2021) on “Effects of social media on the interpersonal relationship among married couples: a study on selected neighbourhood (or wards) of Dhaka City in Bangladesh”, who stated that couples were not honest about their relationship status and lack transparency. Spouses who were conscious of their partners' activity on social media often experienced insecurity and feelings of jealousy relating to their partners' involvement in the opposite gender. The negative effects of social media on married people, such as fighting with partners, extra marital affairs and mistrust have increased immensely. Based on these findings, social penetration theory and social network interference theory provide valuable insights. Social penetration theory posits that relationships evolve through a process of self-disclosure and gradual penetration of inner layers, leading to increased intimacy. Excessive social media use can disrupt this process by diverting attention and communication away from the core aspects of the marital relationship. As couples become engrossed in online interactions, the depth of their interpersonal communication may be compromised, potentially diminishing trust and emotional closeness. On the other hand, social network interference theory emphasises the impact of external influences on relationships. Excessive involvement in social media can expose couples to various external factors that may interfere with their marital dynamics. This could include third-party interactions, comparisons with others, or the influence of online networks on individual perceptions of trust and security. Social network interference theory highlights how the intrusion of external elements, facilitated by digital platforms, can contribute to the erosion of marital stability by introducing new sources of tension and undermining the foundational element of trust within the relationship.

## Conclusion

Based on these findings, this study establishes the significant impact of digital media on marital intimacy, revealing that distractions from quality conversations and bonding time, coupled with excessive device use, hinder the development of physical affection and intimate moments in married couples. To enhance marital intimacy, couples are encouraged to establish dedicated device-free times for meaningful conversations and bonding activities.

The study highlights that in Rivers State, Nigeria; digital intimacy interference in married couples is notably linked to intimate self-disclosure communication, constant accessibility to digital devices, consumption of entertainment through streaming services and interpersonal dis-inhibition. The ease of accessing a plethora of digital stimuli has given rise to a culture of instant gratification, potentially diminishing the patience required for navigating the complexities of a long-term relationship. Instances of online dis-inhibition may lead to impulsive behaviour, exacerbating conflicts within marriages.

This study has established that digital intimacy interference has a significant impact on the level of trust and security within marriage. As digital communication and media continue to permeate every aspect of people's lives, couples increasingly face challenges in maintaining healthy and secure relationships. Digital intimacy interference leads to a breakdown in communication and increases the risk of infidelity, thereby eroding trust and security within the marriage. It becomes necessary to prioritize transparency in digital communications, such as sharing social media passwords, setting up GPS tracking and monitoring applications, sharing locations with each other and updating the daily activities, interests and needs.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Married couples should prioritize physical affection and establish boundaries on digital device usage to foster a deeper connection within the marriage.
2. Couples should cultivate open communication about their digital habits, allocate specific times for uninterrupted personal interactions and be more knowledgeable on about impact of constant digital connectivity on their intimate relationships, and the importance of balance in fostering a healthy marital bond.
3. Couples should avoid engaging in risky digital behaviour such as sharing explicit photos or messages with someone who is not their partner, engaging in online flirting or emotional affairs, or using dating apps or websites without their partner's knowledge. This should include defining what is and is not acceptable behaviour in regard to technology use, sharing passwords and accessing social media accounts.

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