



New media and Marital Instability: Exploring the implications of social media on new marriages

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ABSTRACT

Empirical evidence has shown that a healthy marriage provides a number of physical, mental, financial, social and sexual benefits to a person, and also has valuable outcomes for society. Today, the phenomena of separation, divorce, and broken homes have become a recurring concern in the society considering how it impacts on financial stability, mental health, work satisfaction, child development, and the marriage institution as a whole. Of the issues associated with marital instability, social media have remained repeatedly investigated. This study, relying on the social network interference theory (SNIT), further highlights the implications of social media use on new marriages. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design involving 200 conveniently selected respondents from Port Harcourt City. Data collected using self-designed questionnaires were presented and analysed with descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that majority of the respondents are currently experiencing infidelity-related issues as a result of social media use. Some others stated that social media use has resulted in domestic violence, reduced communication levels, and has resulted in disputes and separation. It is thus recommended, among other things, that couples should make efforts to limit the amount of time spent on social media and create quality, in-person time with their partners. Also, agencies that supervise weddings should include in their programme social media education for new couples.

Keywords: Marital Instability; New Marriages; New Media; Social Media; Social Network Interference.

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature, dimensions, and causes of marital problems have remained a frequently researched area in social development studies largely because of its identified implications for individuals and the society. For instance, scholars such as Flood and Genadek (2016); Vakali, Baseri, Abbasi and Bazzar (2014); Ozcan (2012); Gardner (2010) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2007), have all identified the enormous implications of marital problems on individuals, couples, households, and the society as a whole. Vakali, Baseri, Abbasi and Bazzar (2014) have noted that challenges in marriages have devastating effects on all members of the family, hamper the conditions for bearing and raising children in an optimal environment, and create exasperation that affects members of the family in other facets of their lives. Flood and Genadek (2016), on the other hand, noted that marital instability contributes to poverty and adjustment problems for couples, such that they find it difficult to cope with life issues and challenges. These scholars also indicated that broader problems of marital breakdown can affect productivity at work, efficiency in academics or in any other career, domestic violence, intergroup conflict, and community violence, among many others. Cravens (2013) and Gardner (2010), in similar studies on the implications of marital breakdown, noted that marital instability contributed to the growing challenge of single

parenting, domestic violence, and estrangement in the society, all of which have implications for population dynamics, health, growth, efficiency, social order and development.

Different factors have been identified as the common causes of marital instability across societies and culture. Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara and Buchanan (2000) have opined that working class women in marriages are more likely to experience marital instability than customary housewives. Also, Merkle and Richardson (2000), in a study, identified issues such as age of couples at marriage, education levels, household size, and economic status, as common causes of marital instability. However, Bryfonski (2012) and Griffiths (2010), have argued that asides factors such as economic discontent, intimate partner violence, sexual incompatibility, and infidelity that disrupt marital stability, the advent of technology, especially the new media, also has strong implications for marital instability and makes social relationships increasingly tenuous. Abbasi (2018), in a recent study, also noted that the invasion of technology has negatively impacted the age-old practice of spending quality time with a partner. In the past, couples enjoyed time together attending concerts, plays, shows, visited 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 jeopardizing their relationships

Whereas marriages may endure or dissolve regardless of the level of quality and satisfaction phase, new marriages are mostly challenged (Abbasi, 2018; Flood & Genadek, 2016; Karney, 2010). In new marriages, challenges such as communication issues, value differences, and individuality are common. This is partly because the couples are adjusting to each other's personality and differences. In a previous study, Lavner, Karney and Bradbury (2013), explained that the first year of marriage is usually full of challenges and adjustments as the couple adapt to their new roles. In this phase, couples are more prone to marital dissatisfaction due to unrealistic expectations, disappointments, and adjustment problems to new relationship roles. Other studies by Hall and Adams (2011) and Karney (2010) have found that newlyweds who tend to estimate that their happiness levels will rise (or at least stay the same) within the first four years of marriage, are more likely to diminish or decline in happiness over time. This situation is heightened with the challenges associated with the digital era and the problems associated with the use of social media by married couples. It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to explore the implications of social media on new marriages.

