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Shabani Afarani, Elaheh; Kianpour, Masoud; Sadeghi Fasaei, Soheila

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“In the Presence of the Other”: Mobile Phone Technology and Insecurity in Marital Life; An Iranian Narrative Unfolding Gender Differences

Elaheh Shabani Afarani*
Masoud Kianpour
Soheila Sadeghi Fasaei

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how mobile phone technology shapes interactions between couples and creates a controversial atmosphere in marital life. To achieve this, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with married individuals in Isfahan, Iran. After coding and categorizing the data using the grounded theory method, we identified “insecurity” as a core category. Feeling insecure is largely influenced by one’s interpretation of their partner’s “mobile phone etiquette” and “social media behavior”. Insecurity manifests in four main dimensions: “emotional insecurity”, “relationship insecurity”, “individual insecurity”, and “domestic insecurity”. We noted that the marital life context, including trust and sexual satisfaction plays a crucial role in how couples perceive and interpret each other’s use of mobile phones. However, gender is the most significant factor affecting individuals’ perception of mobile phone, their interpretation of their spouse’s use, and their experience of insecurity as a result. This research utilizes social analysis to examine the effects of technology on family life.



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The research findings hold both academic and practical implications. Professionals involved in the field of family and couples' relationships can benefit from this paper to deepen their understanding of the role and significance of mobile phones in contributing to conflicts within marital life.

Keywords: family, grounded theory, infidelity, insecurity, marital life, mobile phone.

Elaheh Shabani Afarani (*Corresponding author): Faculty of Sociology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran. Research fellow at Pooyesh-Fekri-Tosee Think Tank, Isfahan, Iran. (Email: elaheshabani1@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7976-9159>)

Masoud Kianpour: CERC in Immigration and Integration, Toronto Metropolitan University, Senior Research Fellow, Toronto, Canada. (Email: masoud.kianpour@torontomu.ca, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9663-2448>)

Soheila Sadeghi Fasaei: Department of Social Communication, Faculty of Sociology, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. (Email: s_sadeghi@yahoo.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5849-542X>)

Introduction

Family life is deeply influenced by information communication technologies (ICT). Following the prevalence of television sets and desktop computers, mobile phones have become an essential part of our “electronic cottage” (Toffler, 1980). Mobile phones, more than any other communication technology, have a significant impact on the structures, norms, and values within families. They play a central role in the family domain, surpassing other digital technologies. As a result, the intersection of “family and mobile technology” has become an increasingly important topic in the social sciences, highlighting how mobile technologies reshape family norms, values, and social structures.

Undoubtedly, mobile phones serve many beneficial purposes within families. They enable more efficient management of household chores and provide improved ways to communicate and handle daily life (Campbell & Ling, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2008). Furthermore, the ability to stay connected with family members when physically apart has personal benefits. For example, communication through mobile phones aids in emotional regulation. The use of mobile phones within our social circles helps us establish our position in the eyes of family and loved ones, contributing to our self-perception and emotional well-being (Katz, 2010).

However, the unique features of mobile phones have also made them the most controversial electronic gadgets. Mobile phones are small, portable, personal, and serve both communicative and instrumental purposes. They remove barriers to free access to people and information

(Campbell, 2015; Ling, 2004). They can become someone's "digital black box", encompassing all the values, interests, and secret life of their users.

The negative aspects of mobile phone technology and its impacts on personal health, social life, and family functioning have been extensively studied (Liu et al., 2020; Nath, 2018). Specifically, the negative effects of mobile phone use on marital life have been explored in various social and cultural contexts. The use of social media can lead people to feel unhappy about themselves, their partner, and their relationships through comparisons with an idealized picture of others' relationships. It can also result in "technoference" in relationships, where excessive phone use disrupts quality time for couples (Farooq et al., 2015; Jomy et al., 2019; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

In this study, our aim is to investigate if and how married people in Iran experience concerns and panic arising from mobile phone use in their marital life. While we did not intend to compare the experiences of men and women, the results shed light on gender differences in how they perceive the side effects of mobile phone use in marital life. We utilized grounded theory and conducted in-depth interviews. This study is significant due to its cultural context in Iranian society. Additionally, mobile phone adoption in developing countries is sometimes seen as the adoption of Western values, which can intensify conflicts among family members. The research was conducted in Isfahan, one of the largest cities in Iran. In the following sections, we will delve into the details of the methodology we employed.

Research Method

The exploratory nature of the study required an inductive technique used in qualitative research. Qualitative research seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour and their perspectives on issues. We employed the grounded theory method (GTM) to explore how using a mobile phone can affect marital life in a concerning way. GTM provides guidelines for data collection and analysis, including coding, comparisons between data, memo writing, and theoretical sampling. In this paper, we have followed the methodological process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

We applied the theoretical sampling technique, where researchers choose new cases to compare with cases that have already been studied. Therefore, data collection and analysis took place in an alternating sequence. After achieving theoretical saturation, where no new or relevant data emerged considering the categories or relationships between them, sampling was stopped after 30 interviews. Thematic

Coding was used to analyse the data and create codes, concepts, and categories.

