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

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the association between WhatsApp use and spousal abuse among married women in Kwale County, Kenya. A mixed-methods correlational design was employed, combining survey data from 263 respondents with insights from key informant semi-structured interviews. Independent variables included duration of WhatsApp use, hours spent daily, number of messages exchanged, group membership, and purposeful use (work/family). Dependent variables measured physical injuries, spousal threats, and control of phone/social media. Results indicate that while general duration of WhatsApp use is not significantly associated with physical injuries, purposeful use and group membership are strongly correlated with threats and controlling behaviours. Qualitative findings suggest that women's visibility and economic use of WhatsApp sometimes provoke jealousy and conflict. The study recommends digital-safety interventions, privacy awareness campaigns, and training for community leaders on recognising the role of social media platforms in spousal abuse.

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

BACKGROUND

Spousal abuse is a global problem since Sardinha et al. (2022) indicate that nearly 1 in 3 women across the world experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner during their lifetime. Spousal abuse should not be confused with intimate partner violence (IPV) because it is confined within marital settings. Although this field of study is well-established, most investigations focus on traditional drivers of spousal abuse, such as patriarchy, economic dependency, and religious beliefs (Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020). Therefore, emerging factors that introduce new dimensions in marriage do not received adequate attention. There is an increasing attention in research towards the role of commonly used social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, on spousal abuse. The new dimensions introduced by emerging trends, such as WhatsApp use can be captured through the functionalist social change theory and the diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory. From the perspective of the functionalist social change theory, WhatsApp use causes a dysfunction in marriage that manifests as misunderstandings and conflicts (Gebremariam et al., 2024). These conflicts and misunderstandings may escalate to different forms of spousal abuse. From the perspective of the DOI theory, as people begin and continue to use social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, their behaviours and norms are likely to change due to exposure to new perspectives and lifestyles (Bailey et al., 2024). Husbands may not welcome such changes, leading conflicts with their wives. When they poorly handle conflicts, husbands may end up abusing their wives.

Bailey et al. (2024) points out that social media platforms, including WhatsApp, are increasingly serving as tools for abusive partners to monitor, harass, and control their spouses through cyberstalking, emotional manipulation, and public shaming. As such, there is a need to integrate the role of social media in spousal abuse research to avoid single-sided focus on patriarchy and male dominance. Globally, WhatsApp has become one of the most

widely used messaging platforms, with over two billion users by 2024. Its appeal lies in low-cost instant messaging, group chats, and multimedia sharing (Nadel Harony et al., 2023). While its encrypted nature protects privacy, studies also show that features such as "last seen" and read receipts often trigger jealousy and conflict in intimate relationships (Woodlock, 2017). In some cases, WhatsApp has been weaponised for surveillance, harassment, and coercive control within marriages (Emond et al., 2023). In Sub-Saharan Africa, WhatsApp dominates mobile communication due to affordability and accessibility. Beyond personal use, it is increasingly central to political mobilisation, community networking, and small-scale businesses. Yet, women's participation in WhatsApp groups or economic use of the platform often clashes with patriarchal expectations, leading to accusations of neglecting family responsibilities or infidelity (Ouma & Achieng, 2021). In Kenya, WhatsApp is the most widely used digital platform, with uptake across rural and urban populations. While it empowers women by enabling business opportunities and social support, reports from Kwale County highlight growing marital conflicts linked to WhatsApp use. Men often monitor messages or restrict women's group participation, with some cases escalating into physical or psychological abuse (Mbula, 2025). Despite its prominence, empirical studies on WhatsApp's role in spousal abuse remain limited, creating a gap this study aims to fill.

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 impact of WhatsApp use on spousal abuse, while also capturing lived experiences through qualitative interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The multistage, purposive and snowball sampling methods 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 stratified random sampling approach yielded 399 respondents representing both rural and peri-urban settings. The actual sample size of 263 was realised that translated to 65% of the sample and is acceptable as a strong response rate in social science according to Kharuddin et al., (2020). Seven key informants, including chiefs, community health assistants, professional counsellors, and police officers, were purposively sampled to provide expert insights (Mbula, 2025).

