

# CAN PARTNERS' COMMON STRATEGIES FOR THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT REDUCE THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF INTERNET USE ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP QUALITY?

## ABSTRACT

*In today's digital era, when digital content has permeated all aspects of life, it is essential to determine how the interest and attention that partners invest in digital content affect the quality of their relationship, which patterns of use pose the greatest risk, and which may contribute to positive relationship quality. Drawing on the recent relational maintenance model of positive relationship-focused behaviors (Counouris, Tyson and Henry, 2021), this study aims to examine how partners' use of social media, messaging applications, and partners' common strategies for the digital environment contribute to both the positive and negative dimensions of relationship quality. The study was conducted on a probability cluster sample of 903 respondents with an average age of 44.53 years. Two hierarchical regression analyses were performed, explaining 12% of the variance in the positive dimension of relationship quality and 7.1% of the variance*

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*in the negative dimension of relationship quality. The findings indicate that better household financial conditions, less partner's daily social media use, more frequent discussions about social media usage, and more mutual messaging between partners contribute to a higher positive dimension of relationship quality. On the other hand, being female, poorer household financial conditions, and less discussion about social media usage contribute to a higher negative dimension of relationship quality. These results provide a framework for promoting relationship quality and offer insights into digital behaviors that can guide and enhance counselling and family interventions, making the study particularly relevant for social work practice by helping practitioners strengthen relationship functioning in their direct work with clients.*

## INTRODUCTION

Beyond our bond with our parents, our relationship with a romantic partner is one of the most profound and influential connections in our lives, which explains significant scientific curiosity for the process of partners' dynamics. Those dynamics can impact one's overall well-being. Carr et al. (2014.) demonstrated that marital satisfaction is strongly and significantly associated with both overall life satisfaction and short-term emotional well-being, with no notable differences observed between men and women. Though, marriage quality is an even broader and more complex concept than marriage satisfaction (Gere and MacDonald, 2013.). In this paper, the term *marriage quality* is used broadly to encompass not exclusively marital relationships, but also long-term intimate relationships and cohabitation, and it is used interchangeably with the term *relationship quality*.

## Marriage/relationship quality

Marriage quality is a multidimensional construct that encompasses both subjective evaluations and observable behaviours within a marital relationship (Fincham and Bradbury, 1987.). It is broadly defined as the positive and negative dimensions of a marriage (Fincham and Rogge, 2010.), including happiness and satisfaction, communication, support, conflict, and strain (Hemez et al., 2023.). High marital quality is typically characterized by strong emotional bonds, mutual respect, effective communication, and low levels of hostility or tension (Robles, 2014.). Conversely, low marital quality is implicated by dissatisfaction, negative attitudes toward the partner, and frequent conflicts (Robles, 2014.).

Generally, individuals who are married report higher levels of relationship quality compared to those in cohabiting unions, who in turn report better relation-

ship quality than individuals in non-cohabiting or dating relationships (Paik, 2010.). It is also well-established that marital satisfaction tends to decrease after the first few years of marriage and then increases again, resulting in a U-shaped curve (Rollins and Feldman, 1970.).

Research consistently shows that marital quality significantly predicts individual well-being and relationship stability, with higher-quality relationships associated with better emotional functioning and reduced psychological distress (Postler, Helms and Anastopoulos, 2022.). Conversely, problematic marriages can heighten stress and contribute to poorer physical health outcomes (Robles et al., 2014.). Although numerous studies have linked marital quality to cardiovascular and metabolic indicators, the broader consensus is that high-quality relationships serve as a general protective factor, whereas persistent marital strain may increase health risks (e.g., Azizi et al., 2024.; Bennett-Britton et al., 2017.; Gallo et al., 2003.). These findings underscore the wide-reaching implications of relationship quality beyond relational outcomes alone.

