The Role of Social Media in Marital Relationships: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

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Abstract

As part of the digital transformation of modern societies, social media has become a space where individuals express their identities, display their social roles, and make their relationships visible. This study adopts a symbolic interactionist framework to explore how social media reflects meaning, identity, and role processes within marital relationships. The research[3] was conducted using a qualitative methodology. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants, and two focus group interviews with six people each were then used to deepen the findings. The data were analyzed thematically under the guidance of symbolic interactionist theory, and three main themes emerged: "new forms of communication in marriage," "representation of marriage on social media," and "definition of relationship roles." The findings show that social media serves as a tool for creating new meanings, identities, and roles in marriage. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, social media symbols contribute significantly to strengthening emotional bonds, building trust, mitigating conflict, and raising awareness of gender roles in marital relationships. In addition, demographic factors such as age, years of marriage, and gender, as well as individual preferences and relationship dynamics, were found to influence meanings, identities, and roles within these interactions.

Keywords: Social Media, Marital Relationships, Marital Communication, Symbolic Interactionism.

Introduction

Communication within family relationships contributes to developing and reconstructing individuals' social identities. Communication continually shapes and updates individuals' perceptions of their identities and roles within the family. The values, norms, and expectations shared by family members play a crucial role in how individuals define themselves. Communication within the family supports individuals' self-perceptions and influences how their social identities are perceived in society. By focusing on the dynamic process of meaning-making through social interactions, symbolic interactionism highlights the crucial role of communication in constructing and negotiating these identities and roles within the family context. Thus, symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical framework for understanding how symbols and meanings shape family interactions and how family members create their social identities and roles.

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Based on the work of George Herbert Mead and developed by Blumer, symbolic interactionism argues that individuals construct meaning through social interactions and continually redefine these meanings within their relationships (Blumer, 1969; Burke & Stets, 2009). Accordingly, family members interpret each other as they construct their identities, and this process plays a crucial role in determining social roles and shaping self-perceptions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006). Roles such as parent, spouse, child, or sibling are social roles individuals use to define their identities. Erickson suggests that individuals seek authentic identities reinforced through social interactions (Erickson, 1995). The flexible structure of social roles within families allows individuals to re-evaluate their identities and social roles continually. Rosenbaum notes that spouses' perceptions of each other affect their roles and their self-evaluations, which directly impacts relationship satisfaction (Rosenbaum, 2009). Consequently, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, family roles are dynamic processes that can shift based on individuals' mental frameworks and are continually reconstructed through social interactions.

According to Stryker (1959), applying symbolic interactionism to family research emphasizes identities and role definitions as essential objects of study. Stryker's (2000) identity theory offers a valuable perspective in explaining how individuals' multiple identities are integrated with their family roles in different contexts. Individuals embody different identities in work or social settings that interact with their roles within the family. Thoits suggests that having multiple identities enhances psychological well-being and that the flexibility of identities allows individuals to redefine themselves in different contexts (Thoits, 1983). For example, a professional identity may interact with the family roles of the father or spouse, influencing the dynamic structure of family relationships. Furthermore, the fluidity of identities in modern society means that people have adaptable identities that can change across different social contexts rather than being fixed or unchanging (Sönmez, 2022). This situation allows individuals to continually reassess, update, and emphasize different aspects of their identities in different social contexts.

In times of crisis, individuals may reassess their identities and roles within the family, a critical issue addressed in symbolic interactionism. LaRossa and Reitzes (1993) examine how crises affect individuals' commitments within the family and how these commitments are tested in this context. In times of crisis, individuals engage in reassessing their family roles and identities, reconstructing the meanings attached to themselves and the family. Thus, crises provide an opportunity to reshape individuals' understanding of their family roles and commitments. This re-evaluation process demonstrates that family commitments are flexible and adaptable to changing social conditions.