Data for the study were obtained from in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between 40 to 90 min with 30 married adults aged from 25 to 65 in Isfahan, Iran. The interviews were primarily conducted at the respondents' homes or in public venues. With the respondents' consent to audiotape the interviews, we recorded, transcribed, and analyzed them. The process of coding was performed by the research team, and reliability checks and tests of internal and external validity were carried out.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling. We specifically chose participants who were married adults and users of smartphones. In selecting female participants, we focused only on married women who were housewives. The participants represented a diverse range of demographic variables, including age, education, length of marital life, number of children, and the male participants' occupation. However, our analysis of the findings revealed that other than gender, none of the above variables were significant factors in influencing couples' experiences with mobile phones in their marital lives. Instead, it was found that the couples' marital background was the key determinant in shaping this experience. We will provide further elaboration on this topic later.

The interview questions were organized into four sections: personal use of mobile phones (such as average daily usage, different ways of usage, and personal feelings towards the device), personal use of mobile phones in relation to household and family life (including questions about privacy and communication with spouse through mobile phones), general use of mobile phones by the participant and their spouse (covering topics like who uses the mobile phone more, for what purposes, who initiates more calls, and expectations regarding mobile phone usage), and the controversial role of mobile phones in their marital relationship (addressing conflicts or issues related to mobile phone usage while being together or during telecommunication).

Data Analysis

The process of analysing data in grounded theory includes three phases: "Open coding" is the first phase concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing phenomena found in the text. At this stage, it is important to have fairly abstract categories in addition to very concrete ones, as the abstract ones help to generate general theory. The second phase of the process is "axial coding", which is the process of relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties

and dimensions. To simplify this process, rather than looking for all kinds of relations, grounded theorists emphasize causal relationships and fit things into a basic frame of generic relationships. In the third phase, "selective coding", we selected one category as the core category to which all the other categories were related and could explain them.

Results

The narrations of married men and women in our sample show that mobile phones create tensions and concerns in both marital life and the realm of personal rights. We have categorized these concerns into a main category of "feeling insecure" and distinguished four main types of insecurity: emotional insecurity, relationship insecurity, individual insecurity, and domestic insecurity. Feeling insecure due to mobile phone usage can occur in various social situations, whether the partners are together or apart. It can arise from using a mobile phone at a family gathering, engaging in social media activities, or using the phone to contact the other partner when they are a part from each other.

Insecurity often stems from how an individual interprets their spouse's use of the mobile phone. Insecurity is a perception, not necessarily a reality, but it is influenced by the user's behaviour and how their partner interprets it. This characteristic is known as "ambiguity", a part of the ecological influences of technology that demonstrates how the definition of problematic behaviour varies among individuals (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010). We have observed that "mobile phone etiquette" and "social media behaviour" are two main categories that shape couples' interpretations. Mobile phone etiquette primarily refers to the acceptable way of using a mobile phone in public spaces. Lipscomb et al. (2005) found significant agreement regarding inappropriate places to make cell phone calls. However, in this paper, we focus on mobile phone etiquette within the context of marital life. It encompasses the norms related to when, where, how, and how much to use a mobile phone, as long as it impacts marital life. One's mobile phone use makes them interpretational or accountable. Couples have certain codes in their minds that distinguish normal use from problematic use. These codes stem from their values, particularly their values in marital life, and their lived experiences. Mobile phone etiquette is an explanatory factor not only when the partners are together, but also in their telecommunication and individual activities on social media. Social media behaviour facilitates surveillance by providing updates on people's statuses, revealing their friends and followers, as well as their comments and likes. Below, we will discuss different types of insecurity and the contexts in which this feeling arises.

Emotional Insecurity

Emotional insecurity is a result of the destructive role of mobile phones in couples' quality time. Mobile technology has been found to be a gadget that, although it creates the possibility of remote communication, but it plays an intrusive role in face-to-face relationships and causes dissatisfaction (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Additionally, the mobile phone has normalized ignoring the presence of others. Receiving calls or messages while people are involved in their daily relationships is not a pleasant event, as it creates an atmosphere of tension, ignorance, and immorality in conversation (Geser, 2004).

Emotional insecurity happens when a partner expects the other one to spend time with him or her but the other one is busy on the phone. This is experienced more severely when it is supposed to be a private quality time for the couple like dining out on a special occasion or having an intimate talk on the bed after a busy day.

One term that almost all the victims of emotional insecurity talk about it is "mobile phone addiction". Mobile phone addiction is not merely a scientific term, but surprisingly public is very familiar with this term. Many people live with it and feel it! So, in this research "mobile phone addiction" is an in-vivo code that almost all the participants had experienced in their marital life [according to their criteria] or were aware of its consequences. There are a considerable number of themes and studies that take a critical approach to mobile phone addiction. The term "nomophobia" refers to the anxiety, discomfort, and stress caused to the person when they do not have their smartphone readily available to them (King, 2013). Katz and Akhus (2002) call the phenomenon of attaching to a mobile phone device, "perpetual contact".