Determinants of marital quality include factors such as trust, empathy, emotional expression, shared values, and effective communication (Delatorre and Wagner, 2020), but also gender, education and spouse choice (Allendorf and Ghimire, 2013.). Gender differences play a role, meaning that husbands' marital satisfaction may depend on perceived support from their wives, while wives' satisfaction may be influenced by husbands' contributions to the relationship (Carr et al., 2014.).

While some aspects of a relationship, like relationship stability, e.g. such as whether couples remain together, are relatively straightforward to assess, the concept of marital quality is considerably more complex, both in its definition and in its measurement. Measurement of marital quality varies across studies, with tools assessing aspects such as dyadic cohesion, consensus, and interpersonal tensions (Delatorre and Wagner, 2020.). Allendorf and Ghimire (2013.) have identified key dimensions like satisfaction, togetherness, and conflict resolution as integral to marital quality. Despite advancements in measurement techniques, the construct remains complex due to its subjective nature and variability across cultural contexts.

In his meta-analysis, Robles (2014.) identified modest yet consistent associations between higher marital quality and improved health outcomes, with longitudinal evidence indicating that marital quality more often serves as a predictor of health rather than a consequence of it. Identifying whether effects were due to high marital strain, low marital support, or both would provide a better insight into marriage quality dynamics. These findings indicate that research should explore both positive and negative aspects of marital functioning to better understand their impact on partners' well-being.

## Marriage quality: A two-dimensional approach

The traditional approach conceptualized and measured marriage quality as a single dimension ranging from positive to negative (e.g., Spanier and Cole, 1976.). Unidimensional scales usually consist of statements that are summed up to a total score that is interpreted as ranging from extremely low relationship quality to extremely high relationship quality, depending on the score (e.g., *the Quality of Marriage Index - QMI*; Norton, 1983.). Evidence of ambivalent (with simultaneously high positive and high negative evaluations) and indifferent relationship types (with simultaneously low positive and low negative evaluations) highlighted the need for a two-dimensional perspective (Fincham and Linfield, 1997.). In addition, both relationship types differed in the way they reported partner behaviour and attributions of partner behaviour, but not in the score on traditional unidimensional scales of relationship quality. Inspired by these findings, Fincham and Rogge (2010.) were the first to introduce a two-dimensional conceptualization of relationship quality that includes a separate assessment of positive relationship characteristics and a separate assessment of negative relationship characteristics. The two dimensions are moderately correlated and capture unique aspects of relationship quality. The authors further argue that unidimensional measures may mask the distinct effects of positive and negative aspects of relationship quality, which was later supported by data showing a stronger association between negative partner behaviour and subjective well-being than between positive partner behaviour and subjective well-being (e.g., Rivers and Sanford, 2018.). This is also supported by research showing that the same positive or negative behaviours can have different consequences for relationship stability in different contexts, e.g., depending on whether the couples' problems are severe or less severe (McNulty, 2010.). Accordingly, Fincham and Linfield (1997.) developed a two-dimensional scale (*The Positive and Negative Quality in Marriage Scale (PANQIMS)*), which demonstrates higher predictive validity and statistical power than unidimensional measures.

## Social media and instant messaging applications

The last couple of decades have introduced and consolidated a previously unimaginable way of human socialization through social media and messaging applications. Although today most social media applications (SMA) also provide messaging options, for that purpose, instant messaging applications (IMA) remain dominant, cultivating a sense of privacy and intimacy in communication.

Despite the profound impact of digital platforms on interpersonal interaction, the literature shows a contextual and methodological gap in understanding the ef-

fects of IMA on communication and relationship dynamics (Gaston, 2024.). Findings point to a complex interplay of positive and negative influences. IMA can enhance connectivity, closeness, and emotional expression (Gaston, 2024.) and allow individuals more control and time to reflect before responding (Reid and Reid, 2007.). At the same time, expectations for rapid responses, reduced face-to-face cues, and the potential for misunderstandings can introduce stress. Frequent IMA use is also associated with reduced quality time together and with phubbing, which may provoke conflict and lower relationship satisfaction (Chotpitayasunondh and Douglas, 2016.; Karadağ et al., 2015.; Narić et al., 2024.). Studies also suggest moderating factors, such as attachment style, communication preferences (Gaston, 2024.; McSpadden, 2020.), relationship context (e.g., long-distance versus geographically close couples (Holtzman et al., 2021.)), and the balance between digital and face-to-face communication (Pollmann, Norman and Crockett, 2021.).