In traditional family structures, constructing meaning was mainly limited to face-to-face communication. However, with the digital transformation of modern society, this process has migrated to digital platforms. Rapid advances in technology have made social media an essential arena in which individuals express themselves, present their social roles, and reconstruct their identities. Social media allow family members to make their roles and identities socially visible in digital spaces, leading to new layers of meaning within marriage and family. Couples and family members create and reinforce a social identity about their roles within the family while presenting their identities to the outside world through social media (Baym, 2015).

Research suggests that social media creates a symbolic interactional space within marital relationships, allowing individuals to construct their worlds of meaning through social media. According to

researchers such as Walther (1996) and Caughlin and Sharabi (2013), the controlled nature of online interactions supports face-to-face communication and ensures continuity within relationships. Procentese et al. (2019) suggest that social media platforms act as symbolic tools that support family unity by facilitating adjustment, maintaining communication, and fostering family cohesion.

In addition, couples use symbols of love, loyalty, and belonging (such as photos or joint accounts) to publicly represent their marriage (Gönden & Güzel, 2017; Kalaman & Çelik, 2019). Social media provide tools such as video calling and messaging that increase emotional closeness and support the bond between spouses. In addition, shared media consumption and digital content sharing between couples are essential in relationship maintenance. (Humphreys & Hardeman, 2021; Kayabol et al., 2022; Ledbetter et al., 2010). Emojis, messaging applications, and other online interactions transfer nonverbal cues from face-to-face to written communication, contributing to relationship satisfaction (Derks et al., 2008; Özant & Kelleci, 2017; Wagner et al., 2022). Couples also share passwords as a symbolic act of trust and loyalty (Abbasi et al., 2023; Goodboy et al., 2010). However, excessive use of social media can lead to distractions, neglect of marital roles, and symbolic violation of time devoted to the relationship (Adegboyega, 2022; Morgan et al., 2017).

Social media create new meanings in marital relationships and contribute to forming and sharing identities between spouses. Social media influences identities acquired through marriage, covering various experiences from courtship to marriage and parenthood. Studies suggest that social media and the internet are changing traditional relationships and family rituals and creating new norms. Online dating platforms are increasing marriage rates among young adults, while social media influencers are accelerating the adoption of traditions such as "baby showers" in wedding and birth ceremonies. Moreover, the idealized images of family and marriage promoted on social media shape young people's perceptions of these concepts and drive changes in relationships at the societal level (Aktaş, 2019; Bellou, 2015; Baştok Özkan, 2022; Bielinowicz, 2021; Damayanti et al., 2021; Serbest, 2020).

Research suggests that social media provides a critical reality for constructing meaning within marital relationships. Couples find opportunities to define their relationships and identities by publicly displaying their marriage roles on social media platforms. Social media serves as a space where couples express themselves through symbols, rituals, and expressions related to their marriage, contributing to constructing a shared identity within the relationship.

Method

This study aims to understand social media use within the context of marriage and its impact on marital communication through a symbolic interactionist framework. A qualitative research method was used. The data collection procedure was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, between October 12, 2022, and February 15, 2023, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants. Using purposive and snowball sampling methods, participants were selected from married individuals who actively use social media.

A semi-structured interview with 25 questions was used as a data collection tool. This form is divided into six sections, with the first section containing seven questions about the participants' demographic information. The interview questions include 18 items designed to understand the nature of

participants' communication with their spouses, how they share their private lives on social media, how they communicate with their spouses through social media, and how they perceive social media in the context of marriage.

In the second stage, two focus group discussions were conducted between October 12, 2023, and October 17, 2023. The first group consisted of six participants selected from those who participated in individual interviews, while the second group consisted of six participants chosen from the pool of initial interviewees. These discussions focused on exploring how identities, roles, and relational meanings constructed through social media in the context of marriage had changed based on the findings from the first phase. The focus group discussion guide contained eight questions developed to explore the symbolic meanings constructed in the first phase.

