

Influence of Facebook Use on Spousal Abuse among Married Women in Kwale County, Kenya

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.1210000132>

Received: 02 October 2025; Accepted: 14 October 2025; Published: 07 November 2025

ABSTRACT

While most studies focus on patriarchy and male dominance as contributors to spousal abuse, the role of emerging factors, such as social media use among couples, remain neglected. This paper examines associations between Facebook use (hours spent daily, frequency of posting and reacting to content, and number of friends and followers) and spousal abuse (physical, psychological, and controlling behaviours) among married women in Kwale County, Kenya. Using a mixed-methods design with a survey (n = 263) and key informant interviews, the study tested relationships between hours spent on Facebook, frequency of activity, and size of online networks with measures of spousal abuse. Results show that greater time and activity on Facebook predict higher levels of threats and control, while larger friend/follower networks are associated with lower risk of abuse. The findings underscore the dual nature of social media use in marital relationships. Policy recommendations include digital literacy initiatives, tailored counselling, and legal reforms addressing technology-facilitated abuse.

Keywords: Facebook, spousal abuse, intimate partner violence, social media, Kenya

BACKGROUND

Spousal abuse is a serious global crime affecting the well-being of individuals, families, and societies across the world. According to Sardinha et al. (2022), about one in three women globally have experienced at least one of spousal abuse. Research evidence reveals that spousal abuse is persistent in Sub-Saharan Africa largely due to economic hardships, cultural norms, and gender inequality (Takyi & Lamptey, 2020). For example, Mshana et al. (2022) found that about 56% of married women in Uganda experienced spousal abuse. The finding by Ikwara et al. (2025) shows that 41% of ever-married women in Kenya have experienced spousal abuse, providing a picture of the magnitude of this crime.

The prevention of this crime and its effects require a comprehensive understanding of underlying factors. Takyi and Lamptey (2020) identified factors that underlie the high prevalence of spousal abuse in Africa to include alcohol use, patriarchal norms, religious beliefs, and women's lack of economic empowerment. Such findings align with the feminist perspective that spousal abuse is a product of patriarchal traditions that justify male dominance over women. However, the Nordic paradox suggests that feminist theory is inadequate in explaining spousal abuse in countries with high levels of gender equality. Karlsson et al. (2021) found that Nordic countries, such as Norway and Sweden, have a high prevalence of spousal abuse against women, yet they have high levels of gender equality. Such weaknesses of the feminist theory may explain why, despite having several laws and regulations criminalising and penalising intimate partner violence, Kenya still has a high prevalence of spousal abuse. These gaps point to the need for examining emerging factors, such as social media use, that shape marital relationships and dynamics. Understanding the influence of emerging factors on spousal abuse can be enhanced using the functionalist social change theory or the diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory. Functionalism considers Facebook use a disruption to the marital equilibrium that manifests as disagreements and conflicts,

which may escalate to spousal abuse (Gebremariam et al., 2024). From the perspective of the DOI theory, as Facebook use increases in society, it causes shifts in behaviours and norms among users (Bailey et al., 2024). Such changes may cause disagreements and conflicts among married partners, increasing the risk of spousal abuse.

Facebook is one of the most popular social media platforms used across the world. This platform has expanded opportunities for individuals to connect with each other, express themselves, and share and access to information. Research evidence reveals a pattern that attributes Facebook use to increased spousal abuse. For example, studies from Europe, North America, and Asia show that heavy Facebook use can encourage jealousy, suspicion, and surveillance, thereby increasing the risk of abuse (Emond et al., 2023; Patel & Singh, 2020). For example, cyberstalking, online monitoring, and interpreting "likes" or messages as proof of infidelity have emerged as triggers of marital conflict. The increasing prevalence of Facebook use has raised concerns about its potential role in shaping intimate partner relationships, particularly in cases of spousal abuse against married women. Alsharif et al. (2021) found that excessive surveillance of a spouse's Facebook activities, such as monitoring their interactions, posts, and friendships, can lead to increased mistrust and possessiveness. This aligns with findings from Nguyen et al. (2022), who reported that conflicts stemming from Facebook interactions, including perceived infidelity or misinterpreted comments, were significant triggers for spousal abuse. Similarly, Mwangi and Otieno (2023) demonstrated that Facebook use in Kenya has been linked to heightened suspicion, particularly when partners engage with members of the opposite sex, often leading to verbal and physical confrontations. This finding is further supported by Mwangi (2021), who explored how social media contributes to marital conflicts in middle-class couples in Kenya, emphasising the negative impact of digital interactions on trust and communication.