Research on SMA use in romantic relationships highlights the same positive and negative impacts on romantic relationships as IMA, yet the use of SMA has additional negative effects on relationship quality. Most common downsides of SMA are social comparison and unrealistic expectations, as via SMA people tend to present their lives selectively and unrealistically, often idealizing relationships, leading others to comparisons and feelings of dissatisfaction in their own relationships, and creating unrealistic relationship expectations, contributing to dissatisfaction when real-life relationships do not meet these standards. This can later also lead to increased jealousy, since SMA have become habitual and easily accessible, and thus facilitate initiating and managing romantic relationships, pursuing alternatives (Coundouris, Tyson and Henry, 2021.), blurring the lines between virtual and real-life interactions (Çulfa, Izgi and Çulfa, 2024.). Kovan (2023.) found that social media jealousy negatively predicted life satisfaction, with mediating role of communication skills between social media jealousy and life satisfaction in individuals with romantic relationships.

Some partners engage in conflicts due to the use of modern technology and excessive internet use by one partner (McDaniel and Drouin, 2019.). Furthermore, about a quarter of couples experience tension in their relationship due to technology, perceiving a negative impact of the digital environment, especially when the use of mobile phones and SMA interferes with their communication (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014.). Bouffard, Giglio, and Zheng (2021.) concluded that frequent use of Instagram was associated with reduced relationship satisfaction, which later led to more conflict and negative relationship outcomes. McDaniel, Galovan, and Drouin (2020.) found in their research that individuals who use technology more frequently, or those who perceive their partners as frequent technology users, experience lower leisure time satisfaction, more conflicts during shared leisure time, and lower relationship satisfaction. This suggests that time and attention diverted to SMA

may diminish the quality of romantic relationships. Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg (2019.) conclude that increased smartphone use correlates with lower relationship satisfaction, underscoring the need for common strategies for managing technology use within romantic relationships.

## **Partners' common strategies for digital environment**

In addition to prioritizing personal and spiritual traits over physical appearance, participants in the study by Çulfa, İzgi, and Çulfa (2024.) identified effective management of media interactions as an important expectation in romantic partnerships. Although partners' common strategies for the digital environment are a relatively new concept, the broader idea of behaviours used to maintain relationships has been established since the 1990s. Canary and Stafford (1992.) introduced relational maintenance strategies, categorising them into five empirically supported factors: positivity, assurances, networks, shared tasks, and openness. Positivity refers to pleasant and supportive communication; openness involves being transparent about one's needs; assurances communicate commitment; networks involve engagement with mutual social circles; and shared tasks refer to the distribution of everyday responsibilities.

In their meta-analysis, Coundouris, Tyson, and Henry (2021.) identified partners' common strategies for the digital environment and grouped them into four categories: maintaining an accurate and visible relationship status; sharing couple photos; sending positive and supportive private messages; and publicly tagging, posting about, or engaging with a partner's content. These behaviours were conceptualised within the positive relationship-focused behaviours model. Engaging in these strategies was associated with greater relationship satisfaction, security, and intimacy, thereby enhancing overall relationship quality and mitigating negative effects, with public expressions of positivity and assurance on SNA emerging as particularly effective.

Taken together, these digital behaviours can be understood not only as practical strategies but also as relational processes rooted in established interpersonal theories, offering insight into why certain online practices strengthen intimacy and reduce potential negative effects.

