

A Psychosociological Analysis of the Phenomenon of Digital Jealousy An Analysis of Key Previous Studies

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Abstract

The phenomenon of digital jealousy has become increasingly prevalent in family life, particularly in marital relationships, due to the excessive use of social media. This jealousy manifests itself when one spouse feels anxious or suspicious about the other's online interactions, such as private messages or engagements with other people on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This type of jealousy differs from traditional jealousy, as it involves new challenges related to privacy and transparency in relationships, leading to an erosion of trust between spouses.

In this article, through our analysis of a set of previous studies on the phenomenon, it has become clear that the use of social media networks has significantly threatened the relationships and bonds between spouses due to the digital jealousy resulting from their continuous and constant use.

Keywords: digital jealousy, marital relationship, social media

Introduction

Digital jealousy has become one of the prominent phenomena in the context of the transformations that contemporary family life has undergone, especially within marital relationships, as a consequence of the widespread use of social media. The psychological component plays a key role in the emergence of this new type of emotion. On the one hand, this form of jealousy is linked to fundamental psychological needs such as emotional security and self-esteem; on the other hand, it is shaped within a digital environment that facilitates various forms of symbolic interaction through social media. One spouse may interpret the other's digital behavior—such as repeated online comments—as indicators of a potential threat to the relationship.

Conversely, social media occupies a prominent place in our daily lives, providing us with a range of relational platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and others, allowing us to connect with one another around the world and exchange ideas, feelings, and personal experiences in an open and unrestricted environment. While these social networks offer many social and professional benefits on one side, they have also brought with them a set of challenges that directly impact personal relationships—particularly romantic and marital ones.

Among these challenges is digital jealousy, which refers to a range of feelings of anxiety and doubt that one spouse may experience as a result of the other's online interactions. These interactions may take the form of private messages, comments on photos, or even engagements with other people on social media platforms. This phenomenon can create an atmosphere of suspicion and confusion

between couples, especially in an era where access to digital information is possible anytime and anywhere.

Therefore, digital jealousy is not just understood as an individual emotional response but also as a product of a social and communicative context that reshapes the boundaries of privacy and transparency standards within the marital relationship. This phenomenon also contributes to redefining trust, as it becomes linked not only to real-world behavior but also to virtual practices, leading to tensions and conflicts arising from the interpretative gap between partners.

Numerous studies have shown that this phenomenon has begun to play a significant role in affecting marital relationships in the modern era, as digital jealousy has become one of the main reasons leading to marital disputes and emotional tensions that can cause the breakdown of relationships. The use of social media can have negative effects on families and marital relationships, especially when used inappropriately. These platforms have become among the easiest and simplest means through which marital infidelity is committed or immoral videos are viewed (Falah Hassan, 2018: 168). In addition, these sites can generate negative feelings among couples, such as excessive jealousy and suspicion. This was confirmed by a study published in the journal *Cyber Psychology & Behavior* in 2016, which found that 33% of couples expressed concern that social media might contribute to emotional infidelity, leading to increased doubts and reduced trust between partners. There is a significant relationship between the amount of time spent on Facebook and feelings of jealousy in marital relationships, as the study indicated that "social networks can create cycles of negative reactions." In these cycles, users frequently log in to the sites, upload photos, and respond to messages, leading to a kind of mutual surveillance between spouses.

Studies also indicate that digital jealousy significantly affects trust between spouses, which is one of the fundamental pillars of any healthy and stable relationship. In a study conducted by the University of Portsmouth in the UK in 2017, about 50% of couples surveyed reported feeling jealous as a result of their partners' interactions on social media, especially in cases involving comments on photos or private messages between spouses and other people.

In addition, digital jealousy is not limited to the fear of emotional infidelity; it also includes anxiety about interactions with strangers or ex-partners, where social media becomes a source of ongoing tension in the relationship. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, 46% of couples surveyed indicated that disputes related to social media interactions had become part of the marital challenges they face. Another study in the Arab world showed that 52% of couples in Egypt expressed doubts about their partners' interactions with others on social media, which affected the stability of the relationship and led to increased tensions between the two parties.

With the increasing use of smartphones that facilitate constant access to social media platforms, the sense of surveillance and mutual suspicion between spouses is becoming more common. This growing influence may lead to the erosion of trust between spouses, increasing relationship tension, and in some cases, leading to separation or other emotional issues. In this context, it has become essential to address digital jealousy with caution and awareness in order to avoid the negative effects that could undermine the foundation of the marital relationship.