Based on the radical feminist theory, Brasil et al. (2024) note that algorithms used by social media platforms, including Facebook, increase the vulnerability of women to abuse by rewarding appearance-based validation. Furthermore, Jabali et al. (2024) argue that Facebook has created an additional platform for abusive men to exert their patriarchal control over women through practices such as digital surveillance. The functionalist social change theory treats spousal abuse as a manifestation of temporary disruptions caused by the interaction between the marriage institution and new factors, such as Facebook use. Langlais et al. (2024) reinforce this perspective through their findings that social media use shifts communication to online spaces, causing disruptions in marriage, such as jealousy, mistrust, constant conflicts, and abuse. Existing literature suggests that Facebook use can serve as both a risk factor and a protective factor in intimate relationships, depending on the nature and context of engagement. Several studies have examined the link between Facebook use and spousal abuse, highlighting both psychological and physical implications. However, gaps remain in understanding the nuanced mechanisms through which Facebook influences spousal abuse, as well as the mediating variables that may exacerbate or mitigate abuse.

In Kenya, Facebook remains the most widely used social networking site, cutting across rural and urban settings (Mwangi & Otieno, 2023). However, most studies in Kenya focus on general intimate partner violence without isolating the specific use of social media in spousal abuse. Reports from grassroots organisations in Kwale County indicate that marital disputes linked to Facebook use are rising (Mbula, 2025). Nevertheless, empirical studies on Facebook and spousal abuse in Kenya are limited, necessitating research to guide interventions. This study explored the Facebook use in spousal abuse against married women in Kwale County from a criminological perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a correlational research design under a mixed-methods framework. This design was appropriate because it allowed for the examination of statistical relationships between Facebook use (independent variables) and spousal abuse (dependent variables), while also capturing lived experiences through qualitative interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The mixed-methods approach allowed the collection of qualitative data from key informants, which complemented quantitative findings.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised married women in Kwale County. A multistage, purposive and snowball sampling methods yielded 399 respondents representing both rural and peri-urban settings. Seven key informants (chiefs, counsellors, and police officers) were purposively sampled to provide expert insights (Mbula, 2025).

Data Collection Instruments

Structured questionnaires captured quantitative data on hours spent on Facebook, frequency of activity, and number of friends/followers, alongside indicators of spousal abuse (physical injuries, spousal threats, and control over phone/social media). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data on women's experiences (Mwangi & Otieno, 2023).

Validity and Reliability

The instruments were reviewed by criminology and gender experts to ensure content validity. A pilot study conducted with 30 women in a neighbouring county yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70, confirming acceptable reliability (Patel & Singh, 2020).

Variables and Measures

Facebook use was the independent variable and was measured based on aspects. These aspects include hours spent on the platform daily, the frequency of weekly Facebook "Likes," "Comments," and "Posts," and the number of Facebook friends and followers. The dependent variable was spousal abuse against married women, measured based on the frequency of physical injuries from abuse, spousal threats, and controlling behaviour.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research committee. All respondents were fully informed of the study's objectives, potential risks, and benefits before providing written informed consent. Participation was voluntary and respondents were allowed not to answer to questions that made them uncomfortable. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning the respondents anonymous identifiers, as personal identifying data were not collected. The information obtained from the participants was only used for the purposes of the study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed in SPSS v25. Descriptive statistics summarized Facebook use. Pearson's correlation examined bivariate relationships, and multiple regression identified predictive variables. Qualitative data were thematically coded and triangulated with quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Out of the calculated sample size of 399, only 263 married women participated in the study, resulting in a response rate of 65.91% of the sample, which is acceptable as a strong response rate in social science according to Kharuddin et al., (2020). From Table 1 below, the largest group of married women was aged between 21 and 30 years (35.7%), closely followed by those aged 30-40 years at 34.2%. These findings imply that the majority of married women in Kwale are in their youth, suggesting early marriages or a youthful population of the county. The majority of married women (40.7%) completed secondary school as their highest education level. Other participants had college or technical training (27.8%), a bachelor's degree (7.2%), and a postgraduate degree (2.3%). This is a positive progress to women's empowerment in the county since the findings show that less than a quarter of married women did not reach or complete secondary education. There was a high unemployment rate since 40.7% of participants had no jobs. The high unemployment was reflected on the low financial status since 43% of the participants earned less than Ksh. 5000 monthly. The majority of the participants were rural dwellers (61.2%), while those who resided in peri-urban and urban areas were 24% and 14.8%, respectively.