Another theoretical framework that helps explain how partners' digital strategies may reduce the negative effects of SMA is Social Penetration Theory (SPT; Altman and Taylor, 1973.). SPT describes relationship development as a gradual process of information exchange and increasing self-disclosure across both breadth (variety of topics) and depth (intimacy), guided by the norm of reciprocity (Carpenter

and Greene, 2016.). Individuals reveal their personality in layers, from superficial to deeply intimate content, with disclosure deepening as trust develops. In the context of SMA, partners' shared strategies—such as discussing social media activity, exchanging personal messages, and posting relationship-related content—function as modern forms of self-disclosure and relational investment. These behaviours communicate openness, responsiveness, and commitment, helping partners reinforce trust, strengthen emotional intimacy, and enhance relationship quality.

However, online communication operates under different norms than face-to-face interaction, often facilitating quicker and more open self-disclosure due to a perceived sense of anonymity and control. People may therefore share personal information more freely on SMA, which supports relational development but also creates risks such as over-disclosure or excessive connectivity. Ecosystemic Theory (ET; Bronfenbrenner, 1977.) helps contextualise this duality by framing relationships as embedded within multiple interacting systems—dyadic, social, cultural, and technological—that shape and are shaped by partners' digital behaviours. Within this framework, the microsystem (close relationships), mesosystem (interactions between partners' social networks), exosystem (indirect environments such as workplaces or social media platforms), macrosystem (cultural and digital norms), and chronosystem (changes over time, such as evolving digital practices) all influence how partners navigate the digital environment and employ relational strategies.

This integrated model illustrates how partners' common strategies in the digital environment adapt to platform affordances and broader societal norms, balancing opportunities for intimacy with systemic challenges and ultimately shaping relationship quality. Combining the positive relationship-focused behaviours framework with SPT's emphasis on self-disclosure (breadth and depth) and Ecosystemic Theory's multi-layered environmental systems provides a comprehensive lens for analysing digital–relational dynamics.

## PURPOSE AND AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to examine the extent to which the use of SMA, IMA, and partners' common strategies for the digital environment contributes to both positive and negative relationship quality. Based on a review of the relevant literature and prior empirical findings, two hypotheses were proposed. First (H1), it was expected that more frequent use of SMA and IMA<sup>4</sup> would be negatively associ-

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that SMA and IMA were grouped together for analysis due to their overlapping functions. Messaging applications increasingly include features such as status updates and media sharing, which are typical of SMA. Conversely, SMA often incorporate messaging functions, highlighting their interrelated nature.

ated with negative relationship quality. Second (H2), it was hypothesized that more frequent use of partners' common strategies in the digital environment would be positively associated with positive relationship quality and negatively associated with negative relationship quality.

## METHOD

### Procedure

The study employed the *Positive and Negative Quality in Marriage Scale* (PAN-QIMS; Fincham and Linfield, 1997.), available at <https://fincham.info/measures/panqims.htm>. As the PANQIMS had not been previously translated into Croatian or validated on a Croatian sample, the scale was translated using a double-blind back-translation method and subsequently standardized. A preliminary study was conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the Croatian version of the scale, as detailed in the Instruments section.

The preliminary study was conducted in April–May 2022. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any point. Contact information for the researchers was provided. Data collection was conducted via an online questionnaire using a snowball sampling method.

The main study was conducted in January–February 2023 as part of the broader research project *deShame 2 Croatia*, led by the *Center for Missing and Abused Children* (see <https://cnzd.org/>). The target population comprised parents of primary and secondary school students. The survey included two parts: the first, developed by Childnet (used with permission), and the second, designed to assess relationship quality. This paper presents findings from the second section, administered to a sample of parents of high school students.

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Zagreb, as well as from the Ministry of Science and Education. Schools were informed of the research and provided with all necessary documentation. Participation was voluntary, and school principals were given the option to opt in or out. School coordinators, in cooperation with classroom teachers, distributed the research invitation and informed consent forms to parents. The online questionnaire included a cover letter reiterating the voluntary, anonymous, and confidential nature of participation, as well as the purpose of the study and data usage. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

## Instruments

### *Sociodemographic and Relationship Variables*

Participants reported their age, gender, education level, employment status, and financial situation, as well as information about their relationship (duration and type) and their partner's age, education level, and employment status.

