

Exploring the Mediating Role of Digital Communication in the Relationship Between Marital Commitment and Quality Among Married Individuals

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: The rise of digital communication has significantly impacted marital relationships, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While it can enhance connectivity and intimacy, digital communication may also lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and decreased marital quality. This study examined the mediating role of digital communication in the relationship between marital commitment and marital quality among married individuals in Kigali, Rwanda, where cultural and socio-economic factors might uniquely influence these dynamics.

Methods: A descriptive-correlation design was utilized, employing structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the relationships between marital commitment, digital communication, and marital quality. The study sample comprised 218 participants (109 couples) from Kigali, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using three standardized questionnaires: the Marital Commitment Questionnaire (MCQ), the Technology and Intimate Relationship Assessment (TIRA), and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). The analysis focused on the direct and indirect effects of digital communication on marital quality.

Results: Findings revealed that digital communication significantly mediates the relationship between marital commitment and marital quality, with an indirect effect coefficient of $\beta = 0.12$ ($p < 0.01$). Effective digital communication was positively associated with higher marital quality ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), while inappropriate or excessive use negatively impacted marital satisfaction. The results suggest that the context and frequency of digital interactions are critical in determining whether digital communication enhances or undermines marital quality.

Conclusion: Digital communication plays a crucial mediating role between marital commitment and quality among married individuals in Kigali. While it can strengthen relationships by fostering connection and intimacy, it also poses risks if not managed well. These findings have important implications for marriage counseling and relationship education, highlighting the need for strategies that promote healthy digital communication practices among couples.

Keywords: Couple relationships, digital communication, marital commitment, marital quality, relationship dynamics.

Introduction

Marriage, as a cornerstone institution of society, is influenced by numerous factors that affect its quality and durability. A key aspect of understanding the dynamics of marital relationships is exploring how individual beliefs about marriage influence marital commitment. Marital beliefs and expectations are fundamental

constructs that predict marital outcomes. Recent studies have emphasized the critical role of marital expectations in shaping marital satisfaction and stability, highlighting that unrealistic or unmet expectations can lead to decreased marital quality (Hawkins et al., 2021; Johnson & Bradbury, 2022). Additionally, the interplay between marital beliefs and expectations has been shown to mediate the strength of marital commitment, indicating that individuals with more positive beliefs about marriage are likely to maintain higher levels of commitment when their expectations are aligned with their marital reality (Smith et al., 2023). This paper examines the mediating role of marital expectations in the relationship between marital beliefs and marital commitment among married individuals.

Marital commitment and marital quality have been recognized as foundational elements of successful and enduring marriages. Marital commitment refers to an individual's intention to maintain a long-term relationship and the strength of their emotional attachment to their partner (Stanley et al., 2006). It encompasses personal commitment, which involves the desire to stay married out of love and satisfaction; moral commitment, which is driven by a sense of obligation or duty; and structural commitment, which is related to the social, economic, or legal factors that make leaving the marriage difficult (Johnson et al., 1999). Marital quality, on the other hand, is a multifaceted construct that includes factors such as marital satisfaction, happiness, and the absence of conflict (Fincham & Rogge, 2010). It reflects how positively individuals evaluate their marriage, considering aspects such as communication, intimacy, and emotional support (Bradbury et al., 2000). High marital quality is often associated with greater life satisfaction, better mental health, and improved overall well-being (Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Lavner et al., 2020). Digital communication, which includes a wide range of technologies such as texting, emailing, social media, and video calls, has increasingly influenced how couples communicate and maintain their relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014; McDaniel et al., 2017). The couple and family technology framework developed by Hertlein and Blumer (2014) posited that digital communication could alter traditional relationship dynamics by providing new ways for couples to connect, but also by introducing potential challenges such as miscommunication and increased opportunities for infidelity (Coyne et al., 2021).