Mobile phone addiction happens due to different reasons. Some people would like to be always online and respond to text messages as early as possible because they define themselves by their mobile phones (Atchley & Warden, 2012). For some other people, mobile phone use is a way to escape from reality and their problematic life (Agus et al., 2022).

According to the participants' narration, couples think that their spouse is addicted to a mobile phone if he/she uses a mobile phone at every moment like eating time, bedtime, in presence of guests, while driving a car, and any other time that is supposed to be the time for family ritual. For example:

"I work from morning to the late evening. When I come back home, I find my wife busy on her mobile. As if I'm not there at all. She is busy the whole day on her phone and she cannot stop it when I get back home. There is no such thing as welcoming and serving husband, it seems". (Male, 47 years old)

Feeling emotionally insecure in a marital relationship means that one feels he or she is not the priority for the other one. Mobile phone technology has created an atmosphere that can simply result in feeling ignored. In 2012, the *Macquarie* dictionary coined the term “phubbing” that explains how people prefer their mobile phones to the people who are around them in the real world (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016). Later, Roberts and David (2016) converted the term to p-phubbing that shows how couples ignore their partner for the sake of their mobile phone.

The participants who feel emotionally insecure about their spouse’s mobile phone etiquette believe that mobile phones interfere with their marital life. They believe that following a proper phone etiquette or removing the phone from their life would allow them to spend more quality time with their spouse. They view mobile phone as a disruptive technology that has interfered with the pleasant atmosphere of their marriage. In some cases, they not only criticize their spouse for paying too much attention to their mobile phone, but also blame themselves for contributing to the problem.

In our research, most of the participants had experienced “Technoference”. As said before, this term discusses the disruptive role of mobile phones in social relationships, in particular couples’ relationships. McDaniel and Coyne (2016) have studied the disruptive role of new technologies in couples’ relationships. Their survey on women who were in a marital or cohabitation relationship showed that women believe technologies like smartphones and televisions interrupt their relationship with their partner during leisure time and mealtime. “Absent presence” is another concept where an individual can be physically present in a conversation, but their attention is elsewhere, usually technology. Mobile phones can create an absent present effect, which is exemplified through an individual’s delayed responses, mechanical intonation, and a motionless body. All three of these effects signal to the individual’s conversational partner that the person is not engaged enough to respond immediately or fully (Aagaard, 2016). This is how mobile phones can create a barrier between couples, which may then impact their overall connectedness.

Although the researches mentioned above have not compared the finding in the context of gender; other studies show that women more than men believe in the destructive role of mobile phones in their relationships. Women identify more situations in which cell phone use is unwelcome, they may be more irritated by social etiquette violations (Forgays et al., 2014). In comparison, men do not believe that using a mobile phone in the presence of a partner is necessarily inappropriate

behaviour. In our sample too, women represented themselves as though they were more concerned about the disruptive role of mobile phones in their marital relationship. Here are two examples:

“Unfortunately, mobile phones have occupied even the most private moments of our life. I take my mobile phone everywhere, even to the bathroom. It’s embarrassing I know. But I think it’s a save of time. So, by saying this I mean... I cannot criticize my husband for overusing his mobile phone when I am so attached to my phone myself”. (Female, 38 years old)

“Nowadays all relationships have become superficial. Even between wife and husband! You feel a gap, a wall; I think new technologies like mobile phones are the cause. Technology has deprived us of our warm relationships. And you should be very lucky not to be one of the victims of online infidelity”. (Female, 34 years old)

Emotional insecurity does not occur only when couples are in the presence of each other but also in their telecommunication. According to mobile phone etiquette in marital life, people should answer their spouse’s call immediately or give a call back as soon as possible. Otherwise, that could make their partner feel emotionally insecure. The examples below show different perceptions of the female and male participants of the research:

“I expect my husband to answer my call fast otherwise I feel tensed that something might has happened to him, I mean accident or something.... or I think what other thing he is doing that is more important than me?!” (Female, 29 years old)

“I get irritated when I call my wife and I have to wait because her phone is busy. You know! The mobile phone is supposed to make your important people accessible to you. But when they are busy with other people... it’s irritating...”. (Male, 41 years old)

Although it is hard to generalize, we noticed gender differences in how men and women interpret an unfulfilled call to their spouse. It seems for women it is a cause of concern (as if the husband is not well or he is unhappy with her), and for men, it is a cause of irritation (as if the wife is not attentive and she did not perform her duty of picking husbands’ call fast).

Relationship Insecurity

One’s use of a mobile phone can cause relationship insecurity for their partner. We have observed that people experience relationship insecurity in their marital life in various ways. The most common activities that lead to relationship insecurity in marital life include consuming pornographic content on mobile phones and engaging in extramarital

relationships. Relationship insecurity makes the person feel that they are not attractive enough to their partner or that their partner is not satisfied with their sexual/marital life.