### *PANQIMS*

The **PANQIMS** consists of six items: three measuring positive relationship aspects (e.g., "positive qualities of the partner," "positive feelings toward the partner," and "positive feelings about the relationship") and three measuring negative aspects (e.g., "negative qualities of the partner," "negative feelings toward the partner," and "negative feelings about the relationship"). Responses were given on a 0 (not at all positive/good or not at all negative/bad) to 10 (extremely positive/good or extremely negative/bad) scale.

To assess the psychometric properties of the translated scale, a principal axis factoring (PAF) analysis was conducted on responses from the preliminary sample. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .801, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant,  $\chi^2(15) = 1320.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating the data were appropriate for factor analysis.

Two factors were extracted, explaining 78.47% of the variance. Varimax rotation yielded two distinct dimensions: positive relationship quality (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .910$ ) and negative relationship quality (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .913$ ). Total scores were computed by summing item responses within each dimension, with higher scores indicating greater levels of either positive or negative relationship quality. In the main study sample, internal consistency was high:  $\alpha = .925$  (positive) and  $\alpha = .937$  (negative).

### *Use of SMA and IMA*

Participants indicated how frequently they had used SMA and IMA in the previous 30 days, excluding communication with their partner. Frequency was rated on a scale from 1 (do not use) to 6 (daily). Daily users also reported the average number of hours per day spent using each platform (1 = do not use daily to 6 = 8 or more hours per day). Participants also estimated their partner's usage using the same scales.

## *Partners' Common Strategies in the Digital Environment*

A scale was developed to assess common digital strategies based on prior research and relevant literature. The scale included nine items (e.g., "We talk about how we use social media"), rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). A principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted, yielding a KMO of .632 and a significant Bartlett's test,  $\chi^2(36) = 4620.69$ ,  $p < .001$ . The items explained 74.58% of the variance. Varimax rotation identified three dimensions: (1) common discussions about SMA use (2 items,  $\alpha = .888$ ), (2) mutual personal messaging (3 items,  $\alpha = .708$ ), and (3) SMA posts related to the relationship (4 items,  $\alpha = .890$ ). Higher scores indicate more frequent use of the respective strategy.

## **Sample**

### *Preliminary Study Sample*

The pilot study included 291 participants, of whom 273 met the inclusion criteria (i.e., currently in an intimate relationship lasting six months or longer). Among these, 61.9% were women ( $N = 169$ ), with an average age of 34.73 years (range: 19 – 71). Most participants held a graduate degree (37.73%) and were employed full-time (57.14%). Approximately 46.5% were married, with a mean relationship duration of 10.56 years.

### *Main Study Sample*

A cluster sampling approach was used to recruit a sample of parents of high school students in Croatia. One high school was selected from each of the 21 counties. From each high school, two classes per grade level (grades 1 – 4) were invited to participate. The final sample comprised 956 parents, of whom 903 met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 88.7% were women ( $N = 801$ ), with a mean age of 44.53 years. The majority had completed a four-year secondary education (38.10%,  $N = 344$ ) and were employed full-time (72.65%,  $N = 656$ ). Most participants were married (91.58%,  $N = 827$ ), and the average relationship length was 20.59 years. Information about participants' partners is presented in Tables 2 and 4.

**Table 1.** Gender, Educational Attainment, and Employment Status of Participants in the Preliminary and Main Study

		Preliminary Study (N = 273)		Main Study (N = 903)	
		N	%	N	%
Gender	Male	104	38.10	102	11.30
	Female	169	61.90	801	88.70
Level of Education	Incomplete Primary School	0	0.00	6	0.66
	Primary School	0	0.00	42	4.65
	Three-Year Vocational School	7	2.56	233	25.80
	Four-Year Secondary School	79	28.94	344	38.10
	Undergraduate / Bachelor's Degree	76	27.84	93	10.30
	Graduate / Master's Degree	103	37.73	177	19.60
	Doctorate	8	2.93	7	0.78
	Other	0	0.00	1	0.11
Employment Status	Student	66	24.18	1	0.11
	Unemployed	8	2.93	127	14.06
	Fixed-Term Employment	39	14.29	103	11.41
	Permanent Employment	156	57.14	656	72.65
	Retired	4	1.47	15	1.66
	Other	0	0.00	1	0.11