During data analysis, thematic qualitative content analysis was carried out using the basic principles of symbolic interactionism. In the analysis process, statements from semi-structured interview participants were first examined within the symbolic interactionist framework, and the most relevant statements were selected and categorized. These categorized statements were further refined in the light of the data obtained from the focus group discussions, and the categorization process was repeated. As a result of the analysis, three main themes were identified: "new forms of communication in marriage," "representation of marriage in social media," and "definition of relationship roles." These themes were evaluated and interpreted within the framework of symbolic interactionism.

Findings

The findings from the data analysis are presented in four sections. The first section describes demographic characteristics. The second section examines how social media use is reflected in marital communication, the third section explores how individuals present the identities they have acquired through marriage on social media, and the fourth section looks at how social media use affects roles within marriage.

Demographic Characteristics

The study included 30 participants, evenly split between 15 women and 15 men. Each age group contained six participants, balanced by gender (three women and three men per group). Regarding education, 1 participant had completed primary school, 9 had high school diplomas, 2 had associate degrees, 14 had bachelor's degrees, and 4 held postgraduate degrees. Of those with primary education, one was female; among high school graduates, 6 were male, 3 were female, and both associate degree holders were female. Bachelor's degree holders included 9 women and 6 men, while 1 woman and 3 men held postgraduate degrees.

Among female participants, 7 were employed, while 8 were not; all male participants were employed, but 4 reported that their wives were not. Regarding marital duration, 10 participants had been married for 0-5 years, five for 6-10 years, seven for 11-15 years, two for 16-20 years, and six for over 21 years. Nineteen participants had children, and 11 did not.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Semi-Structured Interview Participants

Demographic Information	Categories	Number	Sum
Gender	Woman	15	
	Male	15	30
Age	Ages 18-24 (K1-K6)	6	
	Ages 25-34 (K7-K12)	6	
	35-44 Years (F13-K18)	6	
	45-54 Years (K19-K24)	6	30
	55-64 Years (K25-K30)	6	
Education Status	Primary/Secondary Education	1	
	High school	9	
	Associate Degree	2	
	License	14	30
	Graduate	4	
Employment Status (Female)	Employed	7	
	Unemployed	8	15
Spouse's Employment Status (Male)	Employed	11	
	Unemployed	4	15
Wedding Year	0-5 Years	10	
	6-10 Years	5	
	11-15 Years	7	
	16-20 Years	2	30
	21 Years and Over	6	
Has children	Yes	19	
	No	11	30

As shown in Table 2, the focus group participants included 7 women and 5 men. Five participants were in the age group 25-34, three participants were in the age group 35-44, two participants were in the age group 45-54 and two participants were in the age group 55-64. Five participants had a bachelor's degree, and six had a graduate degree. Of the female participants, four were employed, and three were not. All male participants reported that their spouses were employed. Regarding length of marriage, four participants had been married for 0-5 years, two for 6-10 years, four for 11-15 years, and two for over 21 years. Ten participants had children, and two did not.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

	Gender	Age	Education Status	Employment Status	Wedding Year	Has Children
K9	Male	25-34 years old	License	Spouse employed	6-10 years	Yes
K11	Woman	25-34 years old	License	Employed	0-5 years	Yes
K14	Male	35-44 years old	Graduate	Spouse employed	11-15 years	Yes
K15	Male	35-44 years old	License	Spouse employed	11-15 years	Yes
K16	Woman	35-44 years old	License	Employed	11-15 years	Yes
K29	Woman	55-64 years old	Graduate	Unemployed	21 years and older	Yes
K31	Woman	25-34 years old	Graduate	Unemployed	0-5 years	Yes
K32	Woman	25-34 years old	Graduate	Employed	0-5 years	No
K33	Male	25-34 years old	License	Spouse employed	0-5 years	No
K34	Male	45-54 years old	Graduate	Spouse employed	11-15 years	Yes
K35	Woman	45-54 years old	License	Employed	6-10 years	Yes
K36	Woman	55-64 years old	Graduate	Unemployed	21 years and older	Yes

