

SWIPE RIGHT, DRIFT AWAY: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA FACILITATED THIRD-PARTY INTERFERENCE IN MARRIAGE AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR COUPLES

AINI AZEQA MA'ROF^{1,2}, HASLINDA ABDULLAH^{1,2}, HANINA H. HAMSAN²

¹Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, MALAYSIA

²Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, MALAYSIA

E-mail: ¹azeqa@upm.edu.my, ²lynn@upm.edu.my, ³hanina@upm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies have fundamentally transformed the landscape of third-party interference in marriage, creating new pathways through which extramarital emotional and romantic involvement emerges, escalates, and produces marital distress. Despite a growing body of research on social media use and relationship outcomes, no systematic review has comprehensively synthesised the evidence on social media facilitated third-party interference as a distinct and coherent phenomenon, examined the specific mechanisms through which digital environments enable and amplify relational violations, or integrated this evidence with established frameworks of betrayal trauma and marital distress. This systematic review addresses these gaps by synthesising empirical research published between 2009 and 2024 on the association between social media use and third-party interference in marriage, the psychological consequences for affected couples, and the mechanisms through which digital contexts facilitate relational boundary erosion. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, five academic databases were systematically searched, namely PsycINFO (n = 198), Scopus (n = 224), Web of Science (n = 167), PubMed (n = 89), and Communication Abstracts (n = 134), yielding a total of 812 records and ultimately 16 eligible empirical studies after deduplication and screening. Findings reveal that social media facilitated third-party interference operates through four primary mechanisms: parasocial intimacy escalation, digital disinhibition, privacy architecture exploitation, and parallel reality construction. Psychological consequences for affected partners include heightened relational jealousy and surveillance behaviour, betrayal trauma symptoms equivalent in severity to offline infidelity, accelerated trust erosion, and partner-directed hypervigilance. The review makes four theoretical contributions: the Digital Intimacy Gradient Model, which maps the escalation pathway from casual online contact to emotionally intimate third-party involvement across five progressive stages; the concept of ambient digital infidelity, describing the continuum of digitally mediated relational boundary violations that precede formal affair disclosure; the Dual Screen Relationship Model, which conceptualises marriage in the digital age as a relationship system simultaneously maintained in physical and digital spaces; and a Digital Boundary Literacy Framework as a prevention-oriented construct with direct implications for premarital education, couple therapy, and digital wellness policy. Implications for therapeutic practice, preventive intervention, and family policy in high-connectivity societies are discussed.

Keywords: *Digital Infidelity, Online Affair, Marital Distress, Betrayal Trauma, Internet Infidelity*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Digital Transformation of Marital Infidelity

The emergence of smartphones, social media platforms, and persistent digital connectivity has not merely added a new medium through which extramarital relationships can be conducted. It has fundamentally restructured the conditions under which third-party interference in marriage becomes possible, probable, and progressively normalised. The technological architecture of contemporary

digital life, encompassing instant messaging applications, social networking platforms, online gaming environments, professional networking sites, and algorithmically curated social feeds, creates an environment in which intimate social contact with multiple external parties is continuous, private, and largely invisible to marital partners. In this environment, the gradient between ordinary social communication and emotionally intimate third-party involvement is both shallower and more easily traversed than in the offline social contexts that shaped existing theoretical and clinical accounts of marital infidelity.

The scale of the phenomenon is significant. Global data consistently document that intensive social media use is associated with elevated rates of relational conflict, jealousy, infidelity, and marital dissolution [1], [2], [3]. In Malaysia, where internet penetration exceeds 96 percent and 88.7 percent of the population actively uses social media, more than 40 percent of couples presenting with marital conflict attribute significant relational tension to their partner's digital communication behaviour [4], [5]. The rapid rise in Malaysian divorce rates from 43,936 cases in 2021 to 62,890 in 2022 [6] coincides with the period of greatest smartphone and social media penetration, suggesting that the digital transformation of social interaction has become a structural contributor to marital instability at the population level.

Despite this epidemiological significance, the scholarly literature on social media facilitated third-party interference remains fragmented. Research has examined the association between social media use and jealousy [3], the role of Facebook in relationship dissolution [1], the prevalence and correlates of online emotional affairs [7], and the psychological impact of digital infidelity discovery [8]. What is absent is a systematic synthesis that integrates these scattered empirical contributions into a coherent theoretical account of digital infidelity as a phenomenon with distinctive mechanisms, distinctive psychological consequences, and distinctive implications for therapeutic and preventive intervention.

This systematic review fills that gap. It synthesises the available empirical evidence on social media facilitated third-party interference in marriage, proposes a theoretical framework that accounts for the distinctive features of digital infidelity, and develops clinical and policy implications grounded in both the synthesised evidence and the established literature on betrayal trauma and couple therapy. In doing so, it draws upon the empirical insights generated by a related programme of qualitative research on third-party interference in Malaysia conducted by the present authors, which documented the specific mechanisms of digital facilitation reported by couples experiencing social media mediated third-party involvement, and integrates those insights with the systematic synthesis of the broader international literature.

