

SOCIAL MEDIA FETISHISATION AND YOUNG MARRIED NETIZENS IN PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS

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Abstract

The rapid growth of social media in Nigeria has significantly reshaped patterns of self-expression, communication, and relationship management, particularly among young married couples. This study examines the phenomenon of social media fetishisation, the excessive idealisation and pursuit of digital validation among young married netizens in Port Harcourt Metropolis. Grounded in Technological Determinism and Uses and Gratifications theories, the study employed a descriptive survey design to investigate how online representations of marital life influence communication, intimacy, and relational satisfaction. A total of 384 respondents were selected across three local government areas using a multi-stage sampling technique, and data were analysed through quantitative and qualitative methods. Findings reveal a high prevalence of social media fetishisation among married netizens, driven by the desire for visibility, admiration, and social approval. The study further established that online validation has become a symbolic measure of marital success, leading to reduced face-to-face communication, privacy erosion, and emotional strain. While social media provides avenues for connection and expression, its fetishisation distorts authentic intimacy and fosters unrealistic expectations. The study concludes that social media fetishisation has become a defining yet problematic aspect of marital identity among young Nigerian netizens. It recommends that couples cultivate digital moderation, while marriage counsellors and policymakers integrate social media literacy into marital guidance programmes to promote healthier relational practices in the digital age.

Keywords: Social media, fetishisation, netizens, marriage, validation.

Introduction

The proliferation of social media platforms has profoundly reshaped the ways in which individuals communicate, construct identities, and navigate relationships in contemporary society. In Nigeria, social media adoption has grown exponentially over the past decade, with platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp becoming integral to everyday life (Adesina&Adegoke, 2021; Okorie&Salawu, 2020). Data from the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC, 2023) indicate that internet penetration and smartphone usage have expanded significantly, particularly among urban youth and young couples. This digital transformation has given rise to a new social culture in which self-expression, validation, and identity formation are increasingly mediated by online spaces.

This phenomenon, often referred to as social media fetishisation, denotes the excessive glorification, idealisation, or obsession with social media activities and representations, often resulting in the prioritisation of online validation over authentic lived experiences (Couldry& van Dijck, 2015; Baudrillard, 1998).

Fetishisation in this context involves treating social media presence, aesthetics, and digital popularity as objects of desire and self-worth. For many young married netizens, particularly in urban Nigerian settings such as Port Harcourt, this manifests in the conscious curation of marital experiences to fit perceived ideals of modern, happy unions (Edegoh&Asemah, 2019). The pressure to maintain a perfect online image can blur the line between reality and performance, influencing how couples communicate, resolve conflicts, and experience intimacy both online and offline (Uduak&Akpan, 2022).

Port Harcourt, as a socio-economically vibrant city in Southern Nigeria, presents a fertile ground for exploring these dynamics. The city's youthful population, exposure to media trends, and increasing social mobility make it a hub of digital culture (Iheanacho, 2021). Young married individuals in Port Harcourt are particularly active online, often using social media to project lifestyle aspirations, participate in social trends, and reinforce social networks. Yet, the fetishisation of online personas among this demographic may have deeper psychological and sociocultural consequences, including marital dissatisfaction, envy, digital infidelity, and reduced privacy (Akanbi&Nwachukwu, 2020).

Scholars have argued that this hyper-engagement with online platforms reflects a broader global culture of digital performativity, where individuals curate idealised selves for networked audiences (Marwick, 2013; Goffman, 1959). Within the Nigerian sociocultural context, however, this digital performance intersects with traditional marital expectations, gender norms, and communal perceptions of respectability (Nwafor&Omenugha, 2021). Understanding how young married netizens in Port Harcourt navigate these tensions provides a

valuable lens through which to explore the interplay between technology, culture, and contemporary marriage.

This study, therefore, investigates the dynamics of social media fetishisation among young married individuals in Port Harcourt. It seeks to understand how online representations influence marital realities, the motivations behind curated digital displays, and the psychological and relational outcomes associated with this emerging digital behaviour.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing penetration of social media in Nigeria has created a new form of social interaction where online visibility and validation are often equated with personal success, happiness, and social prestige (Adesina&Adegoke, 2021; Marwick, 2013). While social media platforms have enhanced communication and connectivity among individuals, they have also introduced complex behavioural patterns that affect interpersonal relationships, particularly among young married couples. In cities like Port Harcourt, where digital engagement is a hallmark of urban youth culture, many young couples now use social media as a space to construct, display, and affirm their marital identities (Edegoh&Asemah, 2019). However, this digital exhibitionism—often driven by the quest for admiration and validation—has given rise to the fetishisation of social media, where online representation takes precedence over the authentic dynamics of marital life.