Given the widespread use of social media, there is an urgent need to study the impact of this phenomenon on trust in marital relationships. It requires a precise understanding of how to minimize the impact of digital jealousy on marital relationships, thereby contributing to maintaining a healthy

and balanced relationship away from the negative effects of these digital interactions. In this article, we will discuss the impact of this phenomenon on trust between spouses and how social media affects the stability of marital relationships, in addition to providing some solutions and techniques to properly address this phenomenon.

1. Definitions of Concepts

1.1. Social Media Networks

The development of media technology has led to the emergence of new means of communication through online platforms on the World Wide Web. These sites have gained widespread popularity under the name "social media networks," which are considered effective tools in facilitating social interaction among individuals by enabling them to communicate textually and vocally, as well as share photos and other content, thereby strengthening their social bonds and relationships (Joudi, 2009: 24).

Ellison and Boyd argue that social networking sites are shaped by the internet, allowing individuals to publish information about their daily lives and communicate with a network of registered users. These platforms also provide individuals or groups the opportunity to express their opinions through a communication process that varies in nature from one site to another (Dnanah, 2007: 02).

1.2. The Marital Relationship

The marital relationship is a legal and social bond that unites a man and a woman on the basis of permanence and continuity, and it is established under specific conditions as determined by scholars and religious law (Makatli, 2016: 259). It also encompasses all mutual interactions between spouses, which last for a long period of time. This is achieved through continuous communication and the exchange of rights and duties between them, in addition to social and emotional connection. The marital relationship is a continuous interaction between spouses in which attention, participation, and social and emotional support are exchanged. These interactions include cooperation in performing roles and household activities, as well as mutual emotional support, which manifests itself in love, tenderness, affection, and compassion (Al-Mahmal, 2022: 830).

1.3. The Concept of Digital Jealousy

Digital jealousy is an emotional phenomenon that arises when one partner feels anxious or suspicious due to the other partner's interactions on social media platforms. This feeling is considered a form of emotional jealousy related to anxiety about the relationship caused by interactions or communications that may negatively impact the marital relationship, but which occur in the digital space rather than in real life. According to the definition provided by the author Jeffrey Hernandez in a 2004 study, emotional jealousy is "a feeling of threat or anxiety stemming from the perception of the existence of emotional relationships that may affect the primary relationship" (Hernandez, 2004).

Digital jealousy refers to the same feeling, but in a digital context through online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This type of jealousy arises from online interactions such as private messages, comments on posts, or even likes that may be perceived as a threat to the marital relationship. In a study conducted by the University of Portsmouth in 2017, it was shown that 50% of the couples surveyed indicated that interactions on social media, such as likes or comments on photos, were the main cause of digital jealousy in their relationships (Portsmouth University, 2017).

2. Studies and Research on Digital Jealousy Worldwide

Digital jealousy is a relatively recent phenomenon, and studies on the topic have started to proliferate only in recent years, especially in Western societies. As for the Arab world, with the increasing use of social media over the past decade, digital jealousy has begun to emerge noticeably as one of the issues affecting marital relationships. The effects of this phenomenon in Arab societies differ from those observed in Western societies due to cultural, religious, and social differences.

2.1. Foreign Studies

- **Portsmouth University Study (2017):** This study showed that 50% of couples surveyed reported feeling jealous due to their partner's interactions on social media, such as private messages or likes on photos. The study confirmed that digital jealousy leads to the erosion of trust within the marital relationship, as both partners feel constantly monitored, which reinforces feelings of insecurity and emotional tension (Portsmouth University, 2017).

- **Study in Cyber Psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking (2016):** Another study published in 2016 in the journal *Cyber Psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* addressed the impact of social media platforms on romantic relationships. The researchers found that 33% of the couples surveyed were concerned that their partner's interactions on social media could lead to emotional infidelity, increasing suspicion and weakening emotional trust between the spouses (Drouin & Landers, 2016).

- **Pew Research Center Study (2018):** In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, the results indicated that 46% of couples who participated in the survey acknowledged that online interactions had become a source of conflict within the marital relationship. The findings suggest that platforms like Facebook and Twitter may lead to a deterioration of trust due to suspicions regarding digital relationships that take place without the other partner's knowledge, thereby increasing conflicts between spouses (Pew Research Center, 2018).