1.2 Defining Social Media Facilitated Third-Party Interference

This review adopts a deliberately broad definition of social media facilitated third-party

interference in marriage to capture the full range of digitally mediated relational violations documented in the literature. Social media facilitated third-party interference encompasses any involvement of an external party in an emotionally or romantically intimate capacity that is initiated, maintained, or significantly facilitated through digital communication platforms, including social networking sites, instant messaging applications, online gaming environments, professional networking platforms, and dating applications, and that constitutes a violation of the understood relational boundaries of the marriage, whether or not physical contact occurs.

This definition encompasses what the literature variously terms online infidelity [7], internet infidelity [8], emotional infidelity [9], digital infidelity [10], and cyber affairs [11], treating these as variants within a single coherent phenomenon rather than as distinct categories. It excludes the use of digital platforms to facilitate offline affairs that have no distinctive digital dimension, and it excludes non-romantic third-party interference facilitated by digital communication, which is addressed in a companion paper from this research programme.

1.3 Research Questions

This review addressed four research questions: (i) What empirical evidence exists on the association between social media use and third-party interference in marriage? (ii) What psychological consequences does social media facilitated third-party interference produce for affected partners and the marital relationship? (iii) What mechanisms explain how digital environments facilitate the initiation and escalation of third-party intimate involvement? (iv) What are the theoretical and clinical implications of the synthesised evidence for couple therapy, prevention programmes, and family policy?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Unique Properties of Digital Relational Environments

Understanding why digital environments generate distinctive conditions for third-party interference requires a theoretical account of how digital communication technologies alter the social, psychological, and structural conditions of intimate contact. Four properties of digital relational environments are particularly relevant.

Persistent availability describes the condition of continuous social connectivity that smartphones and always-on platforms create, in which the individual

is accessible to and in contact with their social network at all times, including contexts, such as the domestic private sphere, in which offline contact with external parties would be naturally constrained. Persistent availability eliminates the structural barriers to social contact that geographic separation, time, and social context previously provided, creating conditions in which intimate communication with external parties can occur in the physical presence of the marital partner without the partner's awareness.

Architectural privacy refers to the built-in privacy features of digital communication platforms, including end-to-end encryption, disappearing messages, multiple account functionality, and password protection, that create a layer of systematic concealment between the user's digital social life and their cohabiting partner. These architectural features provide the infrastructure for sustained parallel intimate communication that would be structurally impossible in pre-digital social contexts.

Disinhibition, theorised by Suler [12] in his foundational account of the online disinhibition effect, describes the tendency for individuals to express and engage with others in ways that they would inhibit in face-to-face interaction, driven by the anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and psychological dissociation from offline identity that digital contexts provide. In the context of relational boundary management, disinhibition lowers the threshold for intimate self-disclosure and emotional engagement with external parties, enabling the development of emotional intimacy at a pace that would be inhibited by the social constraints of offline contact.

Algorithmic amplification describes the way in which the recommender systems and engagement-optimising algorithms of social media platforms actively work to increase the frequency and intensity of social contact, surfacing content from emotionally resonant connections, suggesting new contacts with whom the user shares interests or mutual connections, and rewarding interpersonal engagement with positive feedback mechanisms. This algorithmic dimension of digital social environments means that the user does not merely passively encounter the conditions for third-party involvement but is actively nudged towards increased social engagement by the platform's own design incentives.

2.2 Attachment Theory and Digital Relational Need

Johnson's [13] attachment theoretical framework provides the psychological substrate on which the

digital environment's distinctive properties operate. The fundamental human need for felt security and responsive emotional connection that attachment theory describes does not disappear in the digital age but finds new expression and new satisfaction pathways through digital communication. When the marital relationship fails to meet attachment needs for responsiveness, availability, and emotional attunement, the digital social environment provides a readily available and architecturally private space in which those needs can be partially satisfied through contact with external parties, without the social visibility that would make equivalent offline behaviour relationally legible as boundary violation.

3. METHODS

3.1 Search Strategy and Databases

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines [14]. A systematic literature search was conducted across five databases: PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Communication Abstracts. Communication Abstracts was included specifically because a substantial proportion of the relevant literature is published in communication and media studies journals that are not comprehensively indexed in psychology and social science databases. The search was conducted between January and March 2025 and covered publications from January 2009 to December 2024. The start date of 2009 was selected to correspond with the period of mass smartphone adoption and the emergence of social media as a mainstream communication medium. The number of records retrieved from each database was as follows: PsycINFO (n = 198), Scopus (n = 224), Web of Science (n = 167), PubMed (n = 89), and Communication Abstracts (n = 134), yielding a combined total of 812 records prior to deduplication. Scopus returned the highest yield given its broad interdisciplinary coverage, while Communication Abstracts, though the smallest contributor, was indispensable for capturing empirical literature published in communication and media studies outlets not indexed in the other four databases.

