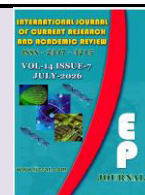




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Digital Uses and Marital Dynamics: Whatsapp as a Vector for Weakening Marital Vitality and Obscuring Marital Secrets

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Abstract

This article analyzes the impact of digital technologies—particularly the instant messaging service WhatsApp—on the vitality of marital bonds and the preservation of marital secrets in sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on Benin. Starting from a fundamental tension between the ideal of marital intimacy promoted by African social norms and the reality of widespread hyperconnectivity, the study employs the Uses and Gratifications theory (Katz *et al.*, 1974) and the theory of managing communicational boundaries (Petronio, 2002) as interpretive frameworks. Methodologically, the research relies on a systematic analysis of secondary data from national surveys, African studies, and international reports. The results reveal that the intensive use of WhatsApp leads to a reconfiguration of intimacy spaces, fosters the emergence of digital infidelity, and weakens traditional mechanisms of marital regulation. These findings call for digital education policies that incorporate a marital and family dimension.

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Introduction

Since antiquity, philosophers, theologians, and jurists have agreed that marital union is one of the most fundamental pillars of the social order. Aristotle saw the couple as the first link in the chain of the city; African philosophies, through the lens of Ubuntu, "I am because we are," have elevated married life to the status of the ontological foundation of the human community (Tempels, 1945; Mbiti, 1969). From this perspective, married life was organized according to a principle of the integrity of the intimate space: what is woven between

two spouses belongs to a protected sphere, inaccessible to outside eyes, and whose preservation conditions the continuity of the bond. African traditions, and those of Benin in particular, have for centuries developed normative and ritual frameworks designed to define this marital space. The practice of palaver, family mediation structures, and communication taboos all served as safeguards against the intrusion of the outside world into the marital sphere (Adjahouinou, 2014; Gbénou, 2018). The notion of marital secrecy—what could be called in the Fon language "wémaxomè," or the inner space of the home—held an almost sacred value.

This foundational paradigm is now subject to unprecedented pressure: the digital revolution, and more specifically, the widespread adoption of smartphones coupled with the meteoric rise of instant messaging applications. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2023), the world had 5.4 billion internet users as of December 31, 2022, representing 67% of the global population. WhatsApp, owned by the Meta Group, claims more than two billion monthly active users in over 180 countries (Statista, 2024).

In Europe, studies have highlighted the ambivalent effects of instant messaging on the quality of couple relationships: while it facilitates long-distance communication, it also fosters digital micro-betrayals that gradually erode marital trust (Cravens *et al.*, 2013; Drouin *et al.*, 2017). In the United Kingdom, a survey by the organization Relate (2019) indicated that 27% of marital breakups were preceded by the discovery of inappropriate exchanges on messaging applications.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the phenomenon is particularly acute due to the convergence of two contradictory dynamics: on the one hand, the rapid and widespread penetration of mobile technologies in societies where traditional family structures remain prevalent; on the other hand, the weakening of spaces for social mediation linked to urban modernization (Castells, 2010; Cheneau-Loquay, 2012). The GSMA report (2023) estimated that sub-Saharan Africa had 615 million unique mobile subscribers, with a penetration rate of 46%, representing an annual growth rate of 4.6%.

In Benin, the situation presents specific characteristics that make it a particularly relevant case study. According to the report by the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Communications and Postal Services of Benin (ARCEP, 2023), the mobile phone penetration rate reached 89.3% in 2022, with WhatsApp being the predominant communication channel. The national survey on household living conditions carried out by the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (INStAD, 2022) also reveals a 34% increase in the number of divorces recorded between 2015 and 2021, a trend that several social actors associate, at least partially, with the increase in numerical conflicts within couples.

Kpatchavi's (2019) research with 320 couples in Cotonou, Parakou, and Bohicon documented that 62% of respondents reported marital tensions related to mobile phone use, with WhatsApp cited in 78% of these cases.

These tensions manifested themselves in behaviors such as monitoring a spouse's phone, arguments related to hidden conversations, and breaches of trust following the discovery of intimate communications with third parties.

These converging observations lead to the following central research question: To what extent does WhatsApp use contribute to the weakening of marital vitality and the obscuring of marital secrets within Beninese households?

Three main hypotheses structure our investigative approach:

H1: The intensity of WhatsApp use is positively correlated with the frequency of marital conflict in Benin, due to the concealment and surveillance behaviors it engenders.

H2: WhatsApp constitutes a primary vector of emotional and sexual infidelity in Beninese couples, weakening the dynamics of trust and marital reciprocity.

H3: The use of WhatsApp leads to a redrawing of the boundaries of marital intimacy, by facilitating the intrusion of third parties into the marital sphere and exposing the couple's secrets to uncontrolled communication spaces.