**Table 2.** Age of Participants, Duration of Current Relationship (Preliminary and Main Study), Subjective Financial Assessment, and Partner's Age (Main Study)

	Preliminary Study (N = 273)				Main Study (N = 903)			
	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max
Age	34.73	10.71	19	71	44.53	5.34	27	65
Duration of current relationship (years)	10.56	9.63	0.5	39	20.59	6.13	0.5	40
Household financial situation	-	-	-	-	3.37	0.71	1	5
Partner's age	-	-	-	-	47.04	5.98	23	68

**Table 3.** Type of Romantic Relationship in the Pilot and Main Study

	Preliminary Study (N = 273)		Main Study (N = 903)	
	N	%	N	%
Married	127	46.50	827	91.58
Cohabiting partnership	-	-	56	6.20
Intimate relationship	-	-	19	2.10
Other	-	-	1	0.11

**Table 4.** Educational Attainment and Employment Status of Partners (Main Study)

		Main Study (N = 903)	
		N	%
Partner's Level of Education	Incomplete Primary School	5	0.55
	Primary School	74	8.19
	Three-Year Vocational School	298	33.00
	Four-Year Secondary School	353	39.09
	Undergraduate / Bachelor's Degree	64	7.09
	Graduate / Master's Degree	102	11.30
	Doctorate	5	0.55
	Other	2	0.22
Partner's Employment Status	Student	2	0.22
	Unemployed	49	5.43
	Fixed-Term Employment	75	8.31
	Permanent Employment	709	78.52
	Retired	66	7.31
	Other	2	0.22

## RESULTS

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 (IBM Corp., 2011.). The normality of the distribution was tested using the Shapiro–Wilk test. Additionally, skewness, kurtosis, and skewness indices were examined. The results indicated that all variables deviated from a normal distribution. Therefore, Spearman's RHO correlation coefficients were used to assess relationships between variables.

**Table 5.** Spearman's Correlation Coefficients Among Key Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
1	Frequency of participants' use of IMA	1												
2	Daily time spent by participants using IMA	.49**	1											
3	Frequency of partners' use of IMA	.48**	.30**	1										
4	Daily time spent by partners IMA	.32**	.38**	.59**	1									
5	Frequency of participants' use of SMA	.46**	.17*	.29**	.19**	1								
6	Daily time spent by participants on SMA	.15**	.34**	.16**	.26**	.45**	1							
7	Frequency of partners' use of SMA	.25**	.13**	.51**	.37**	.35**	.22**	1						
8	Daily time spent by partners on SMA	.14**	.17**	.35**	.49**	.23**	.3**	.65**	1					
9	SMA posts about the romantic relationship	.04	.15**	.10**	.17**	.1**	.30**	.20**	.27**	1				
10	Discussion about SMA use	.03	.10**	.09**	.10**	.01	.03	.12**	.08*	.21**	1			
11	Messaging between partners	.21**	.18**	.34**	.26**	.12**	.09**	.20**	.16**	.27**	.29**	1		
12	Positive dimension of relationship quality	.01	-.02	.01	-.06	-.01	-.06	-.01	-.10**	.02	.18**	.14**	1	
13	Negative dimension of relationship quality	.04	.04	.04	.11**	.05	.08*	.05	.11**	.00	-.15**	-.06	-.68**	1

To determine the contribution of different predictors to positive and negative relationship quality, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted after testing relevant assumptions (Sarstedt and Mooi, 2018.). All variables included were measured at the interval level. The sample size was adequate in relation to the number of predictors, and P–P plots confirmed linearity. No issues with multicollinearity were detected.