The Boolean search strategy comprised three thematic clusters combined with the AND operator. The first cluster targeted the technology dimension: social media, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, online platform, digital communication, internet, messaging application, smartphone, online gaming, dating application, and cyber. The second cluster targeted the relational violation dimension: infidelity, affair, emotional infidelity, internet infidelity, digital infidelity, online affair,

extramarital, marital betrayal, relational boundary violation, and third-party interference. The third cluster targeted the outcome dimension: marital distress, relationship satisfaction, jealousy, betrayal trauma, marital conflict, trust, couple relationship, and divorce. Searches were restricted to English-language peer-reviewed empirical publications involving adult populations in committed romantic relationships.

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they: examined the association between social media or digital technology use and third-party intimate involvement in marriage or committed relationships; reported on the psychological consequences of digitally facilitated third-party involvement for the affected partner or the couple relationship; employed quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods empirical research designs; involved adult populations in committed romantic or marital relationships; and were published in peer-reviewed English-language journals between 2009 and 2024. Studies were excluded if they did not present original empirical data; if they focused exclusively on adolescent or pre-relationship populations; if the digital technology under examination had no direct relevance to intimate relational behaviour; or if they addressed cyberstalking, online harassment, or digital domestic violence as primary phenomena rather than third-party intimate involvement.

3.3 Screening and Selection

The initial database search yielded a combined total of 812 records, comprising PsycINFO ($n = 198$), Scopus ($n = 224$), Web of Science ($n = 167$), PubMed ($n = 89$), and Communication Abstracts ($n = 134$). All records were imported into a reference management system, where 125 duplicate records were identified and removed, leaving 687 unique records for title and abstract screening. No records were excluded by automation tools and no records

were removed for other reasons at this stage. Two independent reviewers assessed all 687 records against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria at the title and abstract level. Of these, 613 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, with the primary reasons being: the digital technology examined was not directly linked to intimate relational behaviour ($n = 241$), the study did not address third-party interference or its relational consequences as a primary outcome ($n = 198$), the study population consisted of non-adults or individuals not in committed romantic relationships ($n = 104$), or the publication was not available in English or did not appear in a peer-reviewed academic journal ($n = 70$).

The 74 remaining records were retrieved in full text for detailed eligibility assessment. All 74 full-text articles were successfully retrieved; no records were unavailable. Full-text assessment resulted in the exclusion of 58 articles. Reasons for exclusion were: the study did not present original empirical data, including theoretical papers, editorials, or commentaries ($n = 19$); the study population fell outside the scope of adult committed romantic or marital relationships, including samples of adolescents or individuals not in relationships ($n = 14$); the digital technology under examination was not directly linked to intimate relational behaviour and therefore did not address the digital facilitation mechanisms central to the review ($n = 13$); and the outcome measures reported did not address third-party interference, relational boundary violation, or associated psychological consequences ($n = 12$). Discrepancies between the two independent reviewers at both screening stages were resolved through discussion and consensus, with no unresolved disagreements remaining. Sixteen studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The complete selection process, from initial database identification through to final inclusion, is documented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram presented in Figure 1.