2. The Meaning and Definitions of New Media

Generally, the term *media* refers to the predominant means of sending and receiving communication such as the radio, television and newspapers. The new media is considered to be the multimedia and digital form of communication happening via desktop and laptop computers, as well as phones, tablets and other recent communication gadgets. Beal (2003) describes the new media as a digital means of communication that makes content available using different forms of computer and internet technology. According to Oxford's publication of 2011, the term 'new media' encompasses a wide range of phenomena and practices, including new types of textual forms and entertainment pleasures (e.g. videogames, the internet, etc.); new media consumption patterns (e.g. convergence, hypertext, sit forward and sit back); new ways of representing the world (e.g. blogs, digitalization, photoshopping); and new ways of representing the self (e.g. avatar, personal homepage), and community (e.g. bulletin boards, chatrooms, social networking sites, etc), new phenomenological experiences, as well as new interactions between media producers and consumers as found in file sharing features and participatory culture of the new media.

Social media, which is the focus of this paper, is one of the common new media and a term for a variety of internet applications that allow users to create content and interact with each other. This interaction can take many forms including creating contents, sharing links to interesting content produced by third parties, public updates to a profile, including information on current activities and even location data, sharing photos, videos, posting, and commenting on the posts or links shared by others. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snap chat and YouTube typify social media, and have become enormously popular across demographics of age and gender, gathering hundreds of millions of users. As a

matter of fact, social media is today an integral part of social life and can be used to entertain, educate, and communicate news.

Kakkar (2018) and Thompson (2018) had noted that there are five major types of social media, namely blogging networks (e.g., Word press, Tumbler, etc), social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter), media sharing sites (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, etc), discussion forums (e.g., Reddit, Quora, etc), and social shopping networks (such as Etsy and Alibaba); with key features such as convergence, interactivity, audience/user control, and accessibility. On convergence, the new media provides that ability for a single device to be used to access a wide range of media. A mobile phone, for example, can be used to watch movies and videos, listen to music, access social media, read books, read newspapers, access websites, and so on. The interactivity feature of new media allows users to participate and create their own content. Interactivity also provides the audience more control. The audience can utilize streaming and catch-up services to access content that they want and when they want them. They can also interact with media material and even develop and distribute it themselves. Also, the new media is free media such that once people have the devices and the broadband internet access, they are able to get instant access to a vast array of media content, much of which is also free.

2.1 New Media and Marital Challenges

Whereas the new media and its social media features offer many advantages for interaction and communication, it is believed to also increase the risks of failure in personal communication and intimacy in marriages. Growing research has shown that increased usage of social media has had a negative effect on marriages and relationships. Higher levels of social media usage have been noted to lead to marital problems, including increased infidelity, domestic violence, jealousy, and divorce. For instance, a recent survey from Boston University in 2017 has revealed that non-social network users were 11.4% happier in their marriages than couples who frequently used social media. Heavy users were 32% more likely to contemplate leaving their spouse. The study also suggested a possible correlation between the number of Facebook users in a state and the divorce rates for the area. States with a higher increase of Facebook users showed similar increase in divorce rates. Another qualitative study by scholars in Harvard University in 2019 showed that close to 25% of married couples argued at least once a week because of social media use, and 17% fought daily over something they found about their spouse online. Similarly, 20% of the respondents reported that they fought with their spouses on Facebook-related issues, and nearly half said they secretly logged into their spouse's accounts to investigate infidelity.