3. A Comparative Study of the Impacts on Western and Arab Societies

3.1. Social and Religious Restrictions: Conservatism

In Arab societies, communication between spouses and other people of the opposite sex through social media is considered a sensitive issue and can provoke feelings of digital jealousy due to cultural and religious restrictions. In Western societies, such interactions are often more widely accepted, as individuals enjoy greater freedom to express themselves and interact with others online, thereby reducing the impact of digital jealousy. Some studies indicate that couples in Western societies may not feel threatened by their partner's interactions with others on social media as is the case in Arab countries (Drouin & Landers, 2016).

3.2. The Role of Religion and Tradition in Strengthening Feelings of Jealousy

In Arab and Islamic societies, religion is considered a key factor in shaping marital relationships. Interactions with people of the opposite sex online are often viewed as a threat to the marital relationship. For example, in Algeria and other Arab countries, couples are keen on maintaining privacy in their marital relationships, which makes any interaction with strangers online a source of suspicion and jealousy. While in Western societies, these interactions are handled with greater flexibility (*Cyber Psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 2016).

3.3. Local Studies on the Impact of Social Media Networks on Marital Relationships in the Arab World

- **A Study in Algeria (2022):** A study conducted by the Center for Social Studies in Algeria in 2022 revealed that 47% of Algerian couples suffer from the effects of digital jealousy due to interactions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. In this study, it was noted that the use of social media has become one of the main sources of suspicion and tension in marital relationships, particularly when one spouse notices their partner's interactions with people of the opposite sex. The study also showed that 35% of participants acknowledged that digital jealousy significantly contributes to increasing marital conflicts (Study by the Center for Social Studies, Algeria, 2022).

- **Study in Algeria (2021):** In a study conducted by the Algerian Center for Family Studies in 2021, 38% of couples in Algeria reported that social media poses a threat to their marital relationships due to the increasing interactions between spouses and individuals of the opposite sex. The study focuses on the impact of social media on marital privacy and revealed that a spouse's interaction with old friends or individuals of the opposite sex evokes feelings of jealousy and anxiety, which affects the stability of the marital relationship. Thirty percent of the participants showed that feelings of digital jealousy increase, especially in the context of constant interactions on social media, reflecting an increase in suspicion and anxiety in marital life (Study by the Algerian Family Studies Center, 2021).

- **Study in Egypt (2020):** A study was conducted in Egypt involving 200 married couples to examine the impact of social media on marital relationships. The study revealed that 60% of couples confirmed that the use of social media was a major cause of increased jealousy between them. Additionally, 40% of participants indicated that daily disputes over smartphone use and private messages had led to deterioration in emotional communication between them. The study confirmed that digital jealousy in Egyptian society is strongly linked to the use of social media as a primary tool for communication between spouses, leading to difficulties in maintaining privacy and transparency in the relationship. The study highlighted the need to educate couples on how to manage social media and avoid conflicts arising from it.

- **Study in Saudi Arabia (2019):** In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah Center for Social Studies conducted a study in 2019 involving a group of Saudi couples. The results showed that 35% of Saudi couples experience increased tensions in their relationship due to digital jealousy resulting from interactions on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The study showed that online interactions, especially when a husband or wife is in communication with someone of the opposite sex in a non-transparent manner, provoke feelings of suspicion and fear of infidelity. The study also indicated that social and religious culture plays a significant role in couples' perceptions of online relationships and how they deal with the resulting doubts arising from them, as interacting with people of the opposite sex is viewed as a potential threat to the marital relationship.

- **Study in the UAE (2021):** The Emirates Center for Social Studies conducted a study in 2021 on a number of couples in the UAE, which revealed that 53% of couples in the UAE believe that online interactions may lead to increased tensions due to digital jealousy. The study indicates that couples in the UAE deal with digital jealousy differently than individuals in Western societies, as couples in the UAE face greater social pressure related to the privacy of online relationships. The study explained that these online interactions, if not accompanied by complete transparency, can lead to the erosion of trust between couples, deepening suspicions and increasing tensions in the marital relationship.