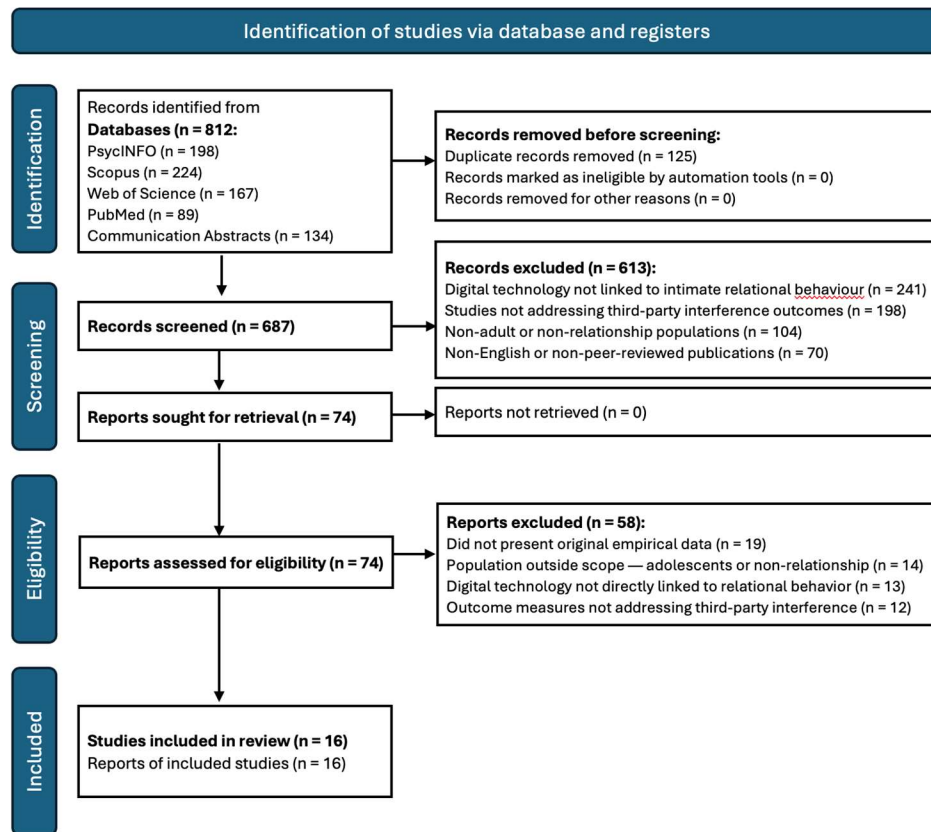


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Showing the Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion of Studies in the Systematic Review.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Overview of Included Studies

The 16 included studies were published between 2011 and 2024 and represent diverse geographical settings, methodological approaches, and specific digital platforms under examination. Studies were conducted in North America (n = 9), Europe (n = 3), Asia (n = 2), Australia (n = 1), and the Middle East

(n = 1). Research designs included quantitative surveys (n = 8), experimental or quasi-experimental designs (n = 3), qualitative studies (n = 3), and mixed-methods studies (n = 2). Sample sizes ranged from 24 to 5,765 participants. The digital platforms most commonly examined were Facebook (n = 8), general social media use (n = 5), WhatsApp and instant messaging (n = 4), online gaming (n = 2), and dating applications (n = 1), with several studies examining multiple platforms. Table 1 presents a summary of the included studies.

Table 1: Summary of Included Studies on Social Media Facilitated Third-Party Interference in Marriage (2011-2024)

No.	Author(s) and Year	Platform(s) Examined	Methodology	Sample	Key Findings
1	Elphinston and Noller [15]	Facebook	Quantitative survey	304 adults in relationships	Facebook surveillance positively predicted jealousy and relationship conflict; higher Facebook use associated with increased monitoring of partner's contacts and relational insecurity
2	Clayton et al. [1]	Facebook	Quantitative survey	205 Facebook users	Facebook-related conflict predicted infidelity, breakup, and divorce; effect strongest for users in relationships of five years or fewer; frequency of use mediated the association

No.	Author(s) and Year	Platform(s) Examined	Methodology	Sample	Key Findings
3	Muise et al. [3]	Facebook	Experimental and survey	1,160 participants across three studies	Facebook use increased jealousy and relationship conflict through exposure to ambiguous partner behaviour; effect strongest for individuals with anxious attachment
4	Abbasi and Alghamdi [2]	General social media	Quantitative survey	411 married adults	Social media use significantly predicted infidelity intentions and actual infidelity behaviour; effect mediated by reduced relationship satisfaction and increased exposure to alternative partners
5	Weiser et al. [8]	General social media	Quantitative survey	197 adults	Discovery of partner's online infidelity produced betrayal trauma symptoms equivalent in severity to offline infidelity; emotional infidelity produced stronger trauma responses than purely physical online contact
6	Borrajio et al. [16]	WhatsApp and social media	Quantitative survey	788 young adults	Partner monitoring via social media and WhatsApp predicted relationship conflict and coercive control; digitally facilitated jealousy distinguished from healthy interest in partner's wellbeing
7	Cravens et al. [17]	Facebook	Qualitative	20 individuals	Discovery of Facebook infidelity described as psychologically equivalent to offline discovery; privacy architecture of Facebook described as enabling concealment and denial; digital evidence produced additional layer of trauma
8	Drouin et al. [18]	General digital media	Quantitative survey	3,004 adults	Text message and social media infidelity reported by 24.7% of participants; digital infidelity associated with lower relationship satisfaction and higher relationship conflict
9	Gerstel and Sarkisian [19]	Dating applications	Mixed methods	276 couples	Partner's dating application use predicted betrayal trauma and attachment anxiety even without evidence of physical contact; mere discovery of profile existence produced significant relational distress
10	Henline et al. [7]	Internet and email	Quantitative survey	871 adults	Online emotional affair involvement predicted by relationship dissatisfaction, opportunity through online contact, and disinhibition; emotional affairs rated as similarly damaging to physical affairs by 68% of betrayed partners
11	Tan et al. [4]	Social media (general)	Quantitative survey	342 Malaysian couples	Social media use predicted marital conflict, jealousy, and third-party involvement in Malaysian sample; 43.2% of conflicted couples attributed tension directly to partner's social media behaviour
12	Luo and Tuney [20]	Texting and social media	Quantitative survey	5,765 adults	Phubbing, smartphone use in presence of partner, predicted relationship dissatisfaction, conflict, and depression through impaired couple communication quality and presence