Women are more concerned than men about their physical appearance and whether they are sexually attractive to their partner and if their partner is content with their sexual life. They perceive their male partner as being more critical of their physical appearance (Groves et al., 2011). Additionally, they are more interested in their husband's activity on social media, their contact list, and their likes and comments.

Women's concerns about their appearance and whether their husband consumes adult content could be related to the larger concern of a husband engaging in cyber-sex. It seems that men, more than women, become involved in cybersex after marriage. Cybersex is a significant factor in separation and divorce, and the overwhelming online interaction compromises offline relationships, detracts from job performance, and increases the potential for addiction to sex or the Internet (Schneider, 2003; Underwood & Findlay, 2004). An investigation of married men's online sexual behaviour reveals that approximately 78% of participants reported having one face-to-face sexual encounter with someone they met online within a year (Dew et al., 2006).

The Internet affects sexual and emotional intimacy in couples' relationships. Those who compulsively engage in online sexual activities desire less sex, feel less desirable, and experience reduced sexual satisfaction and fewer sexual encounters (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Bridges et al., 2003). As mentioned before, "ambiguity" as a feature of technology (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010) allows for different approaches to viewing online porn. One might consider viewing online porn as a problem, though it is not defined similarly by one's partner (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008).

Our interviews show that relationship insecurity is mostly experienced by women, and they, more than men, have a problematic approach to viewing online porn. Although there is strict censorship on adult content in Iran, there is still easy access to pornographic content, and mobile phones make it easier to access anywhere, anytime. Almost half of the women in the sample admitted that their husbands watch adult videos and photos.

Women have different reasons for their hatred towards their husbands watching porn videos. For example:

"He watches the porn stars' videos and feels unhappy with his own sexual life." (Female, 31 years old)

"It is not acceptable in our society, family, or our religion." (Female, 34 years old)

Although for some men, watching pornographic videos is a means of “sexual training”, women do not find the lessons pleasant and practical. Below are two examples:

“I don’t mind if my husband watches porn. He can watch as much as he wants. But he should not expect me to act like a porn star.” (Female, 30 years old)

“Once I was Googling something on my husband’s phone, and I discovered that he had searched for some sexual content. When I asked him about it he said, ‘Honey! I was just trying to get some information about sex. I just wanted to learn.’ Although that didn’t convince me, I had to trust him.” (Female, 29 years old)

In Hertlein and Stevenson’s research (2010), men showed a desire to be educated about what stimulates their partner and to gain the potential to be aroused by what they observe. Furthermore, men rated themselves as having sex more often and stated they used casual online sexual activity as a way to increase arousal with their partner.

As mentioned before, women are more likely to be concerned about their partner’s online sexual activity than men and express feelings of hurt or betrayal regarding their partner’s online activities. They also feel pressure to perform the sexual acts their partner viewed online (Albright, 2008; Grov et al., 2011).

There were two women among the research participants who believed their spouses were cheating on them. Additionally, there were two male participants who were suspicious of their wives. They assumed that the mobile phone was the medium that helped their spouses not only find a new partner but also continue the immoral relationship relatively easily and safely.

“My husband is in contact with a woman who used to work for him. Though she left the job a few years ago, my husband still has her mobile number saved in his phone. He messaged her recently just for a chitchat... and now she’s closer to my husband than I am.”

Another female participant said:

“My husband is in a relationship with his cousin. They were in love before we got married, but my husband’s mother didn’t approve of their relationship¹. Then, we met and had a love marriage. But it seems like they still have feelings for each other, even with my husband having two kids and that lady having one.”

Mobile technologies make it possible to connect with a wide range of potential partners (Baker, 2007) and conduct relationships in secret (Glass, 2002).

¹In Iran, there is no religious and social barrier for cousins’ marriage.

Although Intimate Partner Surveillance (IPS) is a violation of privacy, those who use digital technologies to monitor their partners often justify and support their actions. According to Bellini et al. (2020), the four most common justifications are: (1) gathering digital evidence of infidelity, (2) ensuring their partner's faithfulness, (3) understanding changes in their partner's behavior, and most concerning, (4) controlling their partner's devices and accounts. In our sample, we had two women who had installed spyware apps to monitor their husbands (in one case, a close friend was directly involved by installing the spyware app on her own device). We didn't have any male participants who claimed to use IPS through spyware apps.