Most of the women (33.5%) involved in the study had been married for 1-5 years, while 31.2% were in marriage for 6-10 years. Those who had been married for 11-15 years and above 15 years were 22.8% and 12.5%, respectively.

Table 1: Demographics Characteristics of Participants

		N	Percentage (%)
Age Group	20 years and below	20	7.6%
	21-30 years	94	35.7%
	31-40 years	90	34.2%
	41-50 years	44	16.7%
	Above 50 years	15	5.7%
Current Occupation	Unemployed	107	40.7%
	Self-employed	35	13.3%
	Formal employment	41	15.6%
	Casual Laborer	19	7.2%
	Farmer	59	22.4%
	Student	2	0.8%
	Other	0	0.0%
Highest Level of Education	No formal education	7	2.7%
	Primary Level	51	19.4%
	Secondary level	107	40.7%
	College/Technical Training	73	27.8%
	Bachelor's Degree	19	7.2%
	Postgraduate Degree	6	2.3%
Monthly Income	Below 5,000	113	43.0%
	5,001-10,000	53	20.2%
	10,001-20,000	47	17.9%
	20,001-30,000	24	9.1%
	Above 30,000	26	9.9%
Residency	Rural	161	61.2%

	Peri-urban	63	24.0%
	Urban	39	14.8%
Duration in marriage	Not Married	0	0.0%
	Less than 1 year	0	0.0%
	1-5 years	88	33.5%
	6-10 years	82	31.2%
	11-15 years	60	22.8%
	More than 15 years	33	12.5%

The findings in Table 2 indicate that respondents spent an average of 3.4 hours daily on Facebook, consistent with global research highlighting rising digital engagement among women (Emond et al., 2023). The relatively high frequency of daily posts suggests active participation, while the large variance in network size reflects diverse patterns of social visibility. These variations may influence abuse differently: small networks limit visibility, while larger networks may provide social protection (Mwangi & Otieno, 2023).

Table 2: Patterns of Facebook Use among Respondents (N = 263)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Hours spent on Facebook/day	3.4	1.8	0.5	8.0
Frequency of activity (posts/day)	4.6	2.1	1	12
Number of friends/followers	326	154	50	980

Spousal Abuse

The study evaluated spousal abuse against women by assessing the frequency of physical injuries from abuse, spousal threats, and controlled access to phones and social media. The findings revealed that married women who had experienced physical injuries from spousal abuse occasionally and frequently were 17.5% and 12.5%, respectively. Therefore, about a third of married women in Kwale County have experienced physical abuse. The findings also reveal that 38% and 9.9% of all respondents reported that their spouses had threatened them occasionally and frequently, respectively. Respondents who occasionally and frequently experienced controlled access to phones or social media were 25.9% and 11%, respectively. These findings place controlling behaviour as the most frequent form of spousal abuse after spousal threats.

Table 2: Frequency of Spousal Abuse

Spousal Abuse	Frequency	Percentage of Response (%)
Physical Injuries From SA	Never	51.0%
	Rarely	19.0%
	Occasionally	17.5%
	Frequently	12.5%

Spousal Threat	Never	37.3%
	Rarely	14.8%
	Occasionally	38.0%
	Frequently	9.9%
Control Access To Phones SM	Never	50.2%
	Rarely	12.9%
	Occasionally	25.9%
	Frequently	11.0%

The study also evaluated how often married women in Kwale County report incidents of spousal abuse. About 56% of respondents in Kwale County had never reported being abused by their spouses. Those who rarely, occasionally, and frequently report cases of abuse by their husband were 17.1%, 24.0%, and 3%, respectively. The comparison of these findings with the frequency of physical injuries from spousal abuse, spousal threats, and controlled access to phones and social media suggests underreporting of cases. Furthermore, the findings imply that many married women in Kwale do not seek help to address abuse by their husbands.