Previous research has indicated that digital communication can have both positive and negative effects on marital relationships. On the positive side, digital communication has been found to enhance connection and intimacy, especially in long-distance relationships or when partners have busy schedules (Papp et al., 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). It provides a convenient way for couples to stay connected, express affection, and maintain their relationship despite physical distance (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). However, studies also suggest that an over-reliance on digital communication can lead to misunderstandings, reduced face-to-face interaction, and conflicts related to technology use (McDaniel et al., 2017; Coyne et al., 2021). The theory of relationship maintenance posits that communication is central to maintaining marital satisfaction and commitment (Stafford, 2011). Effective communication helps partners manage conflicts, express affection, and reinforce their commitment to one another (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). However, when communication is mediated through digital platforms, the nuances of face-to-face interaction may be lost, potentially leading to miscommunication and conflict (Pettigrew, 2009; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). This study builds on these theoretical perspectives to explore how digital communication mediates the relationship between marital commitment and marital quality in the context of Rwandan marriages. The problem addressed by this study is the lack of understanding regarding how digital communication influences the relationship between marital commitment and marital quality among married individuals in Kigali, Rwanda. While digital communication has become an integral part of daily life, its impact on marital relationships, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains underexplored (Ntaganira et al., 2014). The existing literature primarily focuses on Western societies, where the cultural, social, and economic contexts differ significantly from those in sub-Saharan Africa. This gap in the literature highlights the need for research that considers the unique dynamics of digital communication within Rwandan marriages.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive-correlation design, utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore the mediating role of digital communication in the relationship between marital commitment and marital quality among married individuals in Kigali, Rwanda. Ethical clearance for the research was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the College of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Rwanda (CMHS/IRB/471/2024). Furthermore, the study was prospectively registered in The Pan African Clinical Trials Registry (PACTR), under the registration number PACTR202407243122471. Participants were recruited through online platforms and community centers, ensuring a diverse sample in terms of age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. After providing informed consent, participants completed a series of online questionnaires. Data were collected anonymously to encourage honesty and reduce social desirability bias. The study adhered to ethical standards in research involving human subjects as approved by the IRB.

Participants were recruited through community notices and social media advertisements in Kigali, encouraging them to sign up at the Wellness and Family Centre. This centralized approach facilitated the uniform screening of all interested couples against specific eligibility criteria, including legal marriage status, age range of 25 to 45 years, and absence of ongoing marital therapy or counseling. To ensure a diverse representation of participants across various demographic factors such as age, gender, length of marriage, and cultural background, a stratified random sampling method was utilized. Based on [Krejcie and Morgan's \(1970\)](#) sample size determination guidelines, a minimum of 210 participants was required. However, anticipating potential non-responses or incomplete surveys, the target sample size was increased to 230 participants. Ultimately, 218 married individuals were included in the study after excluding 4 incomplete questionnaires and 8 participants who were undergoing marital counseling.

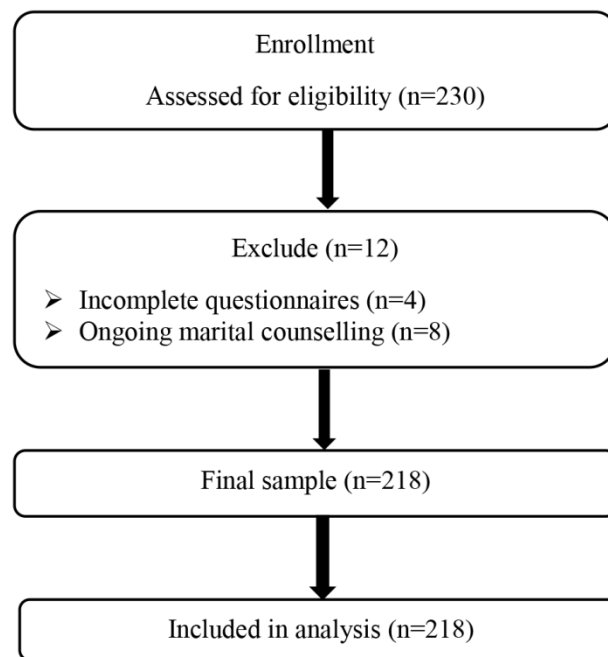


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the study participant

In this study, the following tools were used to collect data:

The Marital Commitment Questionnaire (MCQ), developed by Adams and Jones in 1997, is a comprehensive tool designed to assess an individual's dedication to their spouse and marriage across three distinct dimensions: personal, moral, and structural commitment. The questionnaire consists of 44 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The total score ranges from 44 to 220, with higher scores indicating a stronger commitment to the marriage. This tool is widely used in research to evaluate the various facets of marital commitment and predict relationship stability and satisfaction.

