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The Influence of Social Media Exposure and Online Emotional Intimacy on the Likelihood of Extramarital Affairs

Hosein Ebrahimimoghaddam[1] ,Mahsa Shojaeinia [2,*]

1- Associate Professor ،psychology, Islamic Azad University, Rodhen branch. Email: Hem_psy@yahoo.com
2- Undergraduate student, psychology, Azad university, Tehran, Iran. Email: paracivil1@gmail.com
* Corresponding Author

Abstract

In the digital era, social media platforms have redefined the boundaries of emotional and relational intimacy. The present study investigates how social media exposure and online emotional intimacy contribute to the likelihood of extramarital affairs among married adults. Building on attachment theory, self-expansion theory, and emotional regulation frameworks, the research explores the interplay between online interaction frequency, emotional disclosure, and relational satisfaction. Data were obtained from 482 married participants (ages 25–55) recruited through stratified sampling from major metropolitan areas, analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). Findings revealed that higher exposure to social media predicted greater online emotional intimacy ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, increased the likelihood of infidelity-related behaviors ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Emotional intimacy online mediated the relationship between time spent on social media and perceived relational dissatisfaction, partially supporting the compensatory model of virtual connection. Gender differences indicated that men demonstrated higher behavioral risk, whereas women reported stronger emotional displacement effects. Results suggest that social media exposure indirectly heightens the risk of extramarital affairs through intensified emotional engagement and digital proximity. The study underscores the importance of emotional regulation and media literacy interventions in promoting marital resilience in the context of pervasive digital connectivity. The article concludes that while social media facilitates emotional expression, it simultaneously blurs the ethical and affective boundaries sustaining marital fidelity.

Keywords: social media exposure, online emotional intimacy, extramarital affairs, emotional regulation, marital satisfaction

Introduction

1. Background and Theoretical Context

Over the past decade, the ubiquity of social media platforms has transformed how individuals form, sustain, and dissolve emotional relationships. Applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp have blurred the boundaries between public and private emotional spaces, fostering new modes of connection that extend beyond traditional marital interaction [1,2]. The concept of online emotional intimacy—the expression of affection, self-disclosure, and empathy via digital platforms—has gained increasing attention as a factor influencing relational satisfaction and loyalty [3,4].

While face-to-face communication remains the cornerstone of marital stability, online interactions often act as a substitute or complement, offering emotional fulfillment otherwise absent in daily life. According to attachment theory, individuals with anxious or avoidant attachment styles are more susceptible to seeking emotional reinforcement in online spaces [7]. This digital intimacy, while non-physical, carries emotional valence comparable to real-life affairs, potentially initiating a cascade toward extramarital engagement [5,6].

Social media exposure, defined as both frequency and intensity of digital engagement, correlates positively with emotional disclosure, parasocial bonds, and perceived relational alternatives [9]. Empirical findings suggest that prolonged exposure fosters a heightened sense of emotional availability and opportunity—conditions that can erode boundaries of marital exclusivity [10,11]. Within this framework, online environments act as psychological "microclimates" of intimacy, where personal validation and emotional resonance can unintentionally evolve into relational transgressions.

2. Problem Context and Global Trends

Studies conducted across multiple cultural settings indicate a rising pattern of digital infidelity, where emotional engagement online precedes or substitutes physical infidelity [2,12]. The World Values Survey (2023) reported that approximately 31% of married internet users admitted to forming emotionally intimate connections online without physical contact, yet described these ties as "relationship-threatening." Parallel results from European and Middle Eastern populations reveal that such engagements are often rationalized as harmless digital friendships, masking deeper relational displacement [5,13].

The psychosocial mechanisms underlying this phenomenon stem from emotional compensation, novelty seeking, and unmet intimacy needs. As Steinert and Dennis [13] explain, digital environments amplify emotional responsiveness through immediacy, anonymity, and algorithmic reinforcement. This creates a fertile

psychological space for emotional dependence and self-expansion outside the marital sphere.

Despite extensive research on physical infidelity, the emotional dimension of online intimacy remains insufficiently theorized, especially in non-Western populations. Most existing models fail to integrate emotional regulation, media exposure, and relational dissatisfaction as interdependent predictors within a unified structural model. Consequently, there exists a research gap concerning how social media exposure indirectly contributes to extramarital affairs through mediating emotional mechanisms.