The overall objective of this study is to analyze the effects of WhatsApp use on the quality and stability of marital unions in Benin. More specifically, it aims to: (1) identify the patterns of WhatsApp use likely to affect marital life; (2) to examine the mechanisms by which this application reconfigures the boundaries of marital intimacy; (3) to propose recommendations for institutional and associative actors involved in family life education.

Theoretical Analysis Model

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Initially developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and later formalized by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory is one of the most influential paradigms in media communication. In contrast to functionalist approaches that viewed media as entities with direct and uniform effects on passive recipients, U&G posits that individuals make active and intentional use of media based on specific needs they seek to satisfy (Rubin, 2009).

Within the context of our research question, this theory allows us to analyze the motivations that drive individuals in marital relationships to use WhatsApp: the need for social belonging, the search for emotional stimulation outside the couple, managing marital boredom, the desire to maintain parallel social networks, or even the quest for a form of communicative invisibility (Leung, 2013).

Sundar and Limperos (2013) adapted the U&G framework to mobile digital environments by identifying four specific types of gratification: agency gratification (sense of control), responsiveness gratification (immediate feedback), navigation gratification (exploration of content), and social gratification (maintaining connections).

These four dimensions prove particularly relevant for understanding the appeal of WhatsApp for individuals in marital relationships.

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory

Developed by Sandra Petronio (2002) in her seminal work **Boundaries of Privacy: Dialectics of Disclosure**, Communication Privacy Management (CPM) provides a valuable conceptual framework for analyzing how individuals and couples manage access to their private information.

CPM rests on five fundamental postulates: (1) privacy is a resource that individuals believe they own and control; (2) individuals manage this resource through "privacy boundaries"; (3) when private information is shared, it crosses these boundaries and creates co-owners; (4) rules regulate the management of these boundaries; and (5) turbulence can occur when these rules are incompatible or violated (Petronio, 2002, p. 35).

Applied to the issue of digital use within couples, the CPM (Communication and Relationship Model) allows us to conceptualize how WhatsApp reshapes the boundaries of marital intimacy.

By making normally private communications accessible, by fostering the emergence of boundaries co-managed with third parties (friends, ex-partners, extramarital affairs), and by creating turbulence when the implicit rules of the couple are transgressed, WhatsApp constitutes a powerful disruptor of marital communication balances (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006).

Articulation of the two theories: an integrative model

The originality of our analytical approach lies in the articulation of U&G (United and Gestural) and CPM theories into an integrative model. While U&G sheds light on the individual motivations that lead to potentially destabilizing uses of WhatsApp, CPM allows us to analyze the consequences of these uses on the architecture of marital intimacy boundaries. Together, these two theories account for the dialectical tension between individual needs for communicative gratification and the collective demands for preserving marital space.

This integrative model can be represented by the following heuristic equation: the intensity of digital usage (independent variable), regulated by U&G motivations, acts on the configuration of CPM intimacy boundaries (intermediate variable), producing measurable effects on marital quality and stability (dependent variable). These effects are conditioned by moderating variables such as education level, gender, urban/rural environment, and duration of the union.

Methodological Approach

Epistemological Positioning

Our approach is rooted in a moderate constructivist epistemological position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which acknowledges the social reality of the phenomena studied while recognizing that their understanding is necessarily mediated by the actors' representations and the researcher's paradigms. This stance leads us to favour a hypothetico-deductive approach: the hypotheses formulated in the research problem guide the analysis of available secondary data, without excluding the possibility of unexpected analytical insights.

Method for Collecting and Using Secondary Data

Given the state of the literature and the constraints of accessing primary fieldwork, this study relies on the systematic use of secondary data. In accordance with the recommendations of Heaton (2008) and Vartanian (2011) on secondary analysis methods in the social sciences, our documentary corpus was compiled according to three selection criteria: (1) thematic relevance (studies focusing on digital practices, marital dynamics, or their intersections); (2) Contextual validity (studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular focus on West Africa and Benin); (3)

Methodological rigor (studies published in peer-reviewed journals or originating from recognized national and international statistical institutions).

The final corpus comprises 47 references, including scientific journal articles (n = 24), institutional reports (n = 11), academic books (n = 8), and presentations at specialized conferences (n = 4). These sources were collected via the Google Scholar, JSTOR, Cairn.info, and African Journals Online (AJOL) databases, as well as the document portals of INSAE (Benin), the ITU, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Analysis Strategy

The analysis of secondary data was carried out in three stages. First, a thematic literature review (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified the major recurring themes in the literature on the effects of WhatsApp on marital life. Second, a critical analysis of the available statistical data was conducted to assess observable quantitative trends in digital penetration, marital conflict, and changes in family structures. Third, comparing the empirical data with our two reference theories (U&G and CPM) allowed us to develop a structured and theoretically informed interpretation of the observed phenomena.