In a different study, Widiantari, Pawito, Utari, and Nurhaeni (2019), investigated the effect of social media on divorce. Using a qualitative approach involving interviews with divorcees, they examined the marital privacy information disclosure on Facebook, online infidelity, and the effect of both on divorce. The result of the study suggested that whereas disclosure of marital privacy information has no significant relationship with online infidelity, non-disclosure of marital status online exposed people to flirting and advances from people who may be interested in them. The study also revealed that non-disclosure of marital privacy can be misconstrued as a deceptive and intentional, with the aim of cheating. Participants explained that the most privacy information in marital relationship is sex and intimacy, achievements, and marital conflict. As such, revealing any of these on social media is considered as distasteful, unnecessary, and has many negative impacts on marital relationships. Above all, the study found that the disclosure of marital privacy information is not directly related to online infidelity, unless followed by intensive interpersonal communication through private message. Also, the online infidelity is not directly causing divorce, unless involving emotional and sexual aspects or the spouse could not accept the infidelity and asks for divorce.

Putri and Restya (2019), in a related study on the relationship between social media and marital infidelity, noted that there are three different types of marital infidelity, namely:

- a) *Emotional infidelity*: type of infidelity that involves deep feeling and a deep bond for another person. This could involve lustful thoughts of that person. Example: sneaking around and lying to your partner about spending quality time with another partner.

- b) *Sexual Infidelity*: thus is another type of infidelity that involves physical and sexual involvement with another person. Basically, this involves having sexual relations or engaging in the act of sex with someone other than their spouse.
- c) *Cyber Infidelity*: This happens when someone is physically and emotionally attracted to people online. People who flirt with other people online and even have an online affair can be said to have engaged in online infidelity.

Data collected in this study by Putri and Restya (2019), using the observation and interview methods, revealed that cyber infidelity is very common following the advent of technology and social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and tinder, among many other dating and relationship apps. The study further showed that the factor which drives people to become unfaithful to their partner in the very first place is because there is a feeling of dissatisfaction and conflict in their marriage life. In addition, all the respondents agreed that the existence of social media can lead someone into marital infidelity because it is perceived as less harmful. Another interesting finding of this study is that there are some fundamental differences between male and female subjects in defining marital infidelity. For instance, while the definition of disloyalty according to women subjects refer to very basic things, men tend to judge disloyalty through social media only occurs if it involves feelings or deeper if they are willing to leave their legitimate partner for someone else. The study also noted that social media contributes to the rising cases of marital-infidelity because it is perceived less harmful than an action in the real life. The female subjects in this research argued that all forms of behaviour that are intentionally hidden from their partners, whether involving feelings or not, can be called dishonesty in marriage. For instance, if a man secretly sent a friend invitation to the opposite sex, it can be said that he is being unfaithful to his partner. Because, according to the female subjects, there should be nothing to hide between couples.

Scholars such as Hirschlag (2015); Cravens (2013), and Gardner (2010) have also argued that social media may be contributing to the increase in marital instability and has become really significant in divorce cases across the world. For Hirschlag (2015), the internet-enabled technology is affecting social relationships indifferent ways including exposing couples to unwarranted interference from admirers, former intimate partners, and explicit content that can urge infidelity and secrecy. These issues are also found in Nigeria where marital instability is gradually occurring regularly. As noted by Asa and Nkan, (2017) and Udobong, (2016), whereas the causes of marital problems in most societies, including Nigeria, consist of factors such as: economic hardship, sickness, sexual incompatibility, unsatisfactory sexual relationship, childlessness, and preference for male children; social media usage have emerged as forerunners of marital disputes and breakdown. Today, it is more common to find couples who have social media-related marital challenges than those who do not. As opined by Udobong (2016), social media accounts for the breakdown of many marital relationships in our society today. 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.