New Forms of Communication in Marriage

Social media profiles offer new symbols and forms of communication that allow individuals to reinterpret their identities, relationships, and social lives. Examining a potential partner's profile to gain insight into them reflects how individuals evaluate others through symbolic elements on social media. In the semi-structured interviews, 21 participants stated that social media profiles provide information about individuals and 5 of them noted that social media was not available when they married. In addition, some participants mentioned that information from social media profiles played a role in their communication with potential partners. For example, K2 (male, 24 years old) explained: "I had a girlfriend. She shared a quote from Yahya Kemal on her profile. I bought her a book by him as a gift", illustrating how he adjusted his behavior based on information gathered from social media.

Participants also reported gaining insights into their potential partner's lifestyle, social circle, and personality through social media usage patterns. Focus group participant K31 (female, 28 years old) highlighted the centrality of social media in young people's relationships, suggesting that couples who are unable to manage social media interactions may struggle to maintain their relationships: "For young

people, if a relationship starts and it can't be managed on social media, it doesn't go on to marriage. I think there's an elimination process here".

Ongoing relationships and marriages continue in this new world of communication. Communication between spouses via social media includes various aspects such as self-expression, expressing love, communicating requests, and increasing sharing. In the semi-structured interviews, participants mainly mentioned self-expression and expressing love as reasons for communicating with their spouses via social media, with 14 participants preferring this method for each purpose. 6 women and 8 men used social media to express love, while the same distribution was found for those who used it for self-expression. 7 participants, including 3 women and 4 men, used social media to increase sharing. On the other hand, all 5 participants who used social media to make requests were women.

Participants who used social media to express love generally preferred this method when physically separated from their spouses. K12 (female, 33 years old) emphasized the importance of social media when separated from her spouse: "When I go to my family in Izmir, and he's here, we constantly have our phones like teenagers, talking and sending messages." Similarly, K24 (female, 53 years old) mentioned, "We send kisses when we're apart; we don't feel the need for it when we're together," suggesting that social media communication is associated with physical distance, maintaining the relationship when apart.

Sharing is also an essential factor in maintaining relationships. Participants who used social media for sharing mentioned sending liked content or discussing topics with their spouses. For example, K7 (male, 27 years old) said, 'If I like a song, I'll share it and tag them,' while K12 (female, 33 years old) said, 'I've seen something about animals, so I'll share it with my spouse. Or if there's a video I don't want to lose, I've shared it with them on WhatsApp many times", indicating that couples share common interests. Another aspect of sharing is engaging in social media activities together, which participants described as sharing photos and stories, making reels, watching videos, playing games, and listening to music. 9 participants preferred sharing pictures or stories, 7 participants enjoyed making videos, while watching videos as a leisure activity. 3 participants saw playing games as a fun social media activity, while 3 participants saw listening to music as a shared activity.

Participants who used social media for self-expression often used content to help them communicate. For example, K1 (male, 23 years old) mentioned, "There are posts on Instagram about marriage, like 'four mistakes women make.' I'd send them subtly; maybe it could trigger empathy". Similarly, K31 (female, 28 years old) shared how she could better express herself on unresolved issues by sharing relevant images or videos: "If we've been arguing, or if there's something I feel misunderstood about... I might come across a related study or an example video on Instagram. If there's something I want to express, I share it".

The findings suggest that social media serves as a way for couples to avoid conflict and as an indirect communication channel for managing disputes. The participants' statements indicate that one advantage of social media communication is the absence of face-to-face interaction. K11 (female, 31 years old) said, "My spouse recently posted something... asking if sharing useful content is part of romance. It made me laugh; normally I'd get angry about something like that, but since I'm not face to face, I could take a step back and respond thoughtfully". Some participants preferred social media channels to keep calm in tense situations. For example, K14 (male, 38 years old) said, "When we're

arguing, writing on WhatsApp can help. Writing instead of talking calms things down. When you finally talk or get together, it's like a new beginning", highlighting the advantage of social media in conflict management. K36 (female, 63 years old) pointed to the lack of listening in face-to-face interactions and the role of social media in reducing conflict: "Everyone says what they want to say, and even when they're listening, they're preparing what they're going to say next. On social media, there's a pause to think, which could reduce conflict".