Methodological Limitations

It is important to point out the inherent limitations of this approach. The exclusive use of secondary data does not allow access to the full complexity of the lived experiences of Beninese couples. Furthermore, the disparity in methodological protocols between the different studies used may limit the comparability of the results.

These limitations argue for the subsequent conduct of a primary field study, combining semi-structured interviews and questionnaires administered to a representative sample of Beninese couples.

Results and Discussion: Analysis of Secondary Data

Digital Penetration and WhatsApp Use in the Context of Marriage in Benin

The available statistical data paints a worrying picture of digital penetration in Beninese marriages. According to the ARCEP report (2023), 73.4% of Beninese adults with a smartphone report using WhatsApp daily, with 68% using it during the hours they are at home. This data is

highly significant: it indicates that the home—traditionally the sanctuary of marital intimacy—is now constantly permeated by digital communications directed toward external social spaces.

A survey conducted by the Beninese NGO AFJB ([Association of Women Lawyers of Benin, 2021](#)) among 450 women experiencing marital conflict in Cotonou revealed that in 54% of cases, marital disputes were linked to mobile phone use, and that WhatsApp was involved in 83% of these conflicts. These figures are consistent with the results obtained by [Hertlein and Stevenson \(2010\)](#) in their meta-analysis of 21 studies on cyberinfidelity, which established that instant messaging applications were the most frequently cited vector in cases of digital infidelity.

WhatsApp as a Vector of Emotional Infidelity and the Dissolution of Intimacy Boundaries

The available scientific literature identifies several mechanisms by which WhatsApp undermines marital stability. The first, and undoubtedly the most documented, is that of digital emotional infidelity. [Scheeren, de Montigny, and Féres-Carneiro \(2018\)](#) define this phenomenon as the establishment, via digital applications, of an emotionally invested relationship with someone outside the couple, without this relationship necessarily having a physical or sexual dimension.

The work of [Wysocki and Childers \(2011\)](#), conducted with 1,117 American respondents, had already established that 82% of people who had an extramarital affair had initially made contact via an instant messaging application. While this data comes from a North American context, its transposition to the African context is carried out by [Onuoha and Ugwu \(2020\)](#), who, in their study of 380 Nigerian couples using WhatsApp, document similar mechanisms: 67% of the men and 43% of the women interviewed admitted to maintaining romantic contact with third parties via WhatsApp without informing their spouse.

Through the lens of marital privacy ([Petronio, 2002](#)), these behaviors can be analyzed as violations of the rules governing the boundaries of marital confidentiality. When an individual shares information, emotions, or experiences with a third party that, according to the couple's implicit rules, should have remained confined to the marital sphere, they generate what Petronio calls "boundary turbulence," which can profoundly shake the trust and integrity of the marital bond.

The "Secret Phone" Phenomenon and Mutual Surveillance

A particularly salient phenomenon in African literature is what Kpatchavi (2019) calls the "secret phone": the practice, widespread among Beninese and West African men in general, of possessing a second phone—or maintaining a secondary WhatsApp account—to conduct extramarital communications away from the spouse's gaze. This practice, which constitutes an extreme form of concealing marital secrets in the sense of our research question, has been documented in several African contexts.

In Ghana, Boateng (2020) showed that 38% of married men in urban areas reported using a messaging application on a secondary phone or account to maintain extramarital relationships. In Senegal, Ndiaye's (2021) work highlights the emergence of a "culture of digital secrecy" among urban couples, characterized by systematic practices of concealing chat histories, biometric locking of phones, and automatic deletion of messages.

In response to these practices of concealment, many spouses develop digital surveillance strategies, which Duguay *et al.*, (2018) conceptualize as "intimate surveillance." This surveillance can take forms ranging from simply checking notifications on a partner's phone screen to installing spyware, attempting to unlock the phone, or access online accounts. Far from resolving marital tensions, these surveillance practices tend to amplify them by creating a climate of widespread mistrust, incompatible with the trust that constitutes a healthy marital bond (Duguay *et al.*, 2018; Tokunaga, 2011).

Family WhatsApp Groups and the Dilution of Marital Intimacy

Beyond individual use, family WhatsApp groups constitute an additional factor in the redrawing of marital boundaries. These groups, which often include the entire extended family (parents, siblings, cousins, in-laws), constitute digital spaces for the collective surveillance of couples in African societies (Adjahouinou, 2014). Bonhomme's (2012) work on the transformations of privacy in West Africa anticipated this dynamic, demonstrating how new communication technologies paradoxically reinforce traditional mechanisms of social control over marital life, while simultaneously shifting them to less formalized digital spaces.