2.2 Outcomes and Implications of Marital Challenges

The outcomes of marital challenges have been noted to vary and have different levels of impacts on individuals and the society as a whole. For instance, scholars, such as Dombeck (2006) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2006), have noted that marital instability impacts negatively on the psychology, finance, and social functioning of members of affected marriage. Dombeck (2006), argued that marital instability often times result in depression, resentment, and even suicidal thoughts. Other outcomes might be that after the breakdown, couples would lose their trust in relationships, experience a loss of character, become unproductive at work, or engage in risky sexual behaviour. D'Onofrio (2011) also noted that marital disruptions can be frightening to the children, leaving long-term effects on their personality and perception about marriage and gender relations. D'Onofrio (2011), in a study on the consequences of divorce and separation on children, noted that marital breakdown is associated with a range of negative outcomes for children and adolescents, sometimes resulting in academic difficulties, disruptive

behaviours (e.g., being confrontational with authority figures, getting into fights, stealing, etc) drug abuse, and risky sexual behaviour.

Scholars such as Heaton (2002) have also linked parental divorce to many negative outcomes in the life of children as they transit into adulthood. Children of divorce are more likely to experience poverty, educational failure, early and risky sexual activity, non-marital childbirth, earlier marriage, cohabitation, marital discord and divorce. For instance, emotional problems associated with divorce actually increase during young adulthood. In other words, marital breakdown is a significant risk factor for children's cognitive, behavioural and emotional development, often because it undermines effective parenting practices and parental functioning (D'Onofrio, 2011; Dombek, 2006; Heaton, 2002).

Murphy (2007); Prior and Hayes (2003); and Amato (2000), reported that there is a well-established, strong association between parental relationship breakdown and poor child outcomes. These include: poverty and socio-economic disadvantage, physical ill-health, psychological ill-health, lower educational achievement, drug misuse, and other health-damaging behaviours, and behavioural problems including conduct disorder, anti-social behaviour and crime. Longitudinal, cohort studies have shown that these effects may be long-term for some children, and include socio-economic disadvantage in later life, cohabitation or marriage at an early age, teenage pregnancy, and increased risk of their own marital breakdown. Murphy (2007) also established association between marital status and some specific health conditions such as coronary heart disease and raised blood pressure are also evident. The same association applies to the greater involvement in health-damaging behaviours and poorer adult mental health. Critically, many studies have indicated that marital challenges can heighten health conditions and encourage risky health habits (Murphy, 2007; Prior & Hayes, 2003).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Social Network Interference theory which is hinged 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, such as Dickson-Markman and Markman (1988) and Johnson and Milardo (1984), argue that interferences from external networks including friends, parents and acquaintances, contribute 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, Orbuch, and Shrout (2019), have also argued that marital relationships thrive and solidify when there is less exogenous influence such as from friends, family, and society. For 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.

Gary (1986), in an earlier study, found that spouses' disagreements on how to spend leisure time, the amount of time they spent away from home, and the amount of time they spend with their social network were commonly cited by respondents as common sources of marital conflict. Participants reported that they were unable to find a satisfactory balance in meeting the needs of their spouse, their family and the obligations of their social networks; and this interference had implications for the wellbeing of their marriages. This theory is applied to the nature of influence social media has on marital relationships. Scholars such as Genadek (2016); Lavner, Karney, and Bradbury (2013), and Ozcan (2012), already noted that the use of social media impacts on communication levels, space for intimacy, and trust levels in marriages. 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 the social interactions within those networks, now add social media to their array of marital challenges.

3. METHODS

The study employs a cross-sectional survey design. The use of this design became imperative as there is the need to evaluate quantitative data emanating from a cross section of respondents who fit into the study criteria. The study involved 200 conveniently selected respondents from Port Harcourt City in Rivers State. The respondents are newly married (that is, their marriage is still recent and within 3 years). Instruments such as self-completion questionnaires and interview schedules designed by the researcher were used to collect primary data. Secondary data were sourced from journal articles, documentaries, newspapers, and texts from related studies. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentage analysis and charts.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondents demographics

Table 4.1: Socio-demographic information of the respondents

Variables	Categories	Freq	Percent
Gender	Male	100	50.0
	Female	100	50.0
Age	18 – 27	52	26.0
	28 – 37	119	59.5
	38 – 47	29	14.5
Religion	Christianity	117	58.5
	Islam	53	26.5
	Others	30	15.0
Duration of marriage	Within 1 week	9	4.5
	4 weeks old	27	13.5
	Up to 3 months	40	20.0
	1 year	87	43.5
	Up to 3 years	37	18.5