This situation presents several emerging challenges. First, the relentless pursuit of an idealised online image has led many couples to curate selective portrayals of their relationships, often masking underlying marital struggles or dissatisfaction (Akanbi&Nwachukwu, 2020). The obsession with likes, comments, and followers encourages performative intimacy—where affection, romance, and lifestyle displays are orchestrated primarily for online audiences rather than genuine emotional connection (Abiala, 2019). Such practices create unrealistic marital expectations, social comparison, and unhealthy competition among peers, which can strain marital relationships (Uduak&Akpan, 2022).

Secondly, the fetishisation of social media fosters privacy erosion and digital dependence. Couples increasingly share intimate details of their private lives for public consumption, thereby blurring the boundaries between the private and the public spheres (Couldry& van Dijck, 2015). This exposure not only increases vulnerability to external judgment and interference but also heightens the risk of conflict arising from online interactions such as comments, likes, and perceived infidelity (Chukwu&Ekwueme, 2020). The tendency to seek validation from virtual audiences rather than from one's partner can gradually erode trust.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the phenomenon of social media fetishisation among young married netizens in Port Harcourt, with particular attention to its implications for marital communication, satisfaction, and identity construction. The study aims to explore how social media platforms have become spaces for the performance and validation of marital life, and how such practices shape both digital and offline relational experiences among young couples. The specific objectives are to: a. Investigate the extent to which young married netizens in Port Harcourt engage in social media fetishisation, b. Examine how social media fetishisation influences communication patterns and emotional intimacy among young married netizens. In line with the above objectives, this study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions: a. To what extent do young married netizens in Port Harcourt engage in social media fetishisation? b. How does social media fetishisation influence communication and intimacy among young married couples?

Conceptual Review

Fetishisation is the process of attributing extraordinary or unrealistic value to objects, persons, or ideas (Illouz, 2019). Psychologically, it reflects obsession or idealization that distorts perception and behaviour. The phenomenon of social media fetishisation represents an emerging cultural behaviour shaped by the convergence of technology, identity, and interpersonal relationships in the digital age. It refers to the excessive attachment or idealisation of social media platforms, aesthetics, and online approval as measures of personal or relational worth (Baudrillard, 1998; Marwick, 2013). Within marital contexts, social media fetishisation manifests as a tendency among couples to seek validation through digital performance—curating idealised portrayals of love, happiness, and affluence for public consumption (Edgoh&Asemah, 2019).

Social media fetishisation refers to the obsessive pursuit of online visibility, approval, or symbolic representation at the expense of genuine social connection (Abiala&Kehinde, 2020). It is characterized by the idolization of digital feedback mechanisms such as likes, views, and followers. Social media, in its essence, functions as a participatory space for self-expression, community building, and information exchange (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015). However, its visual and performative nature has increasingly turned it into a stage for impression management, where users consciously craft and regulate the images of themselves and their relationships (Goffman, 1959; Chukwu&Ekwueme, 2020). For young married netizens in Port Harcourt Metropolis, this digital performance aligns with socio-cultural aspirations of success, prestige, and respectability—values that are often reinforced through online visibility and admiration.

The concept of fetishisation, originating from Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions, implies the attribution of exaggerated value to an object or symbol,

often masking the realities behind it (Marx, 1867/1976; Freud, 1927). Applied to social media, this means that digital appearances become “fetishes”—objects of fascination that obscure the complexities of real human experiences. Couples may, therefore, fetishise their online presence by focusing more on how their relationships appear to others than on their authentic emotional connection (Abiala, 2019).

This study conceptualises social media fetishisation as a multidimensional construct encompassing:

1. Excessive dependence on social validation (likes, comments, shares).
2. Idealised self-presentation of marital life.
3. Emotional displacement, where online admiration substitutes for offline affection.
4. Privacy erosion through oversharing of personal details.
5. Relational tension resulting from comparison, envy, or digital infidelity.

Thus, the conceptual framework situates social media fetishisation at the intersection of digital behaviour, marital communication, and cultural expectation; factors that jointly shape the lived experiences of young married netizens in urban Nigeria.