Using a mobile phone in inappropriate places, as mentioned earlier, such as in bathrooms, can indicate a mobile phone addiction and may also be seen as a strategy to maintain privacy while using it. For instance:

"Just like when my husband goes to the bathroom to smoke cigarettes, knowing I don't like him smoking, sometimes he takes his mobile phone with him. I wonder what he does with it in there!" (Female, 29 years old)

"I was suspicious of him [her husband]. I tried to figure out his [mobile phone's] password. He was clever and changed the PIN frequently. If he noticed me watching his fingers while he entered the PIN, he would try to hide his movements on the phone screen." (Female, 30 years old)

One of the women who discovered her husband was cheating on her said:

"It wasn't a surprise. Well, it was, but I should have expected it. Our life wasn't good. He wasn't a family man. He had done all sorts of terrible things and finally did the last and worst one. There's no reason for me to stay with him more." (Female, 30 years old)

The male participants who claimed their wives were cheating on them were not much sure about what they think. For example:

"My wife has more than three active SIM cards. But usually, when I call her, she doesn't answer. She leaves the house without telling me, comes home late, and avoids answering my questions about where she's been or who she's been with. I've heard things from my neighbours, but I don't want to believe it." (Male, 43 years old)

"She has changed a lot. Before, I could easily take her phone and use it, but now she not only changes the password 2-3 times a day, but I don't even see her phone at all. She keeps it hidden from me. Once I found it under the bed, another time in the closet..." (Male, 31 years old)

Some narratives suggest that the family context can create an atmosphere of insecurity within couples. Factors such as sudden economic crises, illness, and childbirth can impact couples' relationships

and lead them to suspect each other's commitment at least temporarily. For example, one woman said:

"He is suspicious of me and I am suspicious of him! He always thinks I am with another man. He once even took a printout of my calls. This becomes more severe when we have financial difficulties. When his business is not doing well... maybe he thinks that being without money makes me unfaithful. He feels insecure about our relationship."

In addition to watching adult content and engaging in extramarital affairs, which are both forms of infidelity, there are other factors that contribute to relationship insecurity. It is important to note that the examples given predominantly reflect the perspectives of men in relation to relationship insecurity. Two main instances are when a wife shares intimate details and photos of her marriage on social media, and when a wife discusses her personal and marital life with her friends on social networking apps. These actions are seen as exposing the private aspects of their marriage to others, leaving room for judgment, advice, and even abuse from outsiders. Interestingly, the narratives surrounding these examples indicate that men who experience relationship insecurity often perceive their wives as socially naive. They fear that individuals with ill intentions could take advantage of their wives' innocence and disrupt their marital life. As a result, men tend to exert control over their wives' use of mobile phones and behaviour on social media in order to protect their marriage.

For instance, a 45-year-old man shared his experience: "I have seen my wife discussing the most private aspects of our life with her friends on WhatsApp groups. I dislike it because it makes our relationship vulnerable. And her friends... they aren't particularly mature. They constantly offer advice to my wife, telling her what is right or wrong and what she should do... I have noticed these conversations and have tried numerous times to persuade her to leave the groups... but she keeps joining again."

A newly married woman also shared her story:

"My husband is my primary audience on Instagram! Whenever I share a post, he is the first person to see it. Many times, he has pressured me to delete posts he disapproves of, like when he thinks my outfit is too revealing. He always discourages me from sharing our photos on Instagram, claiming that people are overly curious and will comment on our appearance or judge our relationship. According to him, people meddle in our lives, and we should try to avoid it!"

Individual Insecurity

People dislike being observed, pursued, and monitored by their spouse through mobile phones. Even in their marriage, people seek privacy.

However, mobile phones and their features can disrupt this privacy. When individuals feel that their partner is invading their privacy, they experience a sense of constant surveillance that prevents them from enjoying their personal space and individuality. Additionally, they may perceive their partner as lacking trust. This easy access to surveillance through social media has been referred to as “graphopticon” by Grosser (2014). The graphopticon represents a self-imposed audit within social networks where individuals monitor each other’s metrics. It combines the concept of the social graph with the omnipticon (everyone watching everyone) to create the potential for constant monitoring.

The mobile phone creates individual insecurities within couples’ relationships in two ways:

1. When partners are together and become curious about each other’s phone usage, leading to a desire to inspect each other’s devices or eavesdrop on phone conversations.

Many participants expressed the belief that the mobile phone is a personal or private device, comparing it to a toothbrush. However, challenges arise when one partner considers the mobile phone personal, but the other does not. Within marital life, some participants believe that secrecy or privacy has no place in a relationship.

Perception of privacy is also influenced by power dynamics, particularly in societies where gender plays a significant role in the power structure, as seen in many Eastern societies. In our sample, some women believed that a husband monitoring his wife’s phone was normal. They viewed phone sharing as a sign of intimacy, trust, and honesty.

“My phone is always on the center table. It is handy. There is a screen lock for safety, but my husband knows the PIN. He can use my phone anytime. If any unknown number calls, I ask my husband to answer. I have nothing to hide.” (Female, 34 years old)

For participants like her, maintaining privacy is seen as having something to hide. She adopts various strategies, such as sharing the PIN code with her husband, asking him to answer calls from unknown numbers, or informing him about all incoming and outgoing calls, in order to gain his trust and demonstrate her honesty.