Social media can also be used to communicate requests to a spouse. Participants who communicated requests via social media often used it to ask for gifts or to fulfill their needs. For example, K5 (female, 24 years old) said: "A robot vacuum cleaner would be a great birthday present. Not for me, for you, of course. I send hints all the time so that robot vacuums will fill his food bowl". In conflict management, it seems that female participants preferred to communicate requests indirectly rather than directly.

Participants who had been married for 0-5 years generally communicated with their spouses on social media more often than others. While there were no significant differences between the age groups, participants married for 0-5 years were younger and more active social media users. Meanwhile, participants who were married for 11-15 years used social media mainly for self-expression. By this time, their children are often school-age or adolescents, requiring a reassessment of responsibilities, parenting approaches, and family roles. Social media can, therefore, serve as a tool for self-expression and conflict management during this time.

In addition, it was observed that participants aged over 44 and married for over 21 years did not see the need for positive interaction with their spouses on social media. This may be related to the lower levels of social media activity among older people and possibly a reduced need for such communication after years of cohabitation. Focus group participant K29 (female, 64 years old) explained this: "If I was younger, if we were newly married, I might be worried about why he doesn't share us. Is he hiding our relationship?".

Conversely, younger participants seemed to integrate social media more naturally into their daily lives. In particular, focus group participants agreed that younger couples were more likely to incorporate social media interactions into their marital communication. K14 (male, 38 years old) said: "Yes, young people are practically born into social media. They don't know life without it, but we do. Maybe they meet their spouses through it".

Women were also found to be more sensitive to social media interactions. While no significant gender differences in social media behavior were found in the semi-structured interviews, participants indicated that women were more demanding in social media communication. Focus group participant K36 (female, 63 years old) stated: "From my observation, even among friends in my age group or younger, men are less interested. Women usually want more communication on social media", suggesting that women may be more sensitive to the meanings created on social media. Male participant K15 (male, 41 years old) remarked, "She posted a video and asked why I didn't like it or comment on it. Now I have to explain that too".

In both semi-structured and focus group interviews, male participants mostly expressed similar sentiments. In addition, participants identified other determining factors. K32 (female, 27 years old) stated: "It depends on the person. For example, my mum uses social media a lot, but if you tried to communicate with my dad through social media, he wouldn't even know how to open a link",

suggesting that the meanings created on social media may vary according to individual preferences or interests.

Presentation of Marriage on Social Media

According to the findings, married people create new symbols and meanings by sharing aspects of their private lives on social media. In the semi-structured interviews, 20 participants reported that their profiles indicated that they were married, while 10 participants did not display this information on their profiles. Of those displaying marital status, 8 were women, and 12 were men; of those not, seven were women, and three were men. Participants' statements suggest that sharing marital status on social media is generally considered a regular, unquestioned act, demonstrating social media integration into social life. For example, K6 (female, 24 years old) stated, "We just did it automatically when we got married... we didn't question why".

Sharing marital status online is seen as equivalent to announcing it in real life, and is often done to avoid being perceived as single or to affirm marriage publicly. For example, K11 (female, 31 years old) shared: "I especially say that I'm married so that people don't assume I'm single", while K1 (male, 23 years old) expressed: "First, you want to share it on social media so that everyone knows - now let them see that we're married". These examples reflect how sharing marital status protects the boundaries of marriage and shares happiness with a wider social circle.

In addition, presenting marital status can be achieved by using a profile photo with one's spouse or sharing photos with family members. 24 participants had profile photos with their spouses, while 6 did not. Of those with photos, 11 were women and 13 were men; 4 were women and 2 were men. Participants expressed various motivations for sharing profile photos with their spouses, including feeling good, expressing a sense of belonging, avoiding being perceived as single, and confirming their happiness.