4. The Main Reasons for Digital Jealousy

4.1. Non-Transparent Online Interactions

The ambiguity of online interactions is considered one of the fundamental causes of digital jealousy. Private messages, likes, and comments on posts are often invisible to the other party, and that fact enhances feelings of suspicion. In a study conducted in 2016, researchers Drouin and Landers noted that the opacity of digital interactions can lead to feelings of emotional insecurity due to a lack of transparency regarding how a partner interacts with others online (Drouin & Landers, 2016).

4.2. Anxiety Concerns About Potential Threats to a Romantic Relationship

Worrying about the existence of hidden romantic relationships is one of the primary causes of digital jealousy. When one partner consistently interacts with other people online, the other partner may feel that this interaction could lead to emotional infidelity. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, 33% of couples admitted that they feel interactions on social media could be a gateway to emotional infidelity. The study also showed that platforms like Facebook can be a fertile ground for emotional infidelity, as constant interaction with others contributes to stirring feelings of jealousy (Pew Research Center, 2018).

4.3. Increased Access to Information

With the widespread use of smartphones and digital applications, couples now have the capability of constant access to each other's accounts on social media platforms. This ability to monitor one another enhances feelings of surveillance and suspicion. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017, 46% of couples reported that disagreements over their partner's social media interactions had become part of the marital challenges they face (Pew Research Center, 2017).

5. Comparison with Traditional Jealousy

Traditional jealousy is a feeling of anxiety or suspicion that one partner may form an emotional relationship with someone else in real life, such as colleagues at work or acquaintances at social events. This differs from digital jealousy, which arises from online interactions and is often invisible or ambiguous. In a study conducted by Coulthard and Dering in 2014, traditional jealousy was defined as "the feeling of fear of emotional or physical betrayal due to a third party's interference in the marital relationship" (Coulthard & Dering, 2014).

Traditional jealousy is based on real-life interactions between spouses and other people in daily life, such as attending meetings or social gatherings. Digital jealousy, on the other hand, relates to digital interactions—such as likes on photos or private messages—which may be invisible to the other partner or difficult to monitor.

6. The Role of Trust in a Marital Relationship

Trust is one of the foundations of a successful and lasting marital relationship, serving as the cornerstone upon which a healthy relationship between spouses is built. Studies indicate that trust is a crucial factor in fostering understanding, mutual respect, and open dialogue between partners. According to psychologist John Gottman, who has conducted extensive research on marital relationships, trust allows couples to be vulnerable to emotional and psychological risks without fear of betrayal or deception. Mutual trust is considered a guarantee of marital stability and achieving harmony between partners.

On an emotional level, trust can motivate individuals to share and communicate honestly and openly. When there is strong trust between spouses, each partner becomes more willing to open up and share their feelings and thoughts. Conversely, a lack of trust reinforces feelings of suspicion and anxiety, leading to the deterioration of the marital relationship.

7. The Negative Effects of Digital Jealousy on Trust

Digital jealousy is one of the factors that negatively affect trust between spouses in the digital era. Continuous interactions on social media platforms lead to a disruption in marital trust, and this is due to several reasons:

7.1. Constant Suspicion

Digital jealousy creates a constant feeling of suspicion in one of the spouses, especially when the other notices suspicious interactions such as private messages or excessive online engagement with other people. Studies have shown that couples become more focused on monitoring their partner's online behavior, leading to a deterioration of trust. For example, a 2017 study conducted by the University of Portsmouth found that 50% of the couples who participated in the study admitted to feeling jealous because of their partner's interactions on social media platforms, such as comments on photos or private messages with others, which evoke feelings of suspicion and anxiety (Portsmouth University, 2017).

7.2. The Impact on Emotional Communication

The constant doubts resulting from digital jealousy directly affect emotional communication between spouses. Instead of both partners sharing their feelings and openly expressing their needs, communication becomes tainted by suspicion and mistrust, leading to emotional distance. A study conducted by the journal *CyberPsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* in 2016 indicates that digital jealousy may lead to a decline in emotional communication within the marital relationship, as couples spend more time monitoring each other rather than building a relationship based on trust and emotional understanding (Drouin & Landers, 2016).

7.3. Increased Suspicion

When one spouse is unable to see or understand how the other interacts with others online, feelings of suspicion and anxiety escalate. In the absence of transparency regarding digital relationships, obsessive thoughts begin to emerge, making it difficult to build or maintain trust in the relationship. In another study published in the journal *Cyber Psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 33% of surveyed couples reported that interaction on social media platforms could lead to emotional infidelity, raising further doubts about their partner's intentions (Cyber Psychology, 2016).