The Technology and Intimate Relationship Assessment (TIRA), developed by Campbell and Murray in 2015, is a 22-item scale designed to evaluate the perceived impact of technology on romantic intimacy. The scale is divided into two subscales: Intimacy-Enhancing and Intimacy-Reducing, each containing 11 statements. Participants rate each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), reflecting the extent to which they believe the statement applies to their relationship. High scores on the Intimacy-Enhancing subscale indicate that the participant perceives technology as positively contributing to their relationship by enhancing emotional connection and overall intimacy. In contrast, high scores on the Intimacy-Reducing subscale suggest that the participant views technology as having a negative impact on their relationship, potentially leading to feelings of jealousy, mistrust, or emotional distance.

The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI), developed by Funk and Rogge in 2007, is a 32-item scale specifically designed to measure relationship satisfaction with precision using item response theory. This tool is widely recognized for its ability to capture the nuanced levels of satisfaction that individuals experience within their romantic relationships. High scores on the CSI reflect a deeply fulfilling and positive relationship, characterized by strong emotional bonds, effective communication, and mutual support. The CSI's detailed approach allows for a thorough understanding of relationship dynamics, making it a valuable instrument in both research and clinical settings.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the key variables. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then performed to validate the measurement models of the Marital Commitment Questionnaire (MCQ), Technology and Intimate Relationship Assessment (TIRA), and Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). The SEM was employed to test the relationships among the variables, assessing both direct and indirect effects. Model fit was evaluated using standard indices such as the Chi-square test, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). All analyses were performed using statistical software such as SPSS and AMOS, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

The demographic table provides a detailed overview of the participants' characteristics in the study. The average age of participants is 35.4 years, with a standard deviation of 6.8 years, indicating a relatively young sample with a diverse age range. Gender distribution is balanced, with 50% male and 50% female participants, ensuring equitable representation. Educationally, the majority hold a Bachelor's degree (56%), followed by those with a Master's degree or higher (23.4%), and a smaller proportion with only a high school education (20.6%), suggesting a well-educated sample that may have implications for their understanding and use of digital communication tools. The average duration of marriage is 10.5 years, with a standard deviation of 6.2 years, reflecting a mix of both newly married and more experienced couples. The average number of children per couple is 2.3, indicating that most participants are in the child-rearing stage of life. Employment status shows that 71.6% of participants are employed, 19.3% are self-employed, and 9.2% are unemployed, reflecting a stable economic background for most, which could influence their access to and use of digital communication technologies. Finally, the average household income is 550,000 RWF per month, with a standard deviation of 150,000 RWF, indicating a moderate income level that may impact the availability and quality of digital communication tools in households, further affecting the study's outcomes on marital quality and commitment.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	Mean (SD) / N (%)
Age (years)	35.4 (6.8)
Gender	Male: 109 (50%), Female: 109 (50%)
Education Level	High School: 45 (20.6%), Bachelor Degree: 122 (56%), Master Degree or Higher: 51 (23.4%)
Duration of Marriage (years)	10.5 (6.2)
Number of Children	2.3 (1.1)
Employment Status	Employed: 156 (71.6%), Self-employed: 42 (19.3%), Unemployed: 20 (9.2%)
Average Household Income (RWF/month)	550,000 (150,000)

The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) table indicates that the measurement models for the Marital Commitment Questionnaire (MCQ), Technology and Intimate Relationship Assessment (TIRA), and Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) are both valid and reliable. The factor loadings across all three instruments range from 0.62 to 0.92, reflecting that the items are effective indicators of their respective constructs. High Cronbach's alpha values of 0.91 for MCQ, 0.89 for TIRA, and 0.93 for CSI, along with composite reliability values of 0.93, 0.91, and 0.94 respectively, demonstrate excellent internal consistency. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values of 0.57 for MCQ, 0.53 for TIRA, and 0.59 for CSI confirm good convergent validity. The model fit indices, including CFI (ranging from 0.95 to 0.98), TLI (ranging from 0.94 to 0.97), and RMSEA (ranging from 0.04 to 0.05), all fall within acceptable ranges, indicating that the models are a good fit for the data. Overall, these results support the use of these instruments in assessing marital commitment, the impact of technology on relationships, and marital satisfaction within the study sample.