Participants' statements highlight belonging as a crucial part of identity. Married people often define themselves as 'we' and make this bond symbolically visible on social media. For example, K20 (male, 46 years old) stated: "We have a photo with our child. We are a family. They're important to me. Why should I just put myself?" and K27 (male, 56 years old) commented: "It's the right thing to do. It's normal. We are one". These statements emphasize the centrality of showing one's spouse and family on social media to identity, reinforcing that a profile photo with one's spouse redefines personal identity within the role of marriage and presents this role as a symbol of belonging to the public.

K2 (male, 24 years old) remarked: "I think it shows how strong our relationship is. It's still strong, just like the first day. Everything is fine", suggesting that using a profile photo with one's spouse communicates to others that the relationship is positive and stable. This highlights how profile photos serve as a tool to express relationship status and demonstrate the happiness and stability of the relationship on social media.

Sharing photos of one's spouse and family also reflects the portrayal of marriage on social media. 25 participants reported sharing content related to their spouse and family, while 5 did not. Of those who shared, 11 were women, and 14 were men; of those who did not share, 4 were women, and 1 was a man. Participants indicated that the motivation for sharing family-related content was often to share happiness with their social circle. The function of social media to enable interaction with one's social

circle supports this and further drives the motivation to share as a means of socializing and seeking acceptance. K4 (female, 22 years old) expressed this by saying: "Isn't that the whole point of social media? You live your social life there too; you share with friends and family".

The participants' statements show that while marital identities influence social media use, social media also influences the identities acquired through marriage. Frequent exposure to images of happy families and spouses on social media may make some individuals feel the need to present a similar identity. K33 (male, 28 years old) explained: "There are these accounts on social media, mainly influencers. I notice this trend, like young families with children... it's socially attractive. If they're doing it on social media, then okay, I should do it too". This observation illustrates how social media shapes individuals' lives and relationships. In this context, the 'happy family' model influencers provide encourages viewers to adopt a similar lifestyle and reshape their identities according to this ideal. For younger people, in particular, social media fosters self-definition by modeling this ideal identity. Social media thus becomes a platform that influences perceptions of identity and contributes to the reproduction of social norms.

Defining Relationship Roles

Behaviors on social media, such as disclosing marital status, using profile photos with a spouse, and posting family-related content, play an essential role in shaping relationship roles and the marital identities that individuals acquire. Through these actions, individuals communicate their self-perception, view of their relationship, and how they want their social circles to perceive it. Similarly, aspects such as easy access to a spouse's mobile phone, spending a lot of time on social media, and interacting with the opposite sex on these platforms are perceived as potential issues that influence relationship roles.

In semi-structured interviews, 25 participants reported sharing social media or phone passwords with their spouse, while five did not. Of those who shared passwords, 11 were women, and 14 were men. Four of those who did not share passwords were women, and one was a man. Seventeen participants emphasized that phone access was essential to allow transparency, while 14 emphasized that complete openness was necessary for a marriage. On the other hand, three participants who did not share passwords justified this decision regarding respecting private spaces, and two noted that they felt uncomfortable not knowing their spouse's phone password.

Participants' statements reflect that sharing passwords is often seen as a practice that builds trust in the relationship. For example, K3 (male, 24 years old) stated, "There shouldn't be secrecy. There has to be transparency. If not, respect, love, and trust will decrease", emphasizing that removing privacy increases trust. K11 (female, 31 years old), who shares a social media account with her spouse, shared, "If someone writes something, they know that we both see it. I think it protects the marriage", emphasizing that having a joint account increases feelings of security. Conversely, a few participants who did not share passwords saw this as respect for personal space, not necessarily an indication of trust.