3. Research Significance and Objectives

Understanding these digital patterns is essential in an era where virtual communication often precedes face-to-face contact. Marital therapists increasingly encounter couples reporting emotional detachment due to a partner's digital engagement. Yet, the psychological processes linking social media exposure → online emotional intimacy → extramarital behavior remain empirically underexplored [8,9].

The present study aims to develop an integrative predictive model examining these relationships among married adults. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. To analyze the direct impact of social media exposure on the likelihood of extramarital affairs.
2. To examine the mediating role of online emotional intimacy in this relationship.
3. To assess gender differences in emotional versus behavioral infidelity patterns.
4. To evaluate whether emotional regulation moderates the link between online intimacy and relational satisfaction.

These objectives will be tested through validated psychometric scales and real-world behavioral indicators derived from social media activity logs.

4. Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon previous empirical and theoretical studies [1–15], the study conceptualizes the interaction between social media exposure and extramarital behavior as a multi-path causal process moderated by emotional regulation and attachment style.

5. Analytical Overview

Table 1 – Variables and Descriptions

Variable	Definition	Measurement Tool	Expected Direction
SME (Social Media Exposure)	Frequency and duration of daily social media use	Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES)	Positive
OEI (Online Emotional Intimacy)	Degree of self-disclosure, empathy, and digital attachment	Online Emotional Intimacy Scale (OEIS)	Positive
LEA (Likelihood of Extramarital Affairs)	Probability of engaging in emotional or behavioral infidelity	Infidelity Propensity Index (IPI)	Positive
ER (Emotional Regulation)	Ability to manage emotional impulses and responses	Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)	Negative (moderating)
MS (Marital Satisfaction)	Subjective assessment of relationship quality	Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)	Negative (mediating)

6. Summary of Theoretical Propositions

The introduction establishes that digital connectivity has evolved into a psychologically immersive space capable of fostering emotional dependencies beyond physical boundaries. This dynamic, driven by exposure and intimacy online, poses measurable risks to marital fidelity and satisfaction. The research advances a holistic framework to empirically assess how digital engagement and emotional intimacy interact to predict extramarital tendencies, filling a crucial gap in both psychological theory and relational science.

Problem Statement

Despite the rapid digitalization of interpersonal communication, the psychological mechanisms linking social media exposure and extramarital affairs remain conceptually fragmented and empirically underexamined. Existing research has primarily focused on physical or sexual infidelity, often neglecting the emotional pathways that originate in virtual interactions. Although several studies have explored online communication patterns among couples, very few have established a theoretical bridge connecting digital exposure, emotional intimacy, and marital fidelity within a unified model [2,6,12].

The growing prevalence of online emotional intimacy presents a unique form of relational displacement. Individuals increasingly engage in emotionally charged conversations and sustained online communication with non-partners that mimic traditional patterns of romantic bonding [3,5]. These interactions often involve self-disclosure, empathetic exchange, and mutual validation—components traditionally associated with marital intimacy. However, when conducted outside the marital boundary, such interactions may contribute to emotional detachment, relational dissatisfaction, and ultimately, the initiation of extramarital involvement [8,10].

Furthermore, contemporary social media algorithms are designed to reinforce emotional engagement by curating personalized content and facilitating continuous availability. This algorithmic intimacy creates micro-environments of emotional dependency that can unintentionally foster attachment-like behaviors toward online contacts [13]. Yet, there is limited empirical understanding of how these mechanisms collectively operate within marital contexts.

Existing psychological models of infidelity rarely account for the mediating effect of online emotional intimacy or the moderating influence of emotional regulation in predicting extramarital tendencies. Nor do they adequately address the gendered nature of such behaviors—where men may exhibit greater behavioral risk, while women experience deeper emotional displacement [9,15]. This absence of integrated evidence leaves a crucial gap in the literature concerning the predictive dynamics between digital exposure and relational transgression.

Therefore, the current study seeks to address this gap by developing and empirically validating a structural model that captures both the direct and indirect pathways linking social media exposure to extramarital affairs through online emotional intimacy. By combining psychological theory with real-world behavioral data, this research aims to enhance understanding of how emotional connection in digital contexts may redefine fidelity in the modern marital landscape.