8. The Psychosocial Causes of Digital Jealousy

Digital jealousy is a phenomenon influenced by a number of psychological and social factors that contribute to its emergence and intensification within marital relationships. These factors can be classified into psychological and social categories, with each playing an important role in enhancing this phenomenon in the digital era.

8.1. The Influencing Psychological Factors

Self-Esteem and Self-Doubt: Low self-esteem is considered one of the most significant psychological factors leading to digital jealousy. When one spouse feels insecure or doubts their self-worth, they become more prone to suspicion about their partner's relationship with others online. According to a study conducted by Drouin and Landers in 2016, the results showed that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to feel jealous about their partner's digital interactions, as this feeling is considered a psychological reaction to the anxiety of losing interest or love (Drouin & Landers, 2016).

This type of jealousy may worsen when an individual sees their partner's interactions with other people online—such as likes or comments—as this can make them feel insecure and raise doubts about their partner's fidelity. The feeling of inadequacy or fear of being replaced can significantly increase digital jealousy, thereby affecting the stability of the marital relationship.

Fear of Losing Love or the Feeling of Competition: The fear of losing love is one of the main psychological triggers of digital jealousy. When one partner starts to notice their partner's interactions with other people online, a feeling of fear escalates that the partner might find someone else who could be more attractive or interesting. This fear of competition, which may manifest as a sense of threat from potential relationships with others, enhances feelings of jealousy. A study published in the journal *Cyber Psychology* showed that couples who feel emotionally insecure are more likely to interpret their partner's digital interactions as threats to emotional fidelity and attachment (*Cyber Psychology*, 2016).

8.2. Influential Social Factors

The Impact of Digital Culture and the Digital Society on Shaping Individuals' Expectations Regarding Romantic Relationships: Digital culture has become an integral part of daily life, with social media influencing individuals' expectations regarding romantic relationships. In the digital society, apparent virtual interactions on the internet are on the rise, which may portray some couples in an idealized image, leading to social comparisons that may increase pressure on others to achieve the same ideal image. Many experts point out that the use of social media reinforces the idea of "emotional perfectionism," where individuals are expected to constantly present themselves as "happy couples." This expectation can lead to feelings of anxiety and jealousy when one partner feels that the other may interact with others in a way that conceals emotions or interests that could affect the real relationship.

The Role of Social Media in Enhancing Social Comparisons Among Couples: Social media platforms contribute to the phenomenon of social comparison, in which individuals compare their romantic lives with those of other couples. This type of comparison can enhance feelings of jealousy when one partner feels that other couples' relationships online appear happier or more ideal compared to their own. In a study published by the journal *Cyber Psychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* in 2016, it was found that 40% of participants felt pressured due to the posting of photos or moments of other couples' lives on platforms like Facebook and Instagram, which increased their dissatisfaction with their own relationship (*Cyber Psychology*, 2016).

Social media is not merely a means of communication; it has become a social platform that reflects new cultural norms regarding what a successful romantic relationship should look like. Consequently, the pressure resulting from these standards can lead to feelings of jealousy, as one partner may start to question the quality of the relationship or his/her partner's behavior based on what they see in others' online interactions.

Conclusion

We can affirm that digital jealousy has become a contemporary phenomenon that profoundly affects marital relationships in our current era. As reliance on social media as a tool for communication and interaction grows, couples face new challenges related to trust and privacy. Their opaque interactions on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok raise suspicions and jealousy, leading to the erosion of mutual trust and exacerbating marital conflicts. Digital jealousy is not limited to the fear of infidelity; it extends to constant concerns about privacy, as well as interactions with friends or former acquaintances, which disrupts the emotional harmony of the romantic relationship.

Therefore, it becomes essential for couples to pay great attention to building mutual trust and enhancing transparency in their use of social media. Clear boundaries should be established regarding the use of these means to ensure they do not negatively impact the marital relationship. Through open communication and mutual understanding regarding digital interactions, couples can minimize the impact of digital jealousy on their emotional lives. Furthermore, it is important to maintain a healthy balance between digital life and real-life experiences to ensure the stability of the marital relationship in the face of contemporary challenges. Adopting these strategies can strengthen the stability of the marital relationship, leading to the preservation of mutual respect and privacy, thereby contributing to building a healthy and lasting relationship, free from the negative influences of modern technology.

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