No.	Author(s) and Year	Platform(s) Examined	Methodology	Sample	Key Findings
13	Kimmes et al. [21]	Social media (general)	Qualitative	18 therapists	Therapists identified digital infidelity as a growing clinical presenting concern; noted particular challenges of digital evidence management, minimisation by offending partner, and lack of closure in absence of physical contact
14	Docan-Morgan and Docan [10]	Internet (general)	Quantitative survey	244 college students	Internet infidelity significantly predicted relationship dissolution; emotional online infidelity rated as more threatening to relationship than physical online infidelity by majority of participants
15	Sharabi and Dykstra-DeVette [22]	Online gaming	Mixed methods	156 gamers in relationships	Online gaming environments produced emotionally intimate relationships with same-sex and opposite-sex co-players; immersive co-play generated shared vulnerability that accelerated emotional intimacy
16	Whitty [9]	Internet (general)	Qualitative	339 online respondents	Internet infidelity defined and experienced as real infidelity by majority of participants regardless of physical contact; emotional investment characterised as the primary criterion for relational violation

Note. Studies are ordered by publication date within each platform category. PRISMA 2020 procedures were followed throughout the selection process.

4.2 Mechanisms of Digital Facilitation

Across the 16 included studies, four primary mechanisms emerged through which digital environments facilitate the initiation and escalation of third-party intimate involvement.

Parasocial intimacy escalation was identified in qualitative and mixed-methods studies as the characteristic progression pathway through which casual digital contact develops into emotionally intimate third-party involvement. Henline et al. [7] documented the sequential process through which online emotional affairs typically developed: initial contact in a shared interest context, gradual personalisation of communication, progressive self-disclosure that mimicked the intimacy-building dynamics of developing face-to-face relationships, and eventual emotional investment that the individual experienced as qualitatively equivalent to a primary relationship. Sharabi and Dykstra-DeVette [22] demonstrated that online gaming environments were particularly effective generators of parasocial intimacy escalation because the shared vulnerability of cooperative gameplay created conditions for emotional bonding that accelerated the intimacy development process.

Digital disinhibition, theorised by Suler [12] and evidenced empirically by Drouin et al. [18] and

Henline et al. [7], describes the process through which the psychological properties of digital communication, including the dissociation from offline identity, the absence of physical social cues, and the temporal asynchronicity, reduce the inhibitory processes that would restrain equivalent behaviour in offline contexts. The disinhibition effect is not uniform: Suler distinguished between benign disinhibition, in which individuals access emotional depths unavailable in everyday interaction, and toxic disinhibition, in which antisocial or relationally harmful behaviour is enacted with reduced internal resistance. Digital infidelity represents a characteristic instance of toxic disinhibition operating in the relational domain.

Privacy architecture exploitation describes the active use by individuals of the built-in privacy features of digital platforms to conceal third-party involvement from their marital partner. Cravens et al. [17] documented how the specific architectural features of Facebook, including the ability to restrict post visibility, manage contact lists, and conduct private messaging through multiple channels, were actively exploited by partners conducting digital affairs to create and maintain a layer of systematic concealment. The digital evidence dimension of this mechanism is clinically distinctive: the existence of digital records of the affair, in the form of saved

messages, image exchanges, and browsing history, creates a form of evidence of third-party involvement that has no direct analogue in pre-digital infidelity contexts and that produces specific forms of psychological impact in the discovery process.

Parallel reality construction was identified most clearly in qualitative accounts [17], [9], [21] as the psychological process through which individuals conducting digital third-party relationships came to experience the digital relational space as a psychologically separate reality in which different relational rules and self-presentations applied. The digital relationship was experienced as genuinely separate from the marital relationship, not merely as a secondary commitment but as an alternative self-presentation in an alternative relational world, a construction that reduced the cognitive dissonance that would otherwise accompany the simultaneous maintenance of two intimate relationships.

4.3 Psychological Consequences for Affected Partners

The reviewed studies documented consistent and clinically significant psychological consequences for partners who discovered their spouse's social media facilitated third-party involvement.

Betrayal trauma severity equivalent to offline infidelity was documented by Weiser et al. [8], whose survey research found that discovery of partner's online infidelity produced post-traumatic stress symptoms, attachment anxiety, and trust impairment of comparable severity to those documented following offline infidelity discovery. Critically, emotional online infidelity, in which no physical contact occurred but sustained emotional intimacy with an external party had been conducted digitally, produced stronger trauma responses than accounts involving purely physical digital contact, supporting the theoretical claim that the emotional rather than physical dimension of the violation is the primary driver of betrayal trauma severity.