Some research conducted in Asian societies confirms that for some women, sharing the phone with other family members and allowing the husband to monitor their digital activity is culturally acceptable (Sambasivan et al., 2018).

When we asked the interviewees if their spouse ever used their phones, most of them replied “Yes”. However, many of them admitted that they didn’t like it because they believed that the mobile phone is a

personal device, and their spouse using their phone could be interpreted as an invasion of privacy.

2. Furthermore, when the couple is physically apart, frequent calls and messages from one partner can make the other feel like their privacy is being invaded.

Frequent communication between couples can be seen as a sign of connection and care. Licoppe (2004) identifies two modes of telephonic interactions: “conversational mode”, which involves long, open-ended conversations usually conducted through landlines, and “contact mode”, which involves short but regular interactions through mobile phones. The latter fosters a sense of connected presence and reassures the relationship. Both modes strengthen the bond between partners, especially in romantic relationships. Not only do people have more frequent phone contact with their romantic partners compared to others, they also expect quick responses to their calls and texts from their partners. The lack of response can quickly frustrate them (Forgays et al., 2014).

However, it is not always the same. At least the married couples in our sample believed that frequent calls from their partner made them feel controlled or as if their spouse didn’t trust them. This perception relates to the idea of the mobile phone as a personal device.

The mobile phone has created the expectation of constant accessibility, a feature that is not always desirable. Ling (2004) describes this as the “digital leash”, which refers to the controlling role of mobile phones in family life (Haddon, 2002). This term can be applied to both parent-child and husband-wife relationships, where technology serves as a leash to surveil one’s life outside the immediate family context.

In marital life, the concept of privacy seems to be somewhat controversial and may depend on cultural norms. More than half of the participants in our sample believe that husbands and wives should not keep anything private. However, at the same time, they view phone sharing and partner snooping on their phones as violations of their privacy rights.

Domestic Insecurity

Mobile phone addiction and the inappropriate use of mobile phones can hinder individuals from effectively carrying out their household duties. Excessive use of mobile phones diminishes productivity at work and home (Duke & Montag, 2017). Problematic use of smartphone is associated with decreased well-being, as indicated by Ryff’s six dimensions of psychological well-being: positive relations, autonomy,

environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Horwood & Anglim, 2019).

In our sample, there are men and women who believe that their partners are neglecting their family responsibilities due to excessive mobile phone use. This creates a sense of insecurity, which we refer to as domestic insecurity. Specifically, men blame their wives for prioritizing their mobile phones over household chores such as cleaning, ironing, and taking care of the children's school-related matters.

The instance below exemplifies the extent of attachment to mobile phones.

"My wife was so engrossed in her phone that she took it with her to the washroom. We were waiting for dinner, and her extended absence caused concern among the children and me. Worried, we went to the door and called out to her. Eventually, she emerged with her phone in hand, having forgotten where she was and what she was doing!" (Male, 42 years old)

Interestingly, we did not encounter any women complaining about their husbands' mobile phone use impeding their assistance with household tasks. However, they did mention that their husbands' phone usage interfered with the time they spend with their children. It appears that traditional gender roles play a role here, with women being expected to handle all domestic chores and children's affairs, while men primarily focus on breadwinning.

"I have two sons, and I am solely responsible for all their needs, including education. I expect my husband to spend time with them when he returns home at night. However, he is constantly engrossed in his mobile phone or watching Turkish Series." (Female, 44 years old)

We also encountered cases of women in our sample who admitted to overusing mobile phones and acknowledged the impact on their daily tasks. These women adopted self-critical and self-blaming approaches, recognizing the judgmental gaze of others.

"I usually charge my phone in the kitchen, which conveniently keeps it close to me. Moreover, I don't have to reveal myself to others when I want to pick up my phone." (Female, 54 years old)

"I believe this is a shared experience among women, burning onions while texting..." (Female, 37 years old).

Beside the interfering role of mobile phone in conducting daily activities, the women in our study expressed enthusiasm regarding the beneficial impact of social media on household tasks. They mentioned learning various new things, such as recipes and innovative house organization ideas, through social media enhances their enjoyment of doing chores.

Discussion

The mobile phone, commonly referred to as the “mobile” in Iran, has become a crucial device in couples’ relationships. On one hand, it is seen as a tool that enhances emotional connection between spouses and improves daily life management. On the other hand, conflicts arising from mobile phone usage among couples are prevalent in real life. Our study was inspired by numerous instances of such conflicts within the social circle of the researchers.

In this paper, we examine how the use of mobile phones create a sense of insecurity in marital life. We observed that mobile phones and mobile phone communication ensure that couples are constantly present for one another. This means that even when they are physically apart, they remain accountable to each other. Mobile phone etiquette and social media behaviour offer couples abundant clues to observe and analyze each other’s conduct and commitment. In this section, we will briefly discuss our findings in light of the existing literature to provide a more thorough explanation.