Trust influences how individuals fulfill roles of responsibility and support for each other and affect establishing boundaries within the relationship. In this sense, interactions with the opposite sex on social media also play an essential role in defining relationship roles. All participants expressed that interactions with the opposite sex should be limited. In particular, they noted that the nature and individuals involved in these interactions were essential. For example, K10 (female, 27 years old) expressed: "There is a difference between sending a smiley, a heart, and a clap. You have to know the

difference between them", indicating that her approach to such interactions would vary depending on the type of interaction.

Relationship dynamics also influence perceptions of interactions with the opposite sex on social media. K11 (female, 31 years old) remarked: "Are women afraid of being cheated on because of social media? Both men and women cheated on their partners before social media. Social media isn't the reason for arguments at", emphasizing that while social media does affect relationships, issues such as cheating and conflict stem from deeper, multifaceted dynamics.

Another factor related to the definition of relationship roles concerns responsibilities. Participants' statements suggest that a spouse's excessive or inappropriate use of social media is a notable issue in relationships. Half of the participants mentioned this as a problem, especially those who had been married for 11-15 years and had children. Thus, the tendency to see a spouse's use of social media as problematic seems more common in marriages where responsibilities such as raising children are more prominent.

There were also significant gender differences in responsibilities. Twelve participants reported that social media content about gender equality made them question their roles and responsibilities. Broken by gender, nine participants were women, and three were men. Analyzing the presence of children, eight participants who reported questioning roles and responsibilities due to gender equality content had children, while four did not.

Women with children were found to be more likely to question their roles because of the increased responsibilities associated with gender roles. This was also the case for unemployed women. Of the participants affected by social media content on gender equality, three were employed and six were not. K18 (female, 42 years old), an unemployed participant, shared her thoughts on such content: "They say stand on your own feet. They're right. God forbid, but if we get divorced, I have nothing. What will happen to me? I'll be left with nothing. I'm cooking for an elderly lady now, and she said: 'No, you won't. I said, 'But there's nothing wrong with it. So I'm going".

In the focus group discussions, K11 (Female, 31 years old) remarked, "Yes, you can show these examples to your spouse so that women feel empowered", highlighting that sharing alternative gender roles on social media with her spouse raised awareness about sharing household responsibilities more equitably. Similarly, K33 (male, 28 years old) stated that learning from others through social media contributed to questioning his role within his relationship: "It means that my partner expects something like this from me, so yes, I have to take a bigger role." These statements illustrate how social media contributes to individuals taking on more egalitarian roles in their relationships and challenging traditional gender roles.

Participants also shared essential observations about how gender roles shape their social media behavior. For example, K31 (female, 28 years old) indicated that after marriage, her husband's presence was a socially perceived protective factor: "After all, she's married, or she's with her husband so that they won't interfere... it's very reassuring for me". In addition, K32 (female, 27 years old) observed that single women are judged more on social media, while the behavior of married women is seen as more acceptable. This highlights the societal roles assigned to women: "Single women are seen differently. I don't think social media raises awareness about gender equality". Male participants also expressed that

they, too, have to conform to gender norms, illustrating how societal expectations constrain social media behavior.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that social media enables the expression of emotional affection within marriages, creating a symbolic communication space in relationships. Couples express their love for each other through symbols such as emoticons, photos, and messages on social media, highlighting the role of symbols in symbolic interactionism in making abstract concepts such as emotion and commitment visible. In addition, social media facilitates communication during physical separations, helping to maintain relationships and preserve emotional bonds between partners. Gómez-Urrutia and Tello-Navarro (2021) note that online intimacy established through social media bridges online and offline interactions. The findings of this study are consistent with Kanter's (1977) views, which emphasize that symbolically meaningful elements in relationships can overcome physical distance, strengthen emotional attachment, and help individuals maintain a sense of commitment through social media interactions.