Relational jealousy amplification and surveillance behaviour were documented by Muise et al. [3] and Elphinston and Noller [15] as consequences of both active digital infidelity and the ambient uncertainty generated by intensive partner social media use. Muise et al. demonstrated experimentally that exposure to ambiguous Facebook-related social information about a partner, information that was ambiguous regarding the nature of the partner's social contacts, increased jealousy above baseline even in the absence of any evidence of actual third-party involvement. This finding is theoretically important: it demonstrates that the

social media environment generates jealousy and relational insecurity as a product of its architectural properties, not merely through the specific acts of individual users.

Phubbing and digital neglect as relationship damage mechanisms were documented by Luo and Tuney [20], whose large-scale survey study demonstrated that partner smartphone use in the couple's shared physical presence, a behaviour they termed phubbing, predicted reduced relationship satisfaction, increased conflict, and depressive symptoms through the mediating mechanism of impaired couple communication quality. This finding extends the relevant evidence base beyond active digital infidelity to the broader pattern of digital displacement of marital attention, which produces relational harm through a different but equally significant mechanism: the redirection of attention and emotional availability from the marital relationship to the digital social environment.

Therapist-perceived increasing prevalence and clinical complexity were documented by Kimmes et al. [21], whose qualitative survey of couple therapists identified digital infidelity as a rapidly growing clinical presenting concern characterised by distinctive challenges not present in offline infidelity cases, including the management of persistent digital evidence, the offending partner's tendency to minimise digital involvement as less serious than physical contact, the absence of natural disclosure or termination processes that offline affairs typically exhibit, and the blurred phenomenological boundary between friendship and emotional intimacy in digital contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Digital Intimacy Gradient Model

The first theoretical contribution of this review is the Digital Intimacy Gradient Model, which maps the characteristic escalation pathway from casual online contact to emotionally intimate third-party involvement across five progressive stages, drawing on the mechanism evidence reviewed above.

Stage 1 is initial digital contact, characterised by platform-mediated social interaction in an apparently innocuous register. The contact may occur through shared interest groups, professional networks, gaming platforms, or mutual social connections. At this stage, there is no subjective experience of relational boundary approach and no intent to develop intimate involvement. Stage 2 is personalisation and self-disclosure escalation, in which communication becomes progressively more personal, moving from shared-interest exchange to

biographical disclosure, emotional reflection, and the development of interpersonal understanding. The parasocial intimacy escalation mechanism begins to operate at this stage, as the intimacy-building dynamics characteristic of developing relationships are replicated through digital communication.

Stage 3 is emotional exclusivity development, in which the digital relationship begins to function as a primary emotional support relationship. The individual experiences the digital contact as providing emotional validation, understanding, and responsiveness that may be absent or insufficient in the marital relationship. Digital disinhibition facilitates the expression of emotional needs and vulnerabilities at this stage that might not be accessible in offline relationships. Stage 4 is concealment normalisation, in which the individual begins actively using the privacy architecture of digital platforms to manage the partner's awareness of the relationship. Password protection, account management, and message deletion become regular practices, and the parallel reality construction mechanism produces a psychological separation between the digital relationship and the marital relationship that reduces the cognitive dissonance of simultaneous maintenance.

Stage 5 is primary relationship equivalence, in which the digital relationship has developed to the point of functional equivalence with the marital relationship in terms of emotional investment, exclusive disclosure, and perceived importance to the individual's psychological wellbeing. At this stage, discovery by the marital partner produces psychological responses, in both the discovered partner and the discovering partner, that are equivalent in severity to those documented following offline affair discovery, as Weiser et al. [8] demonstrated empirically. The clinical significance of the five-stage model is its identification of preventive and early intervention points at Stages 2 and 3, before concealment normalisation has occurred and before the emotional investment has reached the level that makes therapeutic engagement most challenging.

5.2 Ambient Digital Infidelity

The second theoretical contribution is the concept of ambient digital infidelity, which describes the continuum of digitally mediated relational boundary violations that precede formal affair disclosure and produce cumulative relational harm before being recognised, named, or responded to as third-party interference. The existing literature has focused primarily on discoverable discrete acts of digital infidelity, such as the discovery of a

messaging exchange or a secret social media account. What the review reveals is a broader and more pervasive phenomenon: the ambient erosion of relational boundaries through patterns of digital social behaviour that are individually ambiguous but cumulatively damaging.

Ambient digital infidelity encompasses behaviours including sustained private messaging with a specific external contact in the presence of the marital partner, the selective sharing of emotional content with digital contacts that is withheld from the marital partner, the preferential allocation of digital communication time and emotional energy to external contacts, and the maintenance of digital social relationships characterised by levels of intimacy and disclosure that exceed those of the marital relationship. These behaviours do not individually constitute infidelity as conventionally understood but collectively produce the conditions for it, and collectively generate the relational harm, in the form of reduced couple intimacy, increased partner jealousy, and eroded trust, that the reviewed studies consistently document.