Data Collection Instruments

Structured questionnaires captured quantitative data various aspects of WhatsApp use 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

WhatsApp use was the independent variable and was measured based on aspects, including years of using the platform, hours spent on the platform daily, number of daily messages, frequency of purposeful use, and WhatsApp group membership. 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 allow 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 demographic characteristics, WhatsApp use, and spousal abuse. 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

With 263 questionnaires filled and returned, the study achieved a response rate of 65.9%. Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The study sample was relatively young since respondents aged 21-30 years (35.7%) and 31-40 years (34.2%) were the majority. The demographic findings reveal that over 62% of respondents had at least secondary school certificate, while those with no formal education were only 2.7%. Such findings are a positive sign of women in empowerment Kwale County. The respondents had a high unemployment rate since 40.7% of them had no jobs. Farmers were 22.4%, self-employed women were 13.3%, and those with formal employment made up 13.3% of the respondents. The high unemployment rate is a high risk for spousal abuse, as it increases the dependence of wives on their husbands. Most of the respondents were low income earners since 43% of them earned less than Ksh. 5000 monthly. Those who earned above Ksh. 30,000 monthly were a mere 9.9%, signifying limited economic empowerment of married women. About 61.2% of married women in Kwale lived in rural areas, while peri-urban and urban dwellers were 24% and 14.8%, respectively. The duration of being married also varied significantly, which respondents married for 1-5 years being the majority (33.5%). More details are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographics Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Variables		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%
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	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%

Frequency of Spousal Abuse

The study evaluated the frequency of forms of spousal abuse against women, including physical injuries from abuse, spousal threats, and controlling behaviour. Figure 1 below reveals that occasional and frequent experiences of physical injuries due to abuse were 17.5% and 12.5%, respectively. These findings suggest that about a third of married women in Kwale County occasionally or frequently experience physical abuse. About 38% and 9.9% of all respondents reported occasional and frequent threats from their husbands, respectively. These findings imply that spousal threats are the most frequent form of spousal abuse against married in this study. Respondents who had occasional and frequent experiences of controlled access to phones or social media were 25.9% and 11% respectively. Based on occasional and frequent experiences, threats was the second-most frequent form of spousal abuse after spousal threats, followed by controlling behaviour and physical abuse.
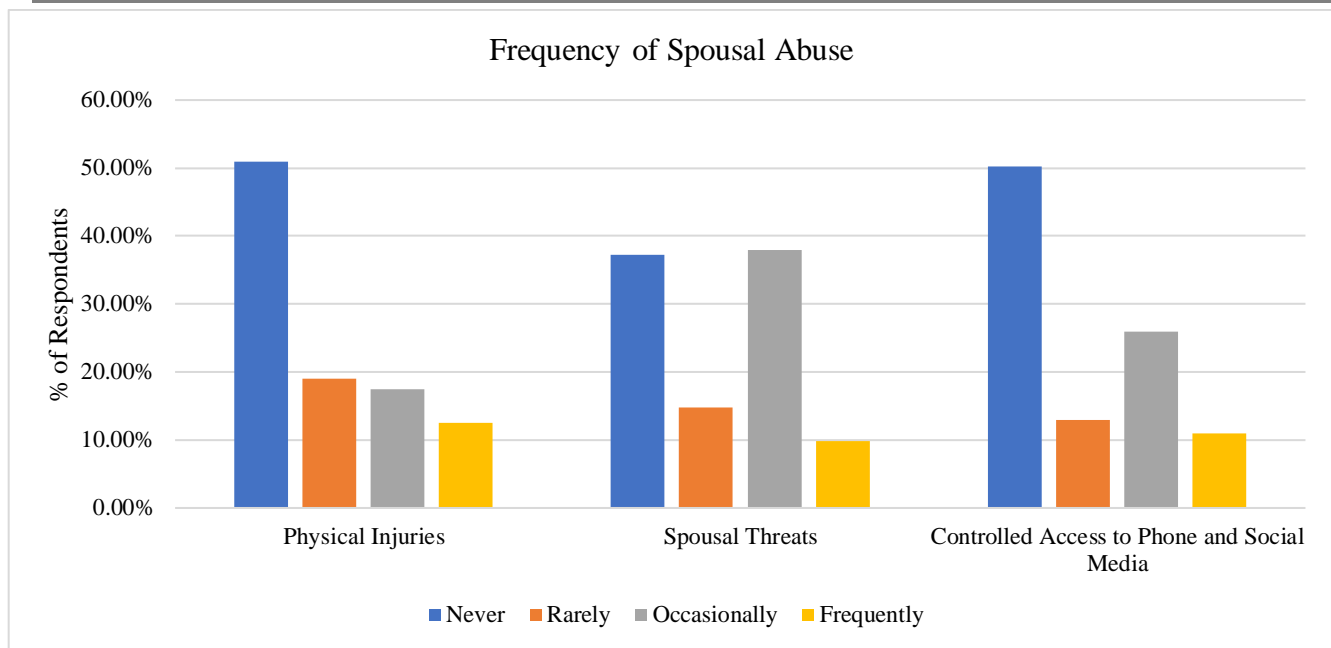
Figure 1: Frequency of Spousal Abuse