Source: Field survey, 2021

As shown in Table 4.1, the respondents are both male and female, within the ages of 18 – 27 years (26.0%), 28 – 37 years (59.5%) and 38 – 47 years (14.5%). Majority of the respondents, 58.5%, indicated that they are Christians; 26.5% indicated that they are Muslims, while the remaining 15.0% indicated that they have other beliefs such as African traditional religion and Atheism. The survey also revealed that most of the respondents, precisely 43.5%, have been married for up to a year; another 20.3% have been married for up to 3 months, while another 18.5% have been married for up to 3 years. The remaining 13.5% have been married for only 4 weeks and 4.5% have been married for only a week.

4.2 Implications of social media on new marriages

To adequately investigate the implications of use of social media on new marriages, the survey first sought to find out the social media commonly used by respondents and how much time the respondents spend on social media daily.

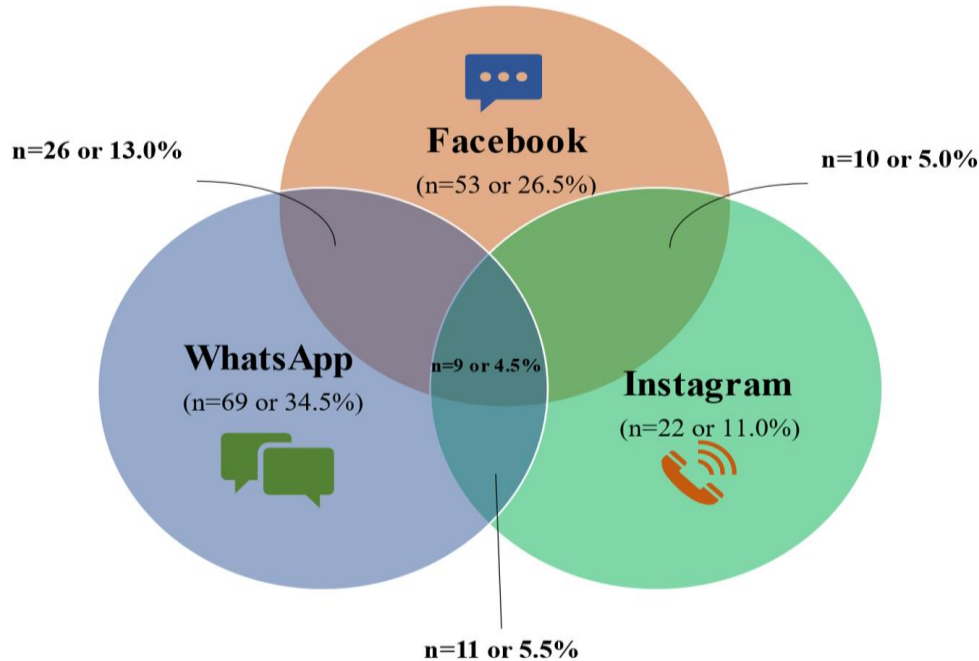


Figure 1: Frequently used social media. Source: Field survey, 2021

As shown in Figure 1, 34.5% of the respondents indicated that they use WhatsApp; 26.5% indicated they use only, while 11.0% indicated that they use only Instagram. However, 13.0% indicated that they use both WhatsApp and Facebook regularly. Another 5.5% noted that they use WhatsApp and Instagram more, while 5.0% indicated that they use Facebook and Instagram. The remaining 9 or 4.5% however noted that they use the three social media platforms.