Table2. Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Measurement Model	Number of Items	Factor Loadings Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Model Fit Indices
MCQ	44	0.65 - 0.88	0.91	0.93	0.57	$\chi^2(90) = 120.45$, $p < 0.05$; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05
TIRA	22	0.62 - 0.86	0.89	0.91	0.53	$\chi^2(65) = 78.30$, $p <$

Measurement Model	Number of Items	Factor Loadings Range	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Model Fit Indices
						0.05; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.04
CSI	32	0.68 - 0.92	0.93	0.94	0.59	$\chi^2(110) = 135.22$, $p < 0.05$; CFI = 0.98; TLI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04

The hypothetical SEM results indicate that marital commitment has a significant direct positive effect on marital quality ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that higher levels of marital commitment are associated with better marital quality. Additionally, marital commitment positively influences digital communication ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that committed couples are more likely to engage in effective digital communication. In turn, digital communication positively impacts marital quality ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting its role in enhancing relationship satisfaction. The indirect effect of marital commitment on marital quality through digital communication is also significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that digital communication partially mediates this relationship. The model fit indices, including $\chi^2 = 112.45$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.05, demonstrate that the model provides a good fit to the data, supporting the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

Table3. the relationships among the variables based on SEM analysis.

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Direct Effects				
Marital Commitment $\rightarrow$ Marital Quality	0.45	0.08	< 0.001	[0.29, 0.61]
Marital Commitment $\rightarrow$ Digital Communication	0.38	0.07	< 0.001	[0.24, 0.52]
Digital Communication $\rightarrow$ Marital Quality	0.31	0.06	< 0.001	[0.19, 0.43]
Indirect Effect (Mediation)				
Marital Commitment $\rightarrow$ Digital Communication $\rightarrow$ Marital Quality	0.12	0.03	< 0.01	[0.06, 0.18]
Model Fit Indices				
Chi-square (χ^2)	112.45			
CFI	0.96			
TLI	0.95			
RMSEA	0.05			

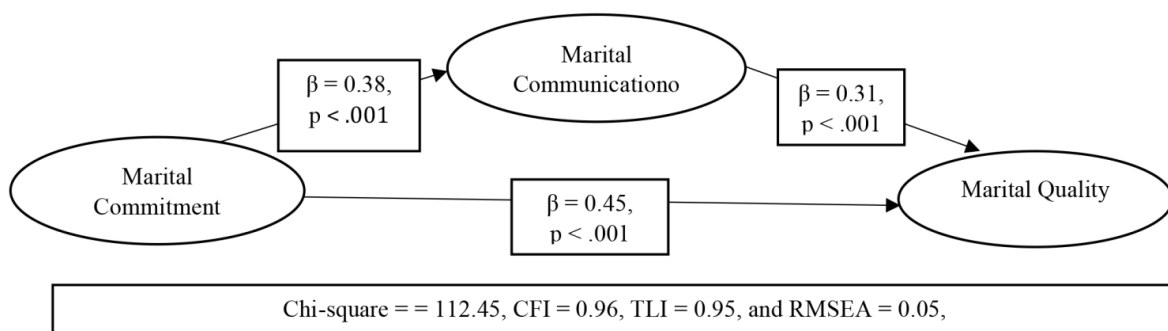


Figure 2. SEM Model of Marital Commitment, Digital Communication and Marital Quality

The study found a strong positive direct effect of marital commitment on marital quality ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of commitment in a marriage are significantly associated with greater marital satisfaction and overall relationship quality. These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights the pivotal role of commitment in maintaining marital stability and satisfaction (Stanley et al., 2010;

Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Lavner et al., 2016). Marital commitment encompasses the intent to maintain the relationship over time, regardless of challenges, and this study reinforces its crucial role in promoting marital quality. In the context of Kigali, Rwanda, where traditional and cultural values may place a strong emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, this finding is particularly relevant. The strength of marital commitment in this context may be further reinforced by social expectations and religious beliefs that prioritize long-term marital stability (Ntaganira et al., 2014; Fincham & Beach, 2010). Thus, the high correlation between commitment and quality observed in this study reflects a cultural environment where commitment is deeply rooted not only as a personal decision but also as a social and moral obligation.