Reporting Spousal Abuse

Evaluating the frequency at which the respondents reported spousal abuse was crucial for determining tolerance and normalisation of this crime. The findings presented in Figure 2 below indicate that's majority (55.2%) of respondents in Kwale County had never reported being abused by their spouses. Those who reported abuse occasionally and frequently was 24.0% and 3%, signifying a low reporting rate. The underreporting of spousal abuse by married women reinforces the notion that husbands can get away with abusing their wives.
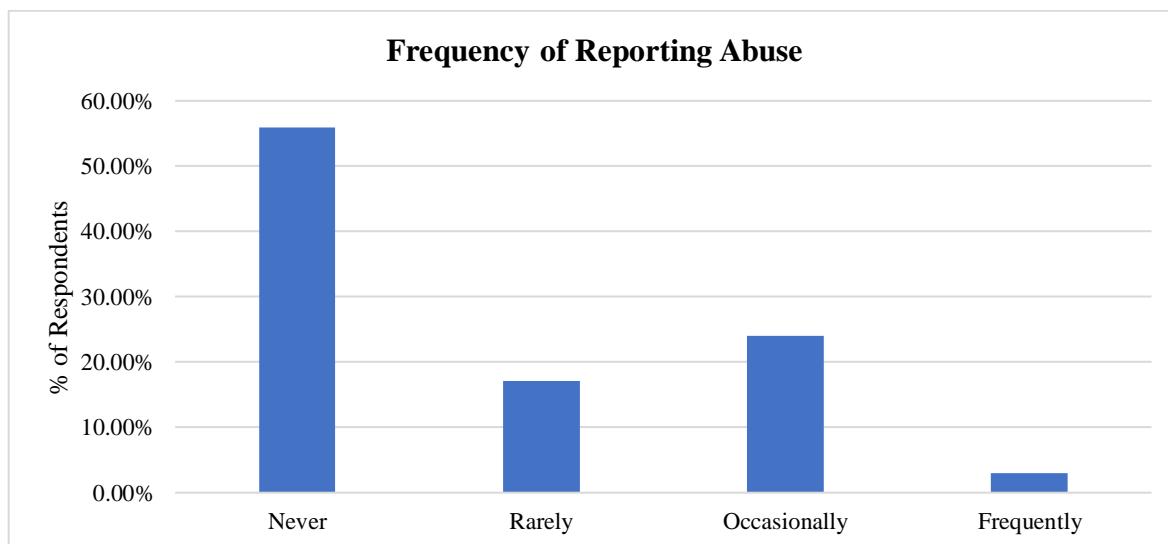

Figure 2: Reporting Spousal Abuse

The Use of WhatsApp by Married Women

On average, respondents spent 2.1 hours daily on WhatsApp and exchanged an average of nearly 47 messages. More than half reported using WhatsApp for purposeful activities, such as work or family communication. These findings highlight the centrality of of WhatsApp in the daily life of users, consistent with findings from Kenyan families (Ouma & Achieng, 2021). Group membership averaged 7 groups, raising potential for both empowerment and conflict when partners perceive participation as threatening. WhatsApp groups can be a source of social network that married women can leverage for their growth and well-being. Table 1 presents the findings on WhatsApp usage patterns among respondents.