Table 4.2: Time spent on social media by respondents

Time spent on social media	Variables	Freq	Percent
	Less than 1 hour daily	9	4.5
	Between 1 - 3 hours	41	20.5
	Up to 5 hours	91	45.5
	More than 10 hours	59	29.5

Source: Field survey, 2021

Data shown in Table 4.2 show the duration the respondents spend on social media. Majority of the respondents, (45.5%), agreed that they spend up to 5 hours daily on social media. This followed by another 29.5% of the respondents who indicated that they spend more than 10 hours on social media. Another 20.5% % indicated that they spend between 1 – 3 hours daily, while the remaining 4.5% indicated that they spend less than an hour daily.

Table 4.3: Social media impacts negatively on new marriages

Variables	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Total
Male	23	46	13	18	100
Female	33	51	7	9	100
Total	56	97	20	27	200
Percent	28.0	48.5	10.0	13.5	100.0

Source: Field survey, 2021

As shown in Table 4.3, 28.0% of the respondents agree strongly that social media impacts negatively on new marriages. This is alongside another 48.5% who equally agreed. Only 10.0% of the respondents strongly disagreed with another 13.5% that also disagreed.

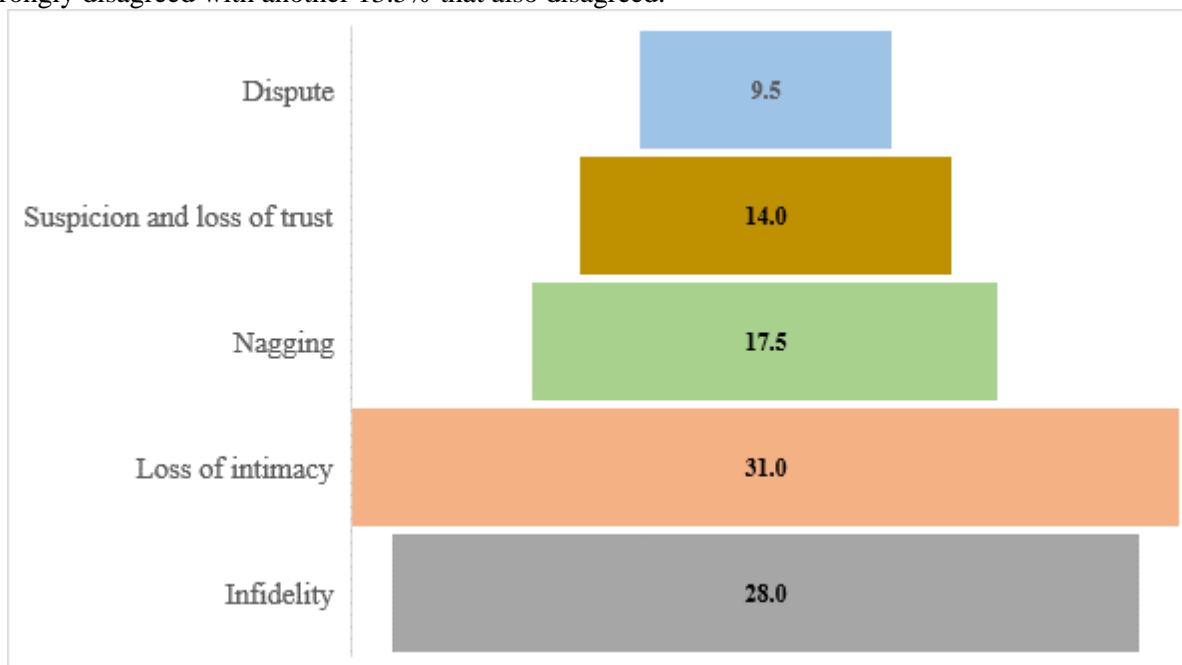


Figure 2: Challenges of social media in new marriages

Source: Field survey, 2021

On the marital challenges associated with the use of social media by couples in new marriages, the survey revealed that 31.0% or 62 of the respondents indicated that loss of intimacy is a major outcome of the use of social media by couples. Another 28.0% or 56 of the respondents indicated infidelity as a major challenge; 17.5% or 35 of the respondents mentioned nagging; 14.0% or 28 respondents mentioned suspicion and loss of trust, while the remaining 9.5% or 19 of the respondents indicated that social media causes disputes in new marriages.