A Netizen is an active participant in online communities and digital culture (Hauben&Hauben, 1997). Netizens engage in creating, sharing, and debating content across platforms. Netizens' behaviour encompasses their patterns of online communication, engagement, and consumption. In urban Nigeria, social comparison, trend participation, and curated self-presentation dominate online culture (Uche&Akpan, 2021).

Young married netizens are digitally active couples who navigate both marital responsibilities and online social life. Their behaviors often blend traditional marital expectations with digital-era performance culture, making them susceptible to social media pressures (Adewale, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Technological Determinism Theory

The study adopted the technological determinism theory. Technological determinism was most notably popularized by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 through his influential book titled "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man." In this work, McLuhan introduced the famous phrase, "*The medium is the message*," emphasizing that the form of a medium—whether television, radio, or later, social media—has a profound effect on how people perceive and interact with the world, often more so than the content itself.

At its core, the theory assumes that technology is the primary driver of social change. This means that instead of society shaping or determining the use of technology, it is the emergence of new technologies that transforms how people live, interact, and organize themselves. This viewpoint challenges the notion of human agency by suggesting that technological innovation is an independent force that imposes itself upon societies, often without their consent or foresight. One of the central premises of technological determinism is that technological development follows its own autonomous path. That is, once a technology is introduced, it evolves largely beyond human control or intention. This assumption portrays technological change as inevitable and linear—progressing on its own terms and compelling society to adapt. As Langdon Winner (1977) and Jacques Ellul (1964) suggest, the societal impact of technologies often surpasses their intended function, reshaping institutions, power dynamics, and even individual identity.

Uses and Gratification Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) posits that individuals actively use media to satisfy specific needs such as entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and information. Applied to this study, it helps explain why young married netizens engage in social media fetishisation. Couples may use social media to gratify needs for validation, belongingness, esteem, and relational affirmation.

However, when these gratifications become excessive or substitute for authentic emotional connection, they contribute to marital dissatisfaction. For instance, seeking constant online approval can result in dependency and anxiety, while negative feedback may cause insecurity or conflict (Uduak & Akpan, 2022). The theory thus provides insight into the psychological motivations behind the fetishisation of social media among young married netizens.

In contrast to earlier media effects theories, such as the Hypodermic Needle Theory, which portrayed media audiences as passive and easily manipulated, the Uses and Gratification Theory marked a significant shift in thinking. Katz and his collaborators introduced a functionalist perspective, emphasizing that audiences are not mere recipients of media messages but active participants in the communication process. They posited that individuals consciously select media content based on personal motivations and the specific gratifications they seek to obtain from media usage.

In Port Harcourt, particularly among the youth married netizens, social media has become a dominant cultural force. Through UGT, this study explores how married netizens engage with fetishized content not merely out of curiosity or boredom, but to meet deeper psychological needs—such as affirming self-worth, projecting aspirational identities, or belonging to a virtual social class. The desire for likes, comments, shares, and followers becomes a form of social currency, reinforcing users' behavior and influencing their digital habits.

Furthermore, the theory helps explain the behavioral outcomes that arise from these engagements. For example, constant exposure to fetishized content lead to emulation, comparison, body dissatisfaction, peer pressure, unhealthy completion, or increased materialistic tendencies—not because users are being manipulated, but because they are actively choosing to engage with content that resonates with their internal motivations and external social environments.

Empirical Review

Several scholars have examined the intersections between social media use, self-presentation, and marital or romantic relationships, although limited studies focus specifically on Port Harcourt.

Edegoh and Asemah (2019) found that Nigerian couples frequently use social media to present idealised marital lives, often masking conflict or dissatisfaction. Their study revealed that online visibility is perceived as a symbol of social success. Similarly, Chukwu and Ekwueme (2020) observed that young Nigerians engage in impression management on Instagram, driven by the desire for validation and social recognition.

Uduak and Akpan (2022) demonstrated that excessive social media engagement among couples correlates negatively with marital satisfaction, particularly when digital approval becomes a substitute for emotional intimacy. Akanbi and Nwachukwu (2020) also reported that social comparison triggered by social media posts often results in envy, insecurity, and relational tension among partners.