The INSTAD survey (2022) reveals that 84% of Beninese households with a smartphone participate in at least one family WhatsApp group, and that 43% of the women surveyed felt that these groups constituted an obstacle to preserving marital intimacy. This perception relates to the concept of forced co-ownership of marital privacy: when information about a couple is (sometimes accidentally) disseminated within a family group, the boundaries of marital confidentiality are irreparably violated, generating turmoil that can have lasting effects on the quality of the marital bond.

Differentiated Effects According to Gender, Background, and Education Level

The available data allow us to identify differentiated effects according to several sociodemographic variables. Regarding gender, the literature documents a significant asymmetry: women are more frequently victims of the negative effects of their partner's digital practices, while men are more often the instigators of concealment behaviours (Onuoha & Ugwu, 2020; AFJB, 2021). This asymmetry reflects pre-existing gender relations in patriarchal African societies, which digital technologies do not neutralize but rather tend to amplify or shift.

Place of residence is also an important moderating variable. Kpatchavi's (2019) study shows that marital conflicts related to WhatsApp are significantly more frequent in urban areas than in rural areas. This can be explained by higher digital penetration, but also by a more pronounced weakening of traditional marital mediation structures in urban contexts. Finally, educational level appears to play an ambivalent role: while it is correlated with more intensive WhatsApp use, it is also associated with a greater ability to negotiate rules of use within the couple (Ndiaye, 2021).

Critical Discussion of Results

Partial Confirmation of Hypotheses

Analysis of the available secondary data allows us to partially confirm the three hypotheses formulated in the research question. Hypothesis H1, concerning the correlation between WhatsApp usage intensity and the frequency of marital conflicts, is supported by data from AFJB (2021) and Kpatchavi (2019), which document a statistically significant association between these two variables in the Beninese context. However, this correlation does not necessarily imply a direct causal relationship: confounding variables such as prior marital

satisfaction, household socioeconomic status, or the spouses' personality traits could mediate this relationship.

Hypothesis H2, concerning the role of WhatsApp as a vector of infidelity, enjoys substantial empirical support in African and international literature (Onuoha & Ugwu, 2020; Wysocki & Childers, 2011; Boateng, 2020). Available data confirm that WhatsApp is the most frequently used application in situations of emotional and sexual infidelity, regardless of the geographical context studied.

Hypothesis H3, relating to the reshaping of the boundaries of marital intimacy, is also confirmed by research on family WhatsApp groups (Adjahouinou, 2014; INSAE, 2022) and on intimate surveillance practices (Duguay *et al.*, 2018). Petronio's (2002) concept of "boundary turbulence" offers a particularly fruitful conceptual tool for understanding the mechanisms at play.

Towards a Dialectical Reading of the Effects of WhatsApp

It would be reductive, however, to consider only a unilaterally negative interpretation of the effects of WhatsApp on married life. Several studies highlight the potentially positive effects of this application on certain dimensions of the couple's relationship. Coyne *et al.*, (2011) showed that the use of instant messaging technologies could strengthen the feeling of closeness between geographically separated partners—a dimension particularly relevant in the context of internal African migration. Similarly, Luo (2014) documented the positive effects of digital exchanges on marital satisfaction in couples who used these technologies to maintain regular emotional communication.

This dialectical reading leads us to qualify our initial statement: WhatsApp is not inherently destabilizing to marital bonds. It is the way it is used, determined by the individuals' U&G motivations and the CPM boundary management rules in place within the couple, that produces positive or negative effects on the quality of the relationship. This conclusion argues for an educational and preventative approach focused on education for responsible digital uses in the marital context, rather than on demonizing technology itself.

In conclusion, This study, through a systematic analysis of available secondary data and a theoretical inquiry combining the paradigms of Uses and Gratifications and

the management of communication boundaries, has demonstrated that WhatsApp is indeed a significant factor in weakening marital vitality and obscuring marital secrets in Benin and, more broadly, in sub-Saharan Africa.

These effects manifest themselves through several interdependent mechanisms: the development of emotional and digital infidelity practices, the emergence of behaviors of concealment and mutual surveillance, the reshaping of the boundaries of marital intimacy under the influence of WhatsApp family groups, and the crystallization of pre-existing gender tensions in new digital communication spaces.

Faced with these challenges, an effective response cannot be limited to a technophobic critique of instant messaging, but must be rooted in an educational and preventative vision that recognizes the centrality of digital technology in contemporary African societies while promoting responsible, ethical uses that respect marital intimacy. In this sense, the convergence of scientific research, public policy, and the mobilization of traditional social actors constitute the most promising path to supporting Beninese couples in navigating the challenges that the digital revolution poses to the sustainability of their marriages.

The results of this study open up numerous avenues for future research, including comparative analysis of the effects of different digital applications on marital dynamics, the study of differentiated effects according to generation or type of union, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of digital marital education programs already underway in some African countries. These future investigations will contribute to gradually building a solid empirical corpus, essential for the rigorous understanding of a phenomenon whose human, social and family implications are of considerable importance.

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