Table 4.4: Impact level of social media on respondents' marriage

Impact on Respondents' marriage	Responses	Freq	Percent
	Reduced communication levels in marriage	37	18.5
	Increased sexting and infidelity among couples	81	40.5
	Encouraged domestic violence	53	26.5
	Resulted in dispute and separation	29	14.5

Source: Field survey, 2021

In research question four, the study investigated the different ways social media has impacted on the marriages of the respondents as new couples. As shown in the Table 4.4, 40.5% of the respondents indicated that their marriage was currently having infidelity-related issues as a result of social media use. Another 26.5% of the respondents stated that social media use has resulted in domestic violence in their marriage. This is followed by another 18.5% that agreed that social media related issues have reduced communication levels in their marriage. The remaining 14.5% indicated that social media related issues have resulted in disputes and separation in their marriage.

4.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Key issues highlighted in this study include the implications of social media use on new marriages and the common marital challenges associated with the use of social media. As shown in the findings of the survey, majority of the respondents (i.e., 76.5%) agree that social media impacts on marital relationships in many negative ways. Furthermore, the respondents of the study indicated that the common marital challenges associated with the use of social media by couples in new marriages include: loss of intimacy, infidelity, nagging, suspicion and loss of trust, and increased disputes. These findings corroborate the earlier assertions of scholars such as Aydın, Sari, and Şahin (2018); Amedie (2015); and Gardner (2010). For instance, Gardner (2010), had noted that *one in five* American divorce cases is social media related. Amedie (2015), have also argued that social media contributes to the increase in marital instability, particularly as it threatens their communication life, marital trust levels, and intimacy. Also, in a recent study, Aydın, Sari, and Şahin (2018) found that whereas media has its positive roles to play in marriages, new media impact negatively on marriages in many ways, including exposing couples to information that exerts social or financial pressure on the marriage, create suspicion and jealousy, reduces communication levels and intimacy, and also invite external influences to the marriage. In a different study investigating the qualitative effect of social media on divorce, Widiantari, Pawito, Utari, and Nurhaeni (2019), noted that social media use exposes couples to flirting and advances from people who may be interested in them. Participants explained that their spouses have, in some cases, refused to disclose their marital status online. Others noted that their partners have also been found discussing private issues such as sexual satisfaction, finance, or achievements with persons they met on social media which has resulted in irreconcilable separations and divorce. The outcomes of these, as noted by Widiantari, Pawito, Utari, and Nurhaeni (2019), include anger, loss of trust, irreconcilable disputes, separations, and divorce.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issues associated with marital instability are diverse and have remained a recurrent concern for social scientists, especially development sociologists, family scientists, and social workers. Marriages are expected to be stable institutions where socio-economic cooperation, child procreation, and socialization can occur; which also impacts on the social interaction and the society as a whole. As a result, scholars have regularly investigated the issues associated with marital instability and breakdown. In this study, it has been shown that new marriages are usually negatively affected by social media in many ways. For instance, respondents of the study have noted that some of the issues they have in their marriage as new couples are social media related. Majority of the respondents also indicated that their marriage is currently having infidelity-related issues as a result of social media use. Some others stated that social media use has resulted in domestic violence, reduced communication levels, and has resulted in disputes and separation. It is thus recommended that:

- i. Considering the implications of frequent use of social media on marital relationships, couples should make efforts to limit the amount of time spent on social media, and create quality, in-person time with their partners. This will help improve on marital intimacy, communication levels, and trust levels requisite for an enduring marriage.
- ii. Also, the agencies and organisations that oversee marriages, such as marriage registries, faith-based organisations, and kinship systems, should include social media education for couples in their

programmes, where marital challenges associated with social media can be taught and adequately discussed to minimise marital challenges and instability.

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