Beyond Nigeria, Marwick (2013) discussed digital performativity—the practice of curating ideal identities online—as a defining feature of social media culture globally. Similarly, Abiala (2019) argued that African users have appropriated social media platforms as spaces for performing intimacy and success, though often under the influence of Westernised ideals.

Despite these valuable contributions, few studies have explicitly investigated social media fetishisation as a distinct construct within the context of marriage in Port Harcourt. Existing research tends to address social media use in general rather than the deeper psychological and cultural attachment to digital validation. This study therefore fills an essential gap by exploring how fetishisation manifests among young married netizens in a Nigerian urban environment, its motivations, and its relational implications.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for investigating the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours of a defined population concerning social phenomena. The descriptive approach enables the researcher

to obtain quantitative and qualitative data on the nature, extent, and effects of social media fetishisation among young married netizens in Port Harcourt.

The population of the study comprises young married netizens residing in Port Harcourt metropolis. The estimated population of the metropolitan area of Port Harcourt is about 3,794,000 in 2025. For this study, young married netizens are defined as legally or traditionally married individuals between the ages of 25 to 40 years who actively use at least one social media platform daily (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, or X). This group represents the demographic most engaged in digital performance and online social validation (Edegoh&Asemah, 2019).

The study employed a multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, three local government areas (Port Harcourt City,Obio/Akpor andIkwerre) will be purposively selected for their urban characteristics and concentration of young families.In the second stage a stratified random sampling method will be used to select respondents from various occupational categories (e.g., civil servants, entrepreneurs, private sector workersetc). This approach ensures representation across socio-economic backgrounds.Using the Krejcie and Morgan Table (1970) as a guide, the appropriate sample size for a population of 3,794,000 is 384 respondents. A structured questionnaire was used to elicit responses on key variables of interest. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended items measured on a four-point Likert scale and interviews were analysed thematically.

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender:	Male	179	46.6
	Female	205	53.3
Age Range	25–30 years	118	31
	31–35 years	182	47.3
	36–40 years	84	22
Educational Qualification	B.Sc	191	50
	M.Sc	102	27
	OND/NCE	59	15.3
	Ph.D.	32	8.3
Occupation	Civil Servant	173	45
	Private Sector Employee	100	26

Entrepreneur	88	23
Others	23	6
Primary Social Media Platform Used		
Facebook	130	34
Instagram	92	24
WhatsApp	106	28
TikTok/X	56	15

The table shows that most respondents were females (53.3%), predominantly between the ages of 31–35 years (47.3%). Facebook was the most frequently used social media platform (34%), followed by WhatsApp and Instagram, indicating a preference for visually oriented platforms among young married netizens.

Research Question One:

To what extent do young married netizens in Port Harcourt engage in social media fetishisation?

STATEMENT	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	DS (1)	WMS	DECISION
I regularly post pictures of my spouse and family to gain likes or comments.	168	128	58	30	3.1	Agreed
I feel excited when people admire my marriage online.	212	97	49	26	3.2	Agreed
I feel the need to appear happy and successful on social media.	235	91	37	21	3.4	Agreed
I compare my marriage with what others post online.	187	132	42	23	3.2	Agreed
My partner and I argue about social media activities.	173	131	50	30	3.1	Agreed

The results indicate a high level of social media fetishisation among respondents, as the majority admitted to regularly sharing marital content for digital validation. The overall mean score (3.2) suggests a moderate-to-high degree of social media preoccupation with marital image. This aligns with findings by Edegoh and Asemah (2019) that young Nigerian couples often equate social media admiration with social status and relational success.

Interviewee 1 (Male, 37 years, Accountant):

“Social media fetishisation is like an addiction — you keep posting and checking for reactions. Over time, it consumes you. I’ve seen it distract couples from their goals and even create financial strain.”

Interviewee 2(Female, 33 years, Journalist):

“Social media fetishisation is real. Couples now chase online attention instead of genuine affection. Many posts love quotes online but live in silence and unhappiness at home.”

Interviewee 3 (Female, 27 years, Medical Laboratory Scientist):

“Social media has caused serious issues between partners. Likes, comments, or even following an opposite sex friend can trigger suspicion. I know couples who almost separated because of this.”

Interviewee 4 (Male, 31 years, Photographer):

“Everything looks perfect online until you meet those couples in real life. They barely talk to each other. I prefer a quiet, real connection over staged love for likes.”