This paper aims to apply sociological insights to examine the impact of mobile phones on family life. In this section, we will draw upon existing literature on the social aspects of technology use, the significance of users’ perceptions and interpretations of technology, and how relationship backgrounds can influence these interpretations.

To begin with, we would prefer to refer to the theories and concepts that view the mobile phone not only as a digital gadget, but as a device that possesses a soul and generates a culture. This aspect of the theoretical background reinforces our finding that the mobile phone plays a role in our social life, influencing our mindsets, behaviours, and relationships. The “Apparatgeist” approach is one of the theoretical perspectives that elucidate mobile phone usage by considering the cultural characteristics of users. In this theory, Katz and Akhus (2002) explain how individuals perceive and understand technologies, as well as the consequences of their interpretations. They argue that values and norms in different societies shape the way people utilize a mobile phone. This approach views the mobile phone not merely as an object, but as a gadget with an interpretable and evaluative essence. Our findings support this perspective on technology, as we have discussed how couples interpret each other’s mobile phone use differently in various contexts and interact accordingly. It is not that mobile phones themselves create challenges among couples, but rather how people employ and comprehend them. As Hertlein and Stevenson (2010) articulate, technological advances enable us to do what we have always done, but the meaning of technology is constructed by its users.

"Adaptation theory" is a prevalent framework for understanding mobile phone use. In this theory, Haddon illustrates how individuals experience symbolic tension as they adapt to mobile phone usage within their families (Ling, 2004: 102). Moreover, some researchers discuss the "domestication of technology" and demonstrate how people incorporate technologies into their everyday lives (Haddon, 2002; Silverstone et al., 1992). This theory examines the role of technology in the daily lives of families, emphasizing the reciprocal nature of the influence of technologies on families by exploring how family processes are embraced and integrated (Koskinen & Kurvinen, 2005). Therefore, the mobile phone is not a passive entity in our social interactions. As Goggin (2006) asserts, it is an integral part of our culture. Gerard Goggin (2006) discusses a "mobile phone culture" and argues that the mobile phone not only contributes to our culture, but also generates new cultural elements through the emergence of novel social behaviours and meanings resulting from its use. Using personal technology such as a mobile phone in daily life is a process of understanding and learning about the gadget. It involves not only learning the technical aspects but also socially understanding how to use the mobile phone appropriately. Couples, in particular, need to revise their beliefs about marital concepts when adopting new technologies. From a structural-functional perspective, couples who don't revisit interpersonal rules as they integrate technology into their household may perceive their partner's behaviour as detrimental, potentially creating tension and interfering with daily functioning (Daneback et al., 2005).

People's perception of mobile phones plays a significant role. Is it simply a device for everyday activities or does it have various functions like entertainment and information? Furthermore, how individuals use their mobile phones and for what purposes can influence how they interpret their spouse's usage. In our sample, we had a case of a participant who had betrayed his wife and he was very curious about his wife's use of mobile phone. Additionally, those who limit their mobile phone use to instrumental purposes become curious about those who spend more time on their devices. Allred and Crowley (2017) have argued that it is an individual's negative perception of the presence of mobile phones which leads to decreased connectedness between individuals not the mere presence of the mobile phones.

The participants' narratives show that feeling insecure due to mobile phone usage in marital life is greatly influenced by their background and social context. In the Iranian society, although transparent data is not readily available, the public, particularly young women, believe that

extramarital affairs and infidelity are on the rise. Almost all the women in our sample discussed various infidelity cases they had heard about within their social circle. Importantly, they make a connection between infidelity and mobile phones. There is a sense of panic surrounding infidelity, and the public perceives mobile phones as playing a role. Additionally, we must acknowledge the influence of religion. In Iran, some view mobile phones as carriers of western values. This sentiment was particularly evident when speaking to religious participants. They see mobile phones as technology that exposes individuals to taboo content and illicit relationships, with a focus on sexual content and extramarital affairs. They believe that while these phenomena may be considered normal in Western Societies, they are unacceptable in our own society and contradict religious values. This group holds a more conservative and pessimistic view towards mobile phones.

In the context of social insecurity, we can look at the backgrounds of married couples. It appears that individuals interpret their spouse's use of the mobile phone based on their relationship history. Couples who have had warm relationships, high levels of trust, and satisfying sexual relationships are less likely to see their partner's use of the mobile phone as abusive or problematic. Conversely, couples who have experienced less peace and trust in their marriage along with a vulnerable sexual life, are more likely to experience insecurity. Insecurity in relationships, for both men and women, is mainly attributed to the couple's sexual relationship. Therefore, it is better to say that a mobile phone can exacerbate existing insecurity in a couple's relationship. The mobile phone provides evidence for a heightened sense of insecurity, as couples interpret each other's use of the mobile phone based on the cues they already have in their minds.