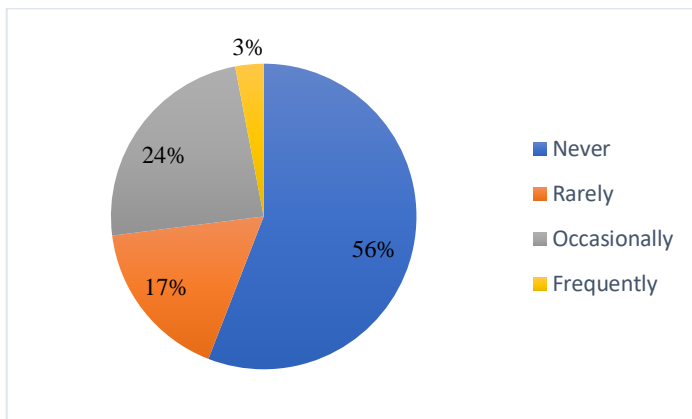


Figure 1: Frequency of Reporting Abuse

Perceived Influence of Facebook on Behaviour and Emotions

The influence of Facebook use on their behaviour and negative emotion experience was evaluated. This analysis was significant to the study because behavioural and emotional factors are involved in spousal abuse. The findings presented in Table 3 below show only 39.5% of respondents reported that Facebook content influenced their behaviours, such as dressing style, hobbies, and relationships. The remaining 60.5% indicated that the contents they interact with on Facebook do not affect their behaviours. The findings also reveal that there are less married women whose behaviours are affected by Facebook content in rural areas (33.3%) compared to their counterparts in urban areas of Kwale County. When the negative effects of Facebook content spills over to their marital relationships, their risk for spousal abuse may rise.

Table 2: Perceived Influence of Facebook Use on Behaviour and Emotions

		Kwale County	Rural	Peri-urban	Urban
	No	60.5%	62.1%	52.4%	66.7%

FB content influence on behaviour	Yes	39.5%	37.9%	47.6%	33.3%
Experience negative emotions due to Facebook use	Never	39.9%	47.2%	31.7%	23.1%
	Rarely	17.5%	17.4%	14.3%	23.1%
	Occasionally	35.7%	28.0%	49.2%	46.2%
	Frequently	6.8%	7.5%	4.8%	7.7%

Some respondents admitted that the use of Facebook exposed them to negative emotions, including sadness, stress, and jealousy. Occasional and frequent negative emotions due to Facebook use were reported by 35.7%, and 6.8% of the respondents, respectively. Rural areas had more married women (47.2%) who never experience Facebook-related negative emotions compared to their counterparts in peri-urban (31.7%) and urban areas (23.1%). As such, rural-urban residency may determine the experience perceived negative emotions by married women after using Facebook. These findings imply that married women can develop behavioural changes or negative emotions after consuming Facebook content. Such behavioural changes and negative emotion can cause marital conflicts or misunderstandings, which may escalate to spousal abuse.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation of physical injuries incurred from spousal abuse, spousal threats, and controlling behaviours with various aspects of Facebook use was analysed using the Pearson's correlation coefficient. Table 2 shows the findings on correlation between Facebook use and spousal abuse indicators. The frequency of physical injuries from spousal abuse had a positive significant correlation with daily hours spent on Facebook ($r = 0.180$, $p = 0.003$) and the frequency of Facebook activity ($r = 0.169$, $p = 0.006$). Therefore, as married women spend more time or increase their Facebook activity (posting or reacting to content), their predisposition physical spousal abuse increases. The frequency of physical injuries had a negative significant correlation with the number of Facebook friends and followers ($r = -0.164$, $p = 0.008$). The frequency of spousal threats had a positive correlation with the daily hours spent on Facebook ($r = 0.425$, $p < 0.001$) and the frequency of Facebook activity ($r = 0.448$, $p < 0.001$). As such, married women are more prone to threats from their husbands the more they use Facebook. However, spousal threats have no significant correlation with the number of FB friends and followers ($r = -0.026$, $p = 0.672$). The frequency of controlled access to phone and social media had a positive correlation with the hours spent on Facebook daily ($r = 0.315$, $p < 0.001$) and the frequency of Facebook activity ($r = 0.349$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, the more married women use Facebook, the more they are predisposed to the controlling behaviour of their husbands.

Table 2: Correlations between Facebook Use and Spousal Abuse

		Physical Injuries from Spousal Abuse	Spousal Threats	Control Access to Phone and Social Media
Hours Spent FB Daily	Pearson Correlation	0.180**	0.425**	0.315**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003	0.000	0.000
	Pearson Correlation	0.169**	0.448**	0.349**

Frequency of FB Activity	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.006	0.000	0.000
No. of Friends & Followers	Pearson Correlation	-0.164**	-0.026	-0.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.008	0.672	0.247

Results show that more time spent on Facebook and higher posting frequency are positively correlated with physical injuries, threats, and controlling behaviours. This supports prior findings that heavy Facebook use increases IPV risks due to jealousy and surveillance (Patel & Singh, 2020). Conversely, having larger online networks was negatively correlated with abuse, suggesting protective effects of social visibility. This finding aligns with the buffering role of social capital noted in African studies (Nabaggala et al., 2021). However, the number of friends and followers was only correlated with physical abuse, as no relationship was observed with spousal threats and controlling behaviour.