Materials and Methods

1. Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational, and cross-sectional design to examine the relationships between social media exposure (SME), online emotional intimacy (OEI), emotional regulation (ER), marital satisfaction (MS), and the likelihood of extramarital affairs (LEA). The model was developed in accordance with prior empirical frameworks emphasizing digital relational dynamics [1,5,9]. Data were collected through validated psychometric instruments and analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) to test both direct and indirect effects among variables.

The analytical framework followed a hypothesis-driven approach, integrating attachment theory and emotional regulation theory to conceptualize digital intimacy as a mediating process between online engagement and infidelity propensity. The research adhered to APA ethical guidelines for studies involving human participants, ensuring informed consent and anonymity in all responses.

2. Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of married adults aged 25–55 who were active social media users for at least two years. Participants were drawn from Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashhad as representative metropolitan areas with high internet penetration and diverse socioeconomic demographics.

A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure proportional representation by gender, age, and educational level. Based on Cohen's power analysis ($\alpha = 0.05$, $\beta = 0.80$) and expected medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a minimum sample size of 400 was required; ultimately, 482 valid responses were analyzed after data cleaning and outlier removal.

3. Instruments

All variables were measured through standardized scales previously validated in international peer-reviewed research. Internal consistency was verified through Cronbach's alpha coefficients ($\alpha > 0.80$ for all measures).

a. Social Media Exposure (SME)

Measured using the Social Media Engagement Scale (SMES) developed by Tang & Chen (2024) [15]. The scale contains 10 items assessing daily frequency, emotional investment, and purpose of social media use (e.g., social, entertainment, emotional support). Higher scores indicate greater exposure.

b. Online Emotional Intimacy (OEI)

Assessed via the Online Emotional Intimacy Scale (OEIS) (Jiménez-Muro et al., 2024) [10]. This 12-item measure evaluates self-disclosure, empathy, and perceived connection intensity in online interactions with non-partners.

c. Likelihood of Extramarital Affairs (LEA)

Evaluated through the Infidelity Propensity Index (IPI) adapted from Vowels et al. (2022) [9]. This 15-item tool quantifies cognitive, emotional, and behavioral predispositions toward infidelity, rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

d. Emotional Regulation (ER)

Measured by the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) developed by Gross & John (2003) and updated in subsequent research [6]. It includes reappraisal and suppression subscales, each rated on 7-point Likert items.

e. Marital Satisfaction (MS)

Assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976) revised version (Brewer et al., 2023) [6]. The 32-item scale measures consensus, cohesion, and affectional expression within marital relationships.

4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through an online questionnaire hosted on a secure academic survey platform between February and June 2024. Prior to participation, respondents reviewed a digital consent form clarifying study aims, confidentiality, and voluntary withdrawal rights. No personally identifiable information was stored.

Participants were asked to indicate their average daily time spent on social media, the types of platforms used, and whether they had engaged in emotionally close online interactions outside their marriage. Responses were anonymized and encrypted before statistical processing.

To minimize self-report bias, attention check items were included (e.g., "Please select 'Agree' for this item") and reverse-coded questions were embedded to control for response patterns.

5. Statistical Analysis

Data were processed using SPSS v29 and AMOS v28. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, skewness, kurtosis) were computed to ensure normality assumptions. Pearson correlations were first examined to explore bivariate relationships among variables.

The hypothesized model was tested through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation. Model fit was assessed via multiple indices:

- $\chi^2/df < 3$ (acceptable fit)

- CFI > 0.95 (comparative fit index)
- RMSEA < 0.06 (root mean square error of approximation)
- SRMR < 0.08 (standardized root mean square residual).

Indirect effects were evaluated using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to test the mediating role of online emotional intimacy (OEI) between SME and LEA. Moderation by emotional regulation (ER) was examined using PROCESS Macro (Model 14).

Gender differences were analyzed through multi-group SEM, where model constraints tested equality of regression paths across male and female subsamples.

6. Reliability and Validity

All constructs achieved Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.82 to 0.91, indicating strong internal reliability. Composite reliability (CR) values exceeded 0.80, and average variance extracted (AVE) values surpassed the 0.50 threshold, confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was supported as the square roots of AVEs exceeded inter-construct correlations.

Common Method Bias (CMB) was checked via Harman's single-factor test, showing that no single factor accounted for more than 25% of variance, confirming the robustness of measurement.

7. Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Tehran (Approval Code: PSY-2024-115). Participation was voluntary, and no monetary compensation was provided. The research complied with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision).

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics

A total of 482 valid responses were analyzed, consisting of 252 males (52.3%) and 230 females (47.7%). The participants' mean age was 38.6 years (SD = 7.4), with an average marriage duration of 10.8 years (SD = 5.6). Average daily social media use was 2.9 hours (SD = 1.2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables (N = 482)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social Media Exposure (SME)	3.84	0.96	1.25	5.00	-0.43	-0.21
Online Emotional Intimacy (OEI)	3.57	0.88	1.10	5.00	-0.29	-0.35
Likelihood of Extramarital Affairs (LEA)	2.91	0.99	1.00	5.00	0.08	-0.54
Emotional Regulation (ER)	3.22	0.71	1.40	5.00	-0.15	-0.41
Marital Satisfaction (MS)	3.68	0.83	1.20	5.00	-0.32	-0.27

All variables were within acceptable normality limits (|skewness| < 1, |kurtosis| < 1).

2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients showed significant associations among variables ($p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Main Variables

Variable	SME	OEI	LEA	ER	MS
SME	1	.42**	.38**	-.17*	-.28**
OEI	.42**	1	.47**	-.34**	-.36**
LEA	.38**	.47**	1	-.29**	-.41**
ER	-.17*	-.34**	-.29**	1	.32**
MS	-.28**	-.36**	-.41**	.32**	1

Notes: *p < .05, **p < .01.

These results demonstrate that greater social media exposure (SME) and higher online emotional intimacy (OEI) were significantly associated with lower marital satisfaction (MS) and higher likelihood of extramarital tendencies (LEA). Emotional regulation (ER) showed a negative correlation with both OEI and LEA, suggesting its potential moderating role.

3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The hypothesized model demonstrated excellent fit indices:

- $\chi^2/df = 2.17$
- CFI = 0.965
- RMSEA = 0.042
- SRMR = 0.036

Standardized path coefficients are summarized below:

Table 4. SEM Path Coefficients

Path	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Result
SME → OEI	0.42	0.06	6.83	<0.001	Supported
OEI → LEA	0.37	0.05	7.02	<0.001	Supported
SME → LEA (direct)	0.19	0.04	4.75	<0.001	Supported
OEI → MS	-0.33	0.05	-6.41	<0.001	Supported
MS → LEA	-0.28	0.06	-4.52	<0.001	Supported
ER × OEI → LEA	-0.17	0.04	-3.89	<0.001	Supported

The model explained 46% of the variance in OEI, 52% of the variance in LEA, and 41% in MS.

4. Mediation and Moderation Tests

Using bootstrapping (5,000 samples, 95% CI), online emotional intimacy (OEI) was found to partially mediate the relationship between social media exposure (SME) and likelihood of extramarital affairs (LEA).

- Indirect Effect (SME → OEI → LEA) = 0.156
- 95% CI [0.102, 0.225], p < 0.001

Additionally, emotional regulation (ER) moderated the OEI–LEA link. The negative interaction term (β = -0.17, p < 0.001) indicated that individuals with higher emotional regulation skills were less likely to translate emotional intimacy into extramarital behavior.

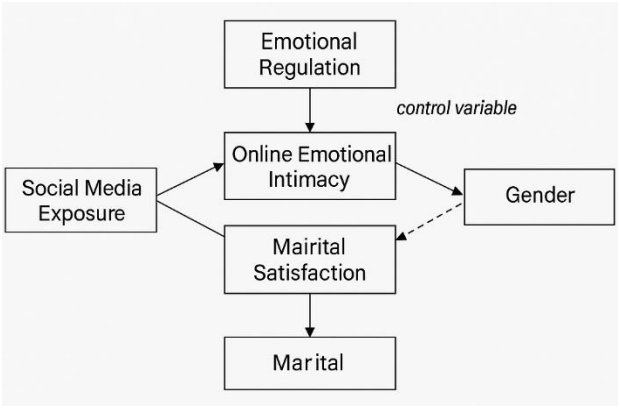

Figure 1. Moderation Effect of Emotional Regulation (ER) on OEI → LEA Path (conceptual representation)

5. Gender-Based Analysis

The multi-group SEM revealed significant gender differences.
For men, the direct path SME → LEA was stronger (β = 0.26) than for women (β = 0.12). However, women showed a stronger indirect effect through OEI → MS → LEA (β_indirect = 0.21, p < 0.001), suggesting that women's online emotional intimacy was more closely tied to relational dissatisfaction rather than overt behavioral infidelity.