The concept of ambient digital infidelity is clinically important because it identifies a category of relational harm that conventional therapeutic and legal frameworks for infidelity do not adequately address. Couples who present with the diffuse relational distress, jealousy, and communication dysfunction associated with ambient digital infidelity frequently cannot point to a specific discoverable act that constitutes the presenting problem, making conventional infidelity treatment frameworks inapplicable. A theoretical construct that names and characterises the ambient pattern provides both a clinical conceptualisation tool and a vocabulary for couples to articulate and address the relational harm being produced.

5.3 The Dual Screen Relationship Model

The third theoretical contribution is the Dual Screen Relationship Model, which conceptualises contemporary marriage as a relationship system that is simultaneously maintained in two distinct relational spaces, the physical domestic space and the digital social space, each with its own boundary norms, surveillance capacities, visibility rules, and vulnerability profiles.

In the physical domestic space, the ordinary social architecture of cohabitation, shared routine, mutual visibility, and social network overlap provides a set of natural constraints on the development of intimate third-party involvement. Opportunities for private sustained contact are structurally limited, the social visibility of

relationships with external parties is higher, and the social consequences of relational boundary violations are more immediately apparent. In the digital social space, by contrast, these structural constraints are systematically absent or circumvented: privacy architecture enables concealment, persistent availability eliminates temporal and geographic barriers, digital disinhibition lowers the threshold for intimate contact, and algorithmic amplification actively promotes social engagement with external parties.

The Dual Screen Relationship Model proposes that healthy marital functioning in the digital age requires the explicit maintenance of coherent and mutually agreed relational boundaries in both spaces, and that the absence of such boundaries in the digital space constitutes a structural vulnerability to third-party interference that is qualitatively distinct from but functionally equivalent to the structural vulnerabilities in the physical space that family systems theory has long theorised. The model has direct implications for premarital education and couple therapy, suggesting that digital boundary negotiation should be treated as a core relational competency for contemporary couples rather than as a peripheral or optional aspect of couple functioning.

5.4 The Digital Boundary Literacy Framework

The fourth theoretical contribution is the Digital Boundary Literacy Framework, a prevention-oriented theoretical construct that specifies the knowledge, skills, and relational practices that constitute adequate digital boundary maintenance for married couples in high-connectivity environments. Digital boundary literacy is proposed as a relational competency with four components.

Digital transparency awareness encompasses understanding of how digital communication platforms create conditions for concealment, parasocial intimacy escalation, and parallel reality construction, and the capacity to recognise these conditions as they emerge in one's own digital social behaviour. Couples with high digital transparency awareness are able to reflect on the intimacy gradient of their digital relationships and to recognise when a digital contact is developing towards the concealment normalisation stage.

Mutual digital boundary negotiation encompasses the capacity to develop and maintain explicit, mutually agreed, and regularly revisited understandings of the relational boundaries that apply in the digital space, including the degree of privacy that each partner regards as appropriate for individual digital communication and the categories of digital social contact that constitute a relational

boundary approach requiring disclosure. Research on premarital preparation has demonstrated that explicit agreement on relational norms, including digital norms, is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and lower conflict over time [23].

Digital attention allocation describes the practice of deliberately and consciously managing the distribution of digital attention in ways that prioritise the marital relationship over external digital social engagements. This component addresses the phubbing and digital displacement phenomena documented by Luo and Tuney [20] and positions the deliberate management of digital attention as a relational act with direct consequences for marital quality.

Early escalation recognition encompasses the capacity to identify and name the early stages of the Digital Intimacy Gradient Model in one's own digital social behaviour and to respond to early-stage escalation through transparent communication with the marital partner rather than through concealment normalisation. This component connects the Digital Intimacy Gradient Model to the preventive intervention agenda by providing individuals with a cognitive framework for recognising the early-stage escalation that, if unaddressed, leads to the more entrenched involvement documented at Stages 4 and 5.

6. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This review makes four theoretical contributions that together constitute a comprehensive and internally coherent theoretical account of social media facilitated third-party interference as a distinct and consequential phenomenon.

The Digital Intimacy Gradient Model provides the first stage-based account of the characteristic escalation pathway from casual digital contact to emotionally intimate third-party involvement, identifying the mechanisms operating at each stage and the preventive intervention points at which escalation can be interrupted. The model's clinical utility lies in its provision of a shared vocabulary for couples and therapists to identify and discuss early-stage digital intimacy escalation before concealment normalisation has occurred.