Table 1: WhatsApp Usage Patterns among Respondents (N = 399)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Duration of WhatsApp use (years)	2.8	1.29	1.0	6.0
Hours spent on WhatsApp/day	2.1	1.00	0.5	8.0
Number of messages sent/received/day	46.7	18.32	10	110
Group memberships	7.2	3.14	1	15
Purposeful use (work/family, yes %)	62%	-	-	-

Perceived Influence of WhatsApp Use on Misunderstandings or Conflicts

The perception of the respondents on the perceived influence of WhatsApp helped to understand the contribution of using WhatsApp to the risk of married women being abused by their husbands. Figure 3 below shows that 40.3% of respondents reported that WhatsApp never caused conflict with their spouses, suggesting that for a substantial proportion, the platform is integrated into daily life without disrupting marital harmony. However, 16.3% experienced conflict rarely, 28.1% sometimes, and 15.2% frequently. This means that for nearly 60% of the women surveyed, WhatsApp use had at least occasional negative impacts on spousal relations, potentially linked to jealousy, misinterpretation of messages, secrecy, or excessive time spent online.
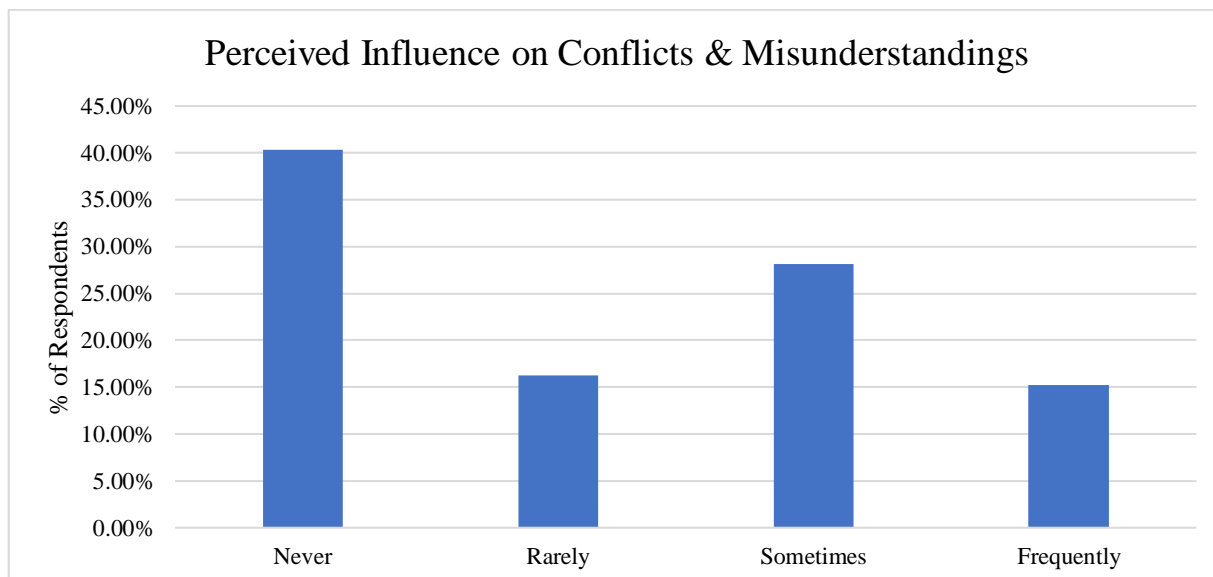

Figure 3: Frequency of Misunderstandings or Conflicts Due to WhatsApp Use

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficient was used to analyse the relationship between forms of spousal abuse and various aspects of WhatsApp use. Physical injuries from spousal abuse had a positive correlation with the use of WhatsApp in purposeful activities, such as work, business, and family matters ($r = 0.202$, $p = 0.001$). As such, women who used WhatsApp for such activities were more likely to report physical abuse. For spousal threats had positive correlations with use in purposeful activities ($r = 0.529$, $p < 0.001$), daily messages ($r = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$), group membership ($r = 0.383$, $p < 0.001$), hours spent per day ($r = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$), and duration of use ($r = 0.353$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that increased engagement with WhatsApp is linked to a higher likelihood of experiencing spousal threats. Regarding control of access to phones and social media, all variables except daily messages showed significant positive correlations. The strongest correlation was observed with

purposeful WhatsApp use (r = 0.383, p < 0.001), followed by group membership (r = 0.235, p < 0.001), daily hours spent (r = 0.229, p < 0.001), and duration of use (r = 0.223, p < 0.001). This finding suggests that the more actively and purposefully married women use WhatsApp, the more likely they are to experience controlling behaviours that restrict their access to phone and social media. Table 2 shows Pearson correlations between WhatsApp use and spousal abuse.