"Trust" is a crucial factor in marriage. There is a negative relationship between the amount of mobile phone usage and the level of trust that people receive from their spouses. Similarly, there is a correlation between the privacy of mobile phone usage and the level of trust, intimacy, and peace in a marital relationship (Mirkheshti, 2014; Mousavi & Mousavi, 2012). On the other hand, increased mobile phone calls in romantic relationships are associated with positive relationship qualities, reduced uncertainty, greater confidence, and higher levels of love and commitment (Jin et al., 2010; Licopp, 2004). Our findings support these correlations, as personalizing mobile phones is a major source of suspicion and concern. Additionally, using the mobile phone to communicate frequently with one's spouse indicates a positive relationship. However, we have introduced a new perspective on

frequent calls from one partner to the other. As previously discussed, frequent calls can be seen as a lack of trust and excessive monitoring, which some people view as an invasion of privacy. This, as we have labelled it, leads to individual insecurity.

This paper is an extension of Hertlein and Stevenson's (2010) work, in which they explore the problems associated with internet usage in couples' relationships, such as online infidelity and pornography consumption. Our paper focuses on how mobile phones influence the establishment of rules, roles, and boundaries within couples and families, as well as their interactions with the outside world. As it is evident in our findings, gender as a variable can explain and provide deeper insight into our results. Gender warrants further investigation as a factor. There is a considerable amount of literature exploring the relationship between gender and mobile phones. Some argue that mobile phones promote equal relationships between men and women in families (Fortunati, 2000; Geser 2004). Others suggest the opposite, asserting that mobile phones can facilitate men's dominance and control over women (Shabani Afarani et al., 2018).

Our research aligns more closely with the second perspective. Mobile phones primarily reinforce the power dynamics in husband-wife relationships. They serve as a tool for the more powerful partner to control and dominate the other. Previous research by Castells et al. (2014) emphasizes that the role of mobile phones in families is heavily influenced by cultural context. If the dominant relationship pattern is rooted in domination and suppression, mobile phones will reflect and perpetuate inequality within families.

Significant differences exist between men and women in terms of the types of insecurity they commonly experience. We discovered that women predominantly experience emotional insecurity, while men are more concerned with domestic and individual insecurity. Regarding relationship insecurity, as previously discussed, women view their husbands as active participants in potential infidelity, while men often perceive their wives as passive and vulnerable to potential abuse or deception. These findings reflect traditional gender roles and attitudes towards men and women. Women prioritize the quality of their marital relationship, love, sexual satisfaction, while men focus on their wives' performance in child-rearing and household tasks. They also seek personal space.

Throughout their development, girls and women have been socialized to be more attuned to social cues and feedback compared to boys and men (Langer, 2010). This socialization leads to a greater reliance on

affiliative language aimed at maintaining relational bonds. In contrast, men tend to use more task-oriented and goal-directed language, which may result in less sensitivity to the social environment (Mulac et al., 2001). Therefore, women spend more time using their phones to connect with friends and family, while men primarily use their phones for information retrieval (Wei & Lo, 2006).

In our research, we also observed that men rationalize their phone use (or label their wife's use as "excessive") as necessary for their work. Since all the women in our sample were housewives, men perceived their phone use as a waste of time. Gender differences in perception and privacy management on personal devices have been previously studied in Asian Societies. For example, in South Asia, women have a lower mobile phone ownership rate compared to men, which results in less control over their phones and sharing their devices with family members (Sambasivan et al., 2018). While our research in Iranian Society does not support the findings of the study conducted in South Asia, we observed that some female participants hold the belief that a "good wife" is someone who does not keep anything private, and willingly shares her mobile phone with her husband. This is seen as a demonstration of loyalty to the marital life, although it is not representative of all female participants. It is worth noting that these values may be influenced by the socialization process, and it is interesting to see how traditional norms and values persist in the context of new technologies.

Gender differences and mobile phones require more investigation in diverse social contexts, as it appears to be influenced by societal values and norms. In particular, less modern societies have the potential to shed light on this topic. Additionally, we recommend exploring the experiences of women who are not housewives but have professional occupations as working women may be more familiar with modern values of independence and privacy. We also suggest conducting longitudinal studies on couples' experiences of conflicts related to mobile phones using action research methods.

As previously mentioned, our research reveals concerns and anxieties related to mobile phones in marital life, including emotional insecurity, relationship insecurity, individual insecurity, and domestic insecurity. These categories can be further investigated individually to gain a better understanding of the challenges posed by mobile phones in the Modern Iranian Society. One limitation of this study is the wide variety of concepts and processes, which prevented a deeper and more comprehensive analysis.

The findings of this research have practical implications for professionals in the field of family therapy. Family psychologists and marriage consultants can benefit from this paper in providing advice on the healthy use of mobile phone technology, particularly for young couples. It can also be helpful to them for educating couples on how to address and resolve conflicts arising from technology use. In order to establish strong interpersonal relationships between spouses, it is essential to foster self-awareness, trust, and sensitivity towards each other. The pervasive influence of mobile phones in our daily lives can often disrupt this process. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the impact of mobile phones and their consequences while supporting couples in improving their marital life.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc.

Conflicts of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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