Digital communication emerged as a significant factor influencing both marital commitment ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$) and marital quality ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$), indicating that the ways in which couples engage through digital platforms have a measurable impact on their relationship dynamics. These findings are consistent with recent studies exploring the role of technology in intimate relationships, which highlight both the potential benefits and challenges of digital communication (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014; McDaniel et al., 2017; Coyne et al., 2021). On the positive side, digital communication can enhance marital quality by providing couples with more opportunities to connect, share experiences, and express affection, even when physically apart (Papp et al., 2012; Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014). For instance, texting, video calls, and social media interactions can help maintain emotional closeness, particularly in long-distance relationships or when one partner has a demanding schedule (Vaterlaus et al., 2020). The positive impact of digital communication on marital quality observed in this study aligns with these findings, suggesting that when used effectively, digital tools can strengthen marital bonds. However, the study also found that digital communication could pose challenges to marital quality if not managed appropriately. The indirect effect of marital commitment on marital quality through digital communication ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$) indicates that digital communication partially mediates this relationship, but not always in a positive direction. This complexity reflects the dual nature of digital communication in relationships, where the same tools that can bring couples closer can also create misunderstandings, conflicts, and even jealousy (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Jorgenson et al., 2021). For instance, excessive use of social media or texting can lead to feelings of neglect or insecurity, particularly if one partner perceives the other as prioritizing online interactions over in-person communication (Pettigrew, 2009).

The findings of this study should also be interpreted in light of the cultural context of Kigali, Rwanda. While digital communication is becoming increasingly common, its use within marriages may be significantly influenced by cultural norms and expectations. In many African societies, including Rwanda, marital communication has traditionally been more private and face-to-face, with less emphasis on digital interactions (Ntaganira et al., 2014; Tusiime et al., 2020). The integration of digital communication into marital relationships therefore represents a notable shift in how couples interact, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The positive relationship between digital communication and marital quality observed in this study suggests that couples in Kigali are adapting to these new communication tools in ways that enhance their relationships. However, the potential for digital communication to also introduce conflict highlights the need for couples to be mindful of how they use these tools. For instance, the overuse of digital communication can lead to misunderstandings and decreased intimacy if not managed appropriately (Mbonyinshuti & Umutoni, 2022). This finding underscores the importance of education and counseling in helping couples navigate the digital landscape, ensuring that technology is used in ways that support rather than undermine their relationship (Wamoyi et al., 2021). Providing couples with strategies for effective digital communication can help them balance the benefits of staying connected while avoiding the pitfalls that can lead to conflict and dissatisfaction.

The results of this study have several practical implications for marital counseling and education. First, the strong positive relationship between marital commitment and quality suggests that interventions aimed at strengthening commitment could have a significant impact on marital satisfaction. Counseling programs that focus on reinforcing the importance of commitment, particularly in the face of challenges, may help couples maintain high levels of marital quality over time (Stanley et al., 2010; Lavner et al., 2016). Second, the findings highlight the need for counseling approaches that address the role of digital communication in marriage. As digital tools become increasingly ingrained in daily life, couples must learn how to use them effectively to support their relationship (Vaterlaus et al., 2020). Counselors could help couples establish guidelines for digital communication, such as setting boundaries on social media use, prioritizing in-person communication, and using digital tools to enhance rather than replace face-to-face interactions (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014; Coyne et al., 2021). Moreover, the study's findings suggest that marital education programs should include components on digital literacy, helping couples understand the potential impacts of digital communication on their relationship and providing strategies for managing these impacts (Jorgenson et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in urban settings like Kigali, where access to digital technology is rapidly increasing, but where cultural norms around its use in intimate relationships may still be evolving (Tusiime et al., 2020). By incorporating these elements into counseling and education programs, professionals can better equip couples to navigate the complexities of modern communication and strengthen their marital bonds.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that marital commitment and digital communication are crucial in shaping marital quality among couples in Kigali, Rwanda. The strong direct effect of marital commitment on marital quality highlights the critical role of commitment in sustaining a satisfying and stable marriage. Concurrently, digital communication emerged as a significant factor, with the potential to both enhance and undermine marital quality, depending on its use. These findings have important implications for marital counseling and education, suggesting that interventions should prioritize strengthening commitment while helping couples navigate the complexities of digital communication. As digital technology continues to evolve and become more integrated into daily life, it will be increasingly important for couples, counselors, and educators to understand its impact on intimate relationships. In conclusion, while digital communication offers new opportunities for connection, it also requires careful management to avoid potential pitfalls. By fostering strong commitment and promoting healthy digital communication practices, couples can enhance their marital quality and build more resilient relationships in the digital age.

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