Table 2: Correlations between WhatsApp Use and Spousal Abuse

		Physical Injuries From Spousal Abuse	Spousal Threats	Control Access to Phone and Social Media
Duration of use	Pearson Correlation	-0.009	0.353**	0.223**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.884	0.000	0.000
Daily hours spent	Pearson Correlation	0.072	0.358**	0.229**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.245	0.000	0.000
Daily messages	Pearson Correlation	-0.036	0.244**	0.076
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.556	0.000	0.217
WhatsApp Groups	Pearson Correlation	0.091	0.383**	0.235**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.141	0.000	0.000
Purposeful Use	Pearson Correlation	0.202**	0.529**	0.383**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.000	0.000

Statistical significance: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

Regression Analysis

Linear regression analyses were conducted to determine whether duration of use, hours spent daily, daily messaging, group membership, and purposeful us of WhatsApp predict spousal abuse against married women. For physical injuries from spousal abuse, two variables showed significant associations. The duration of using WhatsApp was a negative predictor of physical injuries ($\beta = -0.203$, $p = 0.020$), suggesting that women who had been using the platform for more years reported fewer instances of physical harm. The purposeful use of WhatsApp for work, business, or family matters was positively associated with physical injuries ($\beta = 0.197$, $p = 0.002$). As such, when WhatsApp is used for goal-oriented activities, it might intensify disputes possibly due to perceptions of neglect, jealousy, or suspicions about hidden communications. Purposeful WhatsApp use positively predicted spousal threats ($\beta = 0.448$, $p < 0.001$) and controlling behaviour ($\beta = 0.275$, $p < 0.001$). The number of messages sent daily was a negative predictor of controlling behaviour ($\beta = -0.201$, $p = 0.033$), indicating that higher messaging activity was linked to less control over phone and social media access.
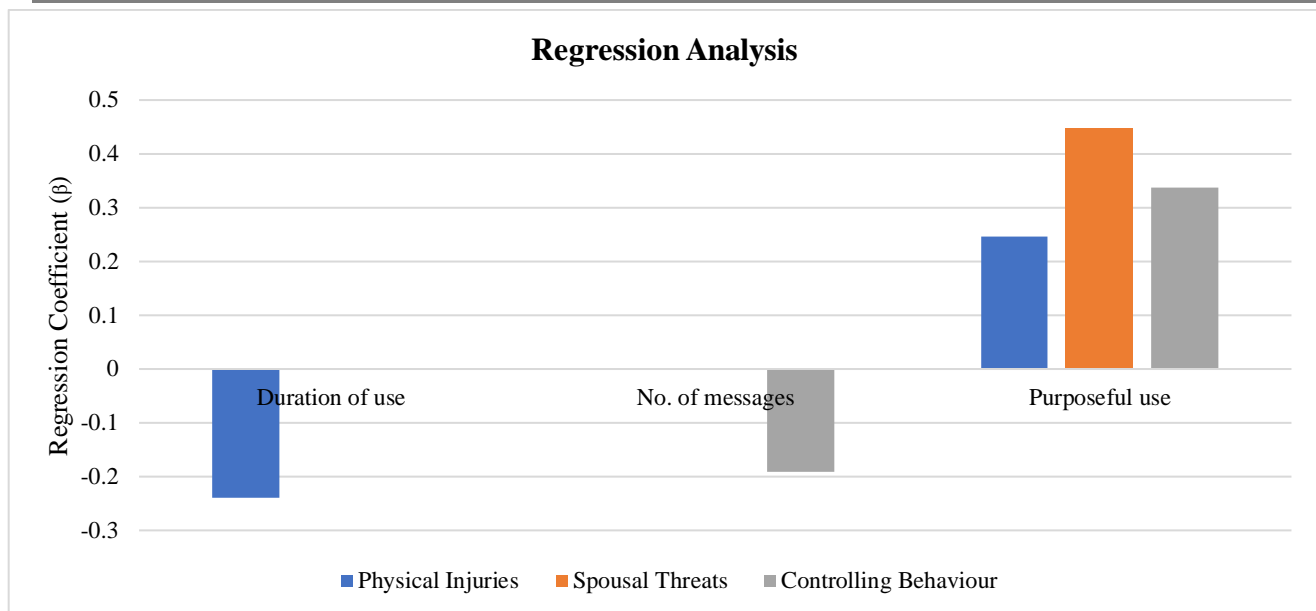
Figure 4: Regression Coefficients of WhatsApp Use Predicting Spousal Abuse