According to Caughlin and Sharabi (2013), social media supports couples' communication by enabling specific issues in relationships to be brought up again in different contexts and helps them manage conflicts more healthily. The findings show that social media communication helps conflict management by providing indirect ways to express needs, thereby reducing conflict. Participants preferred social media to communicate needs subtly, thus preventing conflict, while sharing videos or content offered indirect criticism, reducing defensive reactions. Social media messaging during disputes was seen as less tense than face-to-face interaction, creating a calmer environment and fostering a positive view of social media in marital communication.

The study also shows that social media allows individuals to present their 'married' identity to society. Participants display their marital status on their social media profiles and share photos with their spouses. Displaying a 'married' identity on social media helps individuals to define their social identity. Such posts on social media profiles allow individuals to legitimize their marital identity in a social context and contribute to the validation of their social status. In this sense, social media serves as a platform for individuals to construct their identities to strengthen their bonds with their partners and broader social circles. Goffman (1959) suggests that individuals manage impressions to present themselves in ways that generate certain perceptions. Thus, displaying a marital identity on social media helps individuals to conform to social expectations and demonstrate their marital status.

Burke (1991) states that individuals seek acceptance by displaying their social identities. In this process, they present their identities, receive feedback from their social environment, and adjust their identity perceptions accordingly. Positive feedback reinforces identity perceptions, while negative or inadequate responses may cause individuals to reassess their identity. The findings suggest that younger people adopt socially accepted behaviors commonly observed in others, which can reinforce their sense of social belonging through social media. Commonly seen content, popular sharing styles, and relational norms on social media are often repeated because they are seen as 'normal.' These behaviors allow users to create a self-presentation that conforms to societal perceptions, with individuals conforming to these norms to gain acceptance and express relational identities that conform to social norms.

Symbols created through social media also influence the definition of relationship roles. Symbols of love, interest, belonging, and commitment - such as sharing marital status, appearing with a partner in profile photos, or making joint posts - are markers of public commitment and attachment within a relationship. Liking a spouse's posts, commenting with affectionate emoticons, and sharing everyday moments or special events through stories all express the couple's mutual interest. Practices such as sharing passwords and limiting social media interactions with the opposite sex are symbols of trust and transparency, reflecting how couples define their roles as trustworthy and faithful partners. Excessive or poorly timed use of social media can lead to perceptions of role-breaking about domestic responsibilities, as a negative symbol suggesting unequal sharing of responsibilities within the relationship. Such symbols can create meanings that can be sources of conflict and shape everyday interactions between the couple.

The re-evaluation of gender roles through social media is also an essential factor in defining relationship roles. Findings show that female participants were influenced by gender equality content on social media, leading them to rethink their marital roles. Participants also noted the restrictive effects of societal gender norms on social media. These conflicting effects reflect social media's dual nature, reinforcing and challenging societal norms. West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of 'doing gender' highlights that gender roles are continually reproduced through interactions. Ridgeway (2011) argues that gender inequality is perpetuated not only by personal prejudices or legal regulations but also by social relations and expectations. Social media, as an interactional space, can increase awareness of gender equality and thereby contribute to gender equality itself.

Demographic factors such as age, years of marriage, and gender appear to influence the meanings, identities, and relationship roles created in social media. In addition, individual preferences and relationship dynamics also shape these outcomes differently. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these differences suggest that couples define their relationships not only according to societal norms but also based on their interactions. Marriage is a dynamic structure shaped by evolving conditions and mutual interactions, with each marriage adapting to individual and societal expectations over time by stretching and changing according to unique meanings and values. This dynamic process allows each couple to continually reconstruct their relational identity and role distribution.

This study highlights the integration of digital spaces into marital interactions, demonstrating how couples create unique identities and roles in this environment, thus comprehensively revealing the connection between social media and marital relationships. Employing a qualitative research procedure with limited participants, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the complex processes of meaning and role construction in marital relationships through social media interactions, focusing on participants' individual experiences. Future studies with larger sample groups could explore how these findings vary across different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and relational contexts, allowing this study's unique perspective to be confirmed within a broader framework.

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