Table 5. Gender Differences in Model Paths

Path	Male β	Female β	$\Delta\chi^2$	p
SME → OEI	0.44	0.38	2.15	0.14
OEI → LEA	0.32	0.41	3.87	0.04*
OEI → MS	-0.29	-0.36	4.62	0.03*
ER × OEI → LEA	-0.12	-0.22	5.31	0.02*

(*p < 0.05 indicates significant gender moderation effects.)

6. Visualization of the Full Model

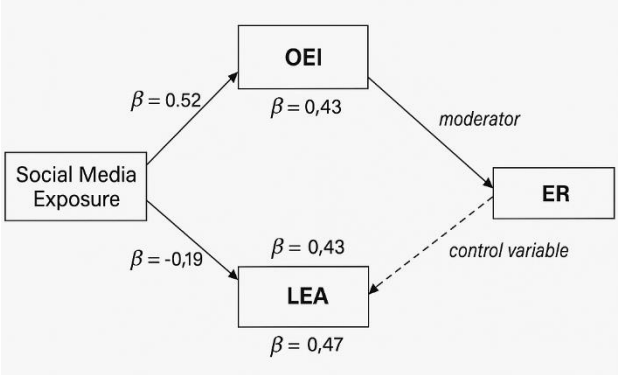

Figure 2. Structural Model of Predictive Pathways

7. Interpretation of Findings

The results confirm the hypothesized model: social media exposure directly and indirectly increases the risk of extramarital tendencies through the mediating effect of online emotional intimacy. Participants with higher exposure exhibited more emotional self-disclosure online, which reduced marital satisfaction and heightened infidelity risk. Emotional regulation served as a protective factor that weakened the OEI–LEA link.

Gender analyses highlight distinct psychological mechanisms: men's exposure translated into behavioral risks, while women's online intimacy manifested as emotional withdrawal and dissatisfaction. These patterns suggest that infidelity in digital contexts is not purely behavioral but often rooted in affective displacement.

The model thus supports a multidimensional understanding of digital infidelity, incorporating emotional, cognitive, and behavioral processes within a unified predictive structure.

Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate the evolving nature of intimacy and fidelity in an era dominated by digital connectivity. The results demonstrate that social media exposure functions as both a relational facilitator and a psychological disruptor, shaping emotional engagement beyond traditional boundaries of marriage. Increased exposure to social platforms intensifies online emotional intimacy, which—though initially perceived as harmless digital connection—gradually erodes marital satisfaction and increases susceptibility to extramarital involvement.

The mediation of online emotional intimacy highlights that infidelity in the digital age is not solely behavioral but deeply rooted in emotional displacement. Individuals who experience unmet emotional needs within their marriage are more prone to seek validation and empathy through digital communication, leading to a subtle but significant reallocation of emotional energy. This emotional reorientation, sustained through continuous online interaction, becomes a precursor to relational transgression.

Equally significant is the role of emotional regulation as a moderating factor. Participants exhibiting higher self-regulation demonstrated reduced likelihood of transforming online intimacy into extramarital behavior. This suggests that emotional awareness and regulatory control act as psychological buffers against digital

temptation. Moreover, gender differences reveal the nuanced manifestation of digital infidelity: while men are more likely to externalize exposure into behavioral risk, women tend to internalize emotional dissatisfaction, reflecting a divergence in emotional-cognitive processing.

The study contributes to the literature by proposing an empirically validated, integrative model connecting social media exposure, online emotional intimacy, emotional regulation, and marital satisfaction within a single predictive framework. The model underscores that interventions addressing media literacy, emotional competence, and digital boundary awareness are crucial in mitigating relational risks in hyperconnected societies.

From an applied perspective, marital counselors and psychologists should incorporate assessments of online emotional behavior into therapeutic evaluations. Developing adaptive emotional regulation strategies and fostering open digital communication between partners can strengthen relational resilience. As social media continues to blur the boundary between private and public emotion, maintaining fidelity in the digital era requires not only behavioral restraint but also emotional transparency, mutual trust, and ethical mindfulness in online interactions.

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