Regression Analysis

Linear regression analyses were used to evaluate the impact of the daily hours spent on FB, activity frequency, and online predict physical injuries from spousal abuse, spousal threats, and access to phones and social media. Hours spent on FB and the number of FB friends and followers were significant positive ($B = 0.203$, $p = 0.021$) and negative predictors ($B = -0.203$, $p < 0.001$) of physical injuries from spousal abuse, respectively. Therefore, as married women spend one more hour on FB, they increase their risk of sustaining physical injuries from spousal abuse by 0.203. Additionally, the risk of physical spousal abuse reduce as married women increase the number of their Facebook friends and followers. The linear regression analysis also revealed that hours spent on FB ($B = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$) and the frequency of FB activity ($B = 0.351$, $p < 0.001$) as significant positive predictors of spousal threats against married women in Kwale County. However, the number of FB friends and followers was a significant negative predictor of spousal threats against married women (-0.282 , $p < 0.001$). From Figure below, it is evident that hours spent on Facebook daily ($B = 0.206$, $p = 0.014$) and the frequency of FB activity ($B = 0.309$, $p < 0.001$) positively predict the experience of controlling behaviour of husbands. The number of FB friends and followers were found to be a significant negative predictor of controlling behaviour ($B = -0.278$, $p < 0.001$).

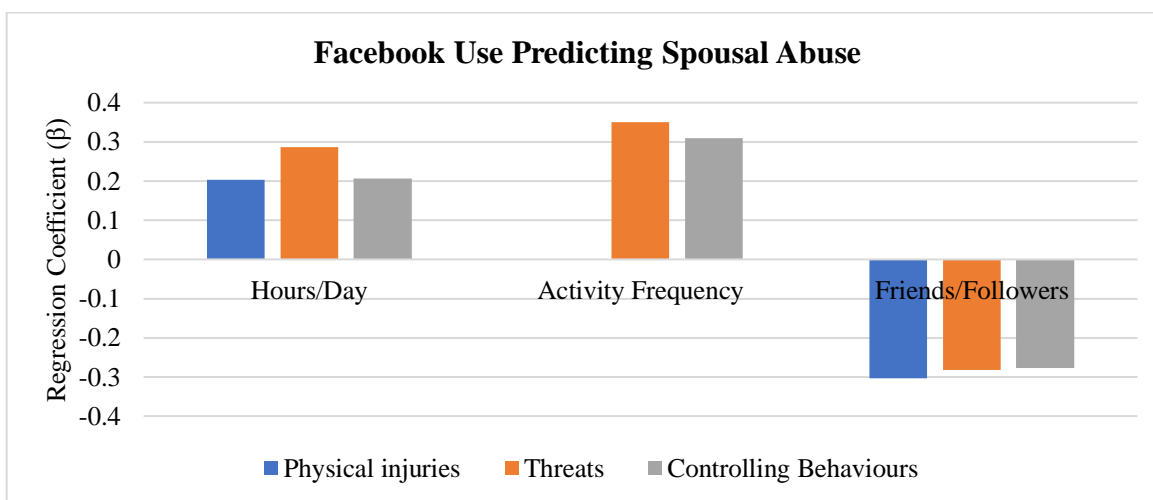


Figure 1: Regression Coefficients of Facebook Use Predicting Spousal Abuse

Regression results confirm that hours spent on Facebook and activity frequency significantly and positively predict spousal abuse outcomes, particularly threats and control behaviours. Meanwhile, larger networks negatively predict abuse, reinforcing the argument that online social capital may serve as a protective factor (Emond et al., 2023; Mbula, 2025). The findings on the impact of Facebook use align with existing evidence,

such as the study by Daspe et al. (2018) that found Facebook use to cause jealousy through online activities, such as commenting, liking, and private messaging. Although inappropriate, a jealous husband can abuse their wives as a reaction to their increased Facebook use.