The concept of ambient digital infidelity extends the scholarly conversation beyond discrete discoverable acts of digital infidelity to the broader and more pervasive pattern of cumulative digital boundary erosion that produces relational harm without constituting a conventionally recognisable infidelity event. This concept fills a significant theoretical and clinical gap by naming and characterising a form of relational harm that couples

frequently experience but cannot articulate within existing infidelity frameworks.

The Dual Screen Relationship Model provides a systems-level conceptualisation of contemporary marriage as simultaneously maintained in physical and digital spaces, each with distinctive vulnerability profiles, and proposes digital boundary maintenance as a core relational competency for married couples in high-connectivity environments. This model has broad implications for couple therapy, premarital education, and digital wellness policy that extend beyond the specific context of third-party interference.

The Digital Boundary Literacy Framework operationalises the preventive implications of the review's findings into four specific relational competencies that are amenable to measurement, development, and incorporation into therapeutic and educational interventions. This framework provides the theoretical foundation for evidence-based programmes in premarital preparation, couple enrichment, and digital wellness education.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Clinical Practice

For couple therapists, the reviewed evidence supports the routine incorporation of digital communication assessment into the initial evaluation of couples presenting with marital distress, third-party interference, or unexplained relational deterioration. The mechanisms of parasocial intimacy escalation, digital disinhibition, privacy architecture exploitation, and parallel reality construction provide a clinical conceptualisation framework that can be shared with couples to facilitate understanding and disclosure. The Digital Intimacy Gradient Model provides a stage-based assessment tool that therapists can use to evaluate the severity and stage of digital third-party involvement and to select stage-appropriate interventions.

The concept of ambient digital infidelity has specific clinical utility with couples who present with diffuse relational distress, erosion of intimacy, and partner jealousy without a specific discoverable infidelity event. Providing these couples with a name and a conceptual framework for the ambient pattern of digital boundary erosion they may be experiencing can facilitate both disclosure and therapeutic engagement with the underlying relational vulnerabilities that have enabled the pattern to develop.

7.2 Prevention and Policy

The Digital Boundary Literacy Framework provides the theoretical basis for preventive intervention programmes that can be incorporated into premarital education, couple enrichment, and digital wellness curricula. In high-connectivity societies including Malaysia, where social media penetration exceeds 88 percent and digital facilitation of third-party involvement is a documented contributor to marital conflict, the explicit development of digital boundary literacy as a relational competency in premarital and early marriage education represents a preventive investment with population-level returns.

For family policy, the review's demonstration of the population-level scale of social media facilitated marital distress supports a policy case for incorporating digital boundary literacy into national family preparation and enrichment programmes, for requiring social media platforms operating in high-penetration markets to provide users with accessible information about the relational implications of platform design features, and for supporting the development of evidence-based digital wellness resources specifically designed for married couples.

8. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this review should be acknowledged. The rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms and digital communication technologies means that the evidence base reviewed here is necessarily a snapshot of a moving landscape: the specific platforms, features, and usage patterns documented in studies published between 2011 and 2024 may not fully reflect the digital environment in which couples are currently navigating relational boundary challenges. The predominance of Western, educated, and relatively young samples in the reviewed studies limits the generalisability of findings to older adults, non-Western cultural contexts, and populations with different digital literacy and usage profiles.

The reliance of most reviewed studies on self-report measures of digital behaviour and relationship outcomes introduces the possibility of social desirability bias and retrospective distortion in the evidence base. The cross-sectional design of most included studies limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the direction of effects between digital behaviour and relational outcomes. The emerging literature on dating applications, AI-facilitated relationships, and immersive virtual reality social environments is not yet sufficiently developed to be incorporated into this synthesis, but

represents a significant gap that future systematic reviews should address.

9. CONCLUSION

Social media and digital communication technologies have not merely provided a new medium for an old problem. They have created a qualitatively new relational environment characterised by architectural conditions, psychological mechanisms, and intimacy escalation pathways that have no adequate precedent in the pre-digital couple therapy literature and that require new theoretical frameworks, new clinical tools, and new preventive interventions. The Digital Intimacy Gradient Model, the concept of ambient digital infidelity, the Dual Screen Relationship Model, and the Digital Boundary Literacy Framework collectively provide the theoretical foundations for these new responses.

The phrase that organises the title of this review, swipe right, drift away, encapsulates the central insight that digital third-party interference rarely begins as a deliberate relational violation. It begins with the ordinary gestures of digital sociality, a profile visit, a message reply, a gaming session, that the digital environment's architectural and psychological properties progressively transform into emotionally intimate involvement, concealment, and ultimately the betrayal that produces the full weight of psychological consequences documented in the empirical literature. Understanding and interrupting this gradient, at the earliest possible stage and through the most culturally responsive and evidence-informed approaches available, is both the scholarly imperative that motivates this review and the clinical and policy challenge that its findings are intended to address.

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