Interviewee 5 (Male, 36 years, Business Woman):

“This obsession with social media is almost idolatry. People seek validation from followers instead of from God or their partner. It’s not healthy spiritually or emotionally.”

Research Question Two:

What are the perceived effects of social media fetishisation on marital communication and satisfaction?

STATEMENT	SA	A	D	DS	WMS	DECISION
	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)		
Social media reduces face-to-face communication between spouses.	148	134	68	34	3	Agreed

My partner pays more attention to online interactions than to me.	135	122	69	58	2.8	Agreed
Conflicts often arise over online activities or posts.	171	136	51	26	3.1	Agreed
Social media strengthens my communication with my spouse.	70	99	159	56	2.5	Agreed
My relationship feels pressured to appear perfect online.	201	122	44	17	3.3	Agreed

Findings show that excessive social media use contributes to reduced face-to-face communication and increased marital tension. The pressure to maintain a perfect image online was evident among most respondents. These outcomes support Marwick’s (2013) argument that online performativity can lead to emotional detachment and relational strain.

Interviewee 6 (Female, 29 years, Teacher):

“Honestly, I think social media puts too much pressure on couples. You start comparing your relationship to others, thinking they’re happier or richer. Before you know it, you’re trying to live up to fake standards instead of focusing on real happiness.”

Interviewee 7 (Male, 35 years, Civil Servant):

“Most of those perfect couple posts are scripted. My wife used to compare our marriage to what she saw online, and it caused unnecessary arguments. People forget that social media is filtered reality.”

Interviewee 8 (Female, 28 years, Banker):

“I feel social media has made people forget the value of privacy. Some couples share everything from fights to romantic moments and it cheapens what should be sacred. Not every aspect of marriage should be for public consumption.”

Interviewee 9 (Male, 34 years, Businessman):

“When my wife used to post our pictures frequently, she got DMs from random men. It made me uncomfortable. That’s when we decided to keep our relationship off social media. It reduces distractions and temptations.”

Interviewee 10 (Male, 36 years, Entrepreneur):

“Social Media fetishisation is true, we men belief in showcasing wealth and our beautiful wives online but women family pictures everywhere, they show off a lot.”

Key findings of the study are summarised as follows:

1. High prevalence of social media fetishisation: A majority of respondents acknowledged that they frequently post and monitor their marital lives online to gain validation, admiration, or social recognition. This reflects a deep emotional investment in online image management.
2. Online Validation and Perceived Self-Worth: Most participants indicated that likes, comments, and followers contribute to their sense of happiness or marital success, confirming that online approval has become a symbolic measure of relational worth. Excessive online activity was found to reduce face-to-face interaction and increase emotional distance between spouses. Many respondents reported that digital distractions and online comparisons negatively affected trust and empathy in their relationships. Although there are gender based variation in social media fetishisation among couples. While husbands showcase wealth and strength, wives parade curated family photos and beauty on social media.

Conclusion

The study concludes that social media fetishisation the excessive idealisation and performance of marriage online has become a defining feature of urban marital culture among young netizens in Port Harcourt and its environs. While social media serves as a channel for expression and connectivity, it simultaneously fosters comparison, anxiety, and relational tension when digital validation replaces genuine intimacy.

Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), and Technological Determinism Theory (Marshall M. 1964), the study affirms that couples use social media to project desirable identities and fulfil emotional needs for approval and belonging. However, when such engagement becomes obsessive, it distorts authentic communication and diminishes marital satisfaction.

The study therefore concludes that social media fetishisation, while reflecting a modern quest for visibility and validation, poses a subtle but significant threat to emotional health and relational stability among young married netizens in Nigeria's digital society.

Recommendations

Young married netizens should exercise moderation and intentionality in their social media usage. However, the religious institutions in Nigeria should in their marriage counseling sessions integrate discussions on social media use, helping couples recognise how online behaviours influence emotional and relational wellbeing.

Policy Makers and Digital Literacy Advocates should educate young single/married netizens on healthy digital habits, privacy management, and emphasise the importance of communication intimacy in marriage.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to scholarship in several key areas:

1. It provides empirical evidence on how social media fetishisation manifests in the marital lives of young Nigerians, especially in Port Harcourt's urban context.
2. It extends self-presentation and social comparison theories into African digital culture, highlighting cultural specificities of online behaviour.
3. It introduces the concept of digital performative marriage, a new dimension of marital representation driven by validation and visibility in the social media era.

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