From the functionalist perspective, spending more time on Facebook and increased Facebook activity are disruptions to marital equilibrium. The use of social media could disrupt existing norms and relationships, leading to temporary dysfunctions in marital relationships. The disruption can manifest as jealousy, mistrust, dissatisfaction with the relationship, emotional distance, reduced communication, and neglect of roles. Social media introduced users to new forms of interaction outside the marital unit, expanding their social networks and exposing them to alternative values and lifestyles (Gebremariam et al., 2024). These changes may have created misunderstandings where their husbands interpreted online behaviours, such as liking photos, chatting privately, and following certain accounts, as violations of trust. Husbands may respond to the changes in equilibrium through abuse or controlling access to phones and Facebook. Based on the DOI theory, users must have developed shared meanings and practices around their use of Facebook to ensure successful integration into their lives (Frei-Landau et al., 2022). In many marriages, this adaptation process is incomplete because disagreement between spouses about what constitutes appropriate online behaviour, how much privacy should be maintained, or how transparent digital interactions should be. These differences can cause the misinterpretations of Facebook-related activities and behaviours as forms of disrespect or infidelity. As a result, husbands may respond to their wives' online activities and behaviours by abusing them or controlling their access to phones and Facebook.

Qualitative Findings

The analysis of qualitative data from key informants highlighted the negative impacts of using Facebook on women's behaviour and emotions. Local administrative officers indicated that some of the spousal abuse causes involved excessive Facebook use. Husbands blamed spending too much time on Facebook for their wives' neglect of the household duties. Some husbands went to the extent of restricting their wives access to Facebook and other social media platforms as punishment for their additive use. Professional counsellors expressed that some of the spousal abuse case they were resolving involved misinterpretation of husbands of their wives' use of Facebook. There was a pattern of husbands accusing their wives of using Facebook posts to seek attention from other men on the platform. One professional counsellor noted, "Husband who are suspicious usually monitor their wives Facebook activity, as they consider online interactions as flirting or cheating." Furthermore, married women who are constantly on Facebook were accused of spending less time with their husband, reducing intimacy and fuelling feelings of jealousy. Although Facebook use was largely associated with negative impacts on spousal abuse, professional counsellors and social workers acknowledged its potential in preventing or deterring abuse since it can help women to speak out and seek help. Married women with larger online following were considered privileged because they were mostly vulnerable to subtler forms of psychological intimidation.

From a functionalist social change theory perspective, marital relationships thrive when there is stability and equilibrium and any disruption can create tension until new norms emerge. Using Facebook, in terms of time spent and frequency of activity, can disruptions in communication patterns, privacy boundaries, and social exposure. Such disruptions can trigger spousal abuse as a maladaptive attempt of husbands to restore the perceived "balance" in the marital structure. The protective effect of having more friends and followers reflects a new equilibrium where public visibility and external social ties act as informal social controls, discouraging abuse and fostering accountability within the marriage. The technology innovations theory holds that Facebook use does not married women's risk for spousal abuse because of the differences in their adoption rates. Early adopters of Facebook have lower risk of abuse because they have developed mechanisms for healthy use and using the platform as a source informal social controls.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates a complex relationship between Facebook use and spousal abuse in Kwale County. Time spent and activity levels increase risks of threats and controlling behaviours, whereas larger networks reduce vulnerability. Spousal threats were the most frequent form of spousal abuse that married women faced, followed by physical abuse and psychological abuse. The more married women use Facebook, the more they are likely to

experience physical, verbal, and psychological abuse from their husbands. Spending more time on Facebook makes married women more vulnerable to physical abuse, spousal threats, and psychological abuse. However, having more friends and followers on Facebook reduces this likelihood because the online social network provides a protective environment for married women that deters abuse from their husbands. Having a higher digital literacy reduces the risk of spousal abuse among married women who use Facebook.

The frequency of spousal abuse among married women in Kwale County points to the need for expanding counselling and support services to promote marital conflict resolution. Additionally, there is a need for community-based campaigns to raise awareness of this vice and increase reporting rates. Such campaigns should educate couples about the potential risks and consequences of unhealthy use of Facebook within marriages. Instead of excessive use of Facebook, married women should be advised to use the platform as a source of support and seek help. Since the findings showed that digital literacy moderated the impact of some aspects of Facebook use on spousal abuse, digital literacy programs should be incorporated into interventions that fight intimate partner violence and spousal abuse. Policymakers should also consider digital literacy training in legal frameworks developed for fighting spousal abuse, IPV, and domestic violence.

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