## Positive Relationship Quality

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the contributions of IMA usage, SMA usage, and partners' common strategies in the digital environment to positive relationship quality (Table 6). Predictors were entered in four steps:

1. *Sociodemographic variables*: age, gender, financial status, and relationship duration.
2. *IMA usage*: frequency and daily duration (self-reported and partner-reported).
3. *SMA usage*: frequency and daily duration (self-reported and partner-reported).
4. *Partners' common strategies in the digital environment*: discussions about SMA use, relationship-related SMA posts, and mutual digital communication.

The overall model significantly predicted positive relationship quality,  $F(15, 885) = 8.063, p < .01$ , explaining 12% of the variance. Each block of predictors significantly contributed to the model ( $p < .01$ ). The greatest variance was explained by partner digital strategies (5.8%), followed by sociodemographic variables (3.8%), and finally, messaging app use and social media use (1.2% each).

At the individual level, higher perceived financial conditions, lower partner-reported daily social media use, more frequent conversations about social media use, and higher frequency of mutual digital communication were associated with higher positive relationship quality.

**Table 6.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Positive Relationship Quality

	1. step		2. step		3. step		4. step	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Gender	-.004	-0.118	.005	0.136	.004	0.108	.000	0.002
Age	-.056	-1.448	-.056	-1.450	-.060	-1.551	-.046	-1.209
Assessment of financial circumstances	.187	5.707**	.191	5.814**	.185	5.623**	.174	5.416**
Relationship Duration	.015	0.402	.011	0.294	.012	0.323	.034	0.915
Frequency of the Respondent's use of IMA			.013	0.316	.007	0.147	.026	0.568
Respondent's daily time spent on IMA by the			.009	0.243	.018	0.426	-.010	-0.238
Frequency of the partner's use of IMA			.093	2.170	.073	1.544	.040	0.856
Partner's daily time spent on IMA			-.127	-3.110**	-.064	-1.439	-.075	-1.731
Frequency of the respondent's use of SMA					-.004	-0.095	-.007	-0.175
Respondent's daily time spent on SMA					-.015	-0.356	-.006	-0.138
Frequency of the partner's use of SMA					.072	1.514	.043	0.940
Partner's daily time spent on SMA					-.145	-3.111**	-.138	-3.019**
Discussion about SMA usage							.198	5.867**
Posts on SMA about the relationship							.012	0.325
Mutual messaging between partners							.104	2.855**
Overall Model								
R	.038		.050		.062		.120	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.034		.042		.049		.105	
$\Delta R^2$	.038**		.012*		.012*		.058**	

## Negative Relationship Quality

A similar hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to assess predictors of negative relationship quality (Table 7). The same four blocks of predictors were entered in the same manner as described in the above section.

The full model significantly predicted negative relationship quality,  $F(15, 885) = 4.530, p < .01$ , explaining 7.1% of the variance. Significant contributions were observed for the first and fourth blocks ( $p < .01$ ), with the largest contribution from partner strategies (2.9%), followed by sociodemographic variables (2.7%).

Specifically, being female, having poorer perceived financial conditions, and engaging in fewer conversations about social media use were associated with higher levels of negative relationship quality.