Qualitative Findings

Key informants acknowledged that WhatsApp was a common used social media platform that enables married individuals to communicate with each other and parties outside marriage. However, Chiefs and counsellors confirmed that WhatsApp-related disputes are increasingly presented in community mediation forums. Infidelity and seeking attention from other men were common accusations in many incidents of abuse. A local administrative officer (area chief) stated, "Husbands have expressed suspicious that their wives planned dates with other men through text messages even when they are in the same place." Some men to the extent of spying on the WhatsApp accounts of the wives. A professional counsellor noted, "I have handled cases where husbands demand their wives to remove profile pictures and statuses that are sexually 'revealing', terming them attention-seeking." As such, women's WhatsApp use may compound existing insecurities of husbands regarding their wives' behaviours. A common observation among the key informants was a trend where husbands are worried when their wives spend much time chatting, especially when they are together. This pattern signifies the feeling of being neglected or reduced intimacy due to excessive use of WhatsApp. When married women spend more time chatting or video-calling, their husbands are more likely to demand to see the chats. Professional counsellors and chiefs noted minimal cases of abuse when women participated in many WhatsApp groups.

DISCUSSION

While time spent on WhatsApp or number of messages may not directly relate to physical abuse, increased and purposeful use in group contexts is more strongly linked to threats and controlling behaviours. This pattern suggests that marital conflicts and abuse may be driven less by casual chatting and more by perceptions of independence, exposure, and external networking facilitated through WhatsApp. These findings are consistent with Faye et al. (2020) who found that couples who used WhatsApp more intensively were more likely to report marital conflict and reduced expression of love, which are precursors of spousal abuse. Nnam and Dastile (2025) associated marital conflicts with from ambiguous WhatsApp messages, perceived emotional infidelity triggered by third-party contacts. Omokhabi et al. (2025) also found that WhatsApp use has the potential to cause marital conflict by strain relationships when it is excessive or geared toward functional purposes. These accounts mirror regional evidence of WhatsApp as a double-edged sword that empower but also expose women to new forms of abuse.

The negative impact of duration of use implies that familiarity and established patterns of use reduce conflict triggers over time. This finding aligns with the diffusion of innovations theory, which posit that as individuals continue to use a technology, their understanding of the associated outcomes improves (Mattu & Saha, 2024). As such, married women can discern and limit behaviours that can cause conflicts with their husbands after a

long duration of use. From the perspective of functionalist social change theory, the findings suggest that married women's use of WhatsApp disrupts traditional patterns of communication and gendered control within marriage (Siregar, 2022). The disruption can create tension as couples adapt to shifting roles, particularly when the technology grants women more independence in networking, and information access. However, functionalist terms such tensions as not purely destructive since they are social adjustment toward integrating the new technology into marital relationships. These perspectives reveal how the emerging nature of WhatsApp use in Kenya cause disruptions in marital relationships. When the disruptions are poorly managed, they lead to spousal abuse. As such, there is a need for interventions that seek to improve the awareness of the tensions caused by WhatsApp use by married individuals and how they can navigate such tensions to avoid conflict and spousal abuse.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed social media use by married women play a significant role in their abuse by their husbands. How married women use WhatsApp can either increase or reduce their risk for spousal abuse. The use of this platform can increase the risk of spousal abuse if it makes husbands jealous, suspicious of infidelity, feel neglected, or threatened by the opportunities presented to their wives. Community-based awareness campaigns can educate couples about the potential risks and consequences of unchecked use of WhatsApp within marriages. Such intervention create informal controls that deter abusive husbands from taking advantage of their wives. Awareness can contribute to reducing excessive use of WhatsApp and improve spousal support for purposeful uses. Building trust between couples can help reduce jealousy and suspicious of infidelity by reinforcing a sense of security. Counselling and support services should be strengthened and made more accessible in rural areas to increase married women's access to support. Since WhatsApp and other social media platforms are inevitable realities in the digital era, couples should learn to use it responsibly to support each other.

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