**Table 7.** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Negative Relationship Quality

	1. step		2. step		3. step		4. step	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Gender	.102	3.021**	.094	2.764**	.096	2.817**	.101	2.992**
Age	.062	1.610	.060	1.526	.067	1.715	.064	1.627
Assessment of financial circumstances	-.110	-3.328**	-.118	-3.573**	-.116	-3.499**	-.114	-3.463**
Relationship Duration	.032	0.844	.039	1.037	.037	0.973	.027	0.706
Frequency of the Respondent's use of IMA			.028	0.682	.023	0.494	.007	0.157
Respondent's daily time spent on IMA by the			-.009	-0.227	-.019	-0.447	.001	0.026
Frequency of the partner's use of IMA			-.042	-0.963	-.043	-0.911	-.031	-0.653
Partner's daily time spent on IMA			.102	2.473*	.056	1.239	.059	1.326
Frequency of the respondent's use of SMA					.021	0.494	.023	0.546
Respondent's daily time spent on SMA					.031	0.736	.023	0.559
Frequency of the partner's use of SMA					-.014	-0.296	.007	0.144
Partner's daily time spent on SMA					.089	1.891	.084	1.800
Discussion about SMA usage							-.164	-4.745**
Posts on SMA about the relationship							-.007	-0.195
Mutual messaging between partners							-.019	-0.514
Overall Model								
R		.027		.035		.043		.071
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.022		.026		.030		.056
$\Delta R^2$		.027**		.008		.008		.029**

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between digital behaviours, specifically the use of IMA, SMA, partners' common strategies within the digital environment, and marital quality. The results support the notion that both digital interactions and digital relational maintenance strategies have a measurable impact on the positive and negative quality of romantic relationships.

Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that, in general, partner strategies for the digital environment significantly predicted higher levels of positive relationship quality and lower levels of negative relationship quality. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that relationship maintenance strategies are correlated with both positive and negative relationship quality (Malinen, Tolvanen, and Rönkä, 2012.) and with research emphasizing the role of digital transparency and partner responsiveness in fostering intimacy and trust (Morey et al., 2013.). The results are also consistent with the findings of Coundouris, Tyson, and Henry (2021.), who showed that engaging in partners' common strategies for the digital environment is associated with greater relationship satisfaction, security, and intimacy.

At the individual level, our results show that significant predictors of positive relationship quality are more frequent conversations about social media use and a higher frequency of mutual digital communication. In our study, SMA posts related to the relationship were not significantly associated with positive relationship quality. This finding contrasts with Coundouris, Tyson, and Henry (2021.), who showed that public expressions of positivity and assurance on SNA were most effective in improving relationship quality. One possible reason for this could be that our sample consisted of participants who have been in a relationship longer than newly married couples (the average relationship duration in our sample is 10.56 years) and are therefore less likely to post relationship-related content on SMA.

Our study makes an important contribution to the research field in that it is one of the first studies to examine the association between partners' strategies for the digital environment and both positive and negative relationship quality. Although the partners' common strategies showed significant associations with both positive and negative relationship quality, the strategies were a more substantial predictor for improving positive relationship quality than for reducing negative relationship quality. In addition, the following behaviours were found to be predictive of positive relationship quality: more frequent conversations about social media use and a higher frequency of mutual digital communication, while only fewer conversations about social media predicted negative relationship quality. These differential results for positive and negative relationship quality justify the need to look at these dimensions separately. These results corroborate earlier data showing differential effects for

two quality dimensions: a stronger association between negative partner behaviour and subjective well-being than between positive partner behaviour and subjective well-being (e.g., Rivers and Sanford, 2018.). Our findings are also supported by evidence showing that the same positive or negative behaviours can have different consequences for relationship stability in different contexts (McNulty, 2010.).

Although we hypothesised the links between strategies and quality only at a general level, some studies suggest that somewhat different relational maintenance behaviours are employed when trying to amend relationship issues than when trying to retain relationship satisfaction (Dindia and Baxter, 1987.).

Interestingly, while IMA and SMA use were significant at the block level, their individual predictive power was modest. Notably, higher levels of partner-reported daily SMA use were associated with lower positive relationship quality. This may reflect concerns about partner availability, distraction, or potential conflict arising from ambiguous or inappropriate online behaviour (McDaniel, Galovan, and Drouin, 2020.; Beukeboom and Pollmann, 2021.; Hemez et al., 2023.). Furthermore, partners' use of IMA was significantly associated with negative relationship quality in the initial step of the analysis, prior to the inclusion of SMA variables, underscoring its importance, particularly for couples who do not actively use SMA.

One possible explanation for these findings lies in the perceptual asymmetry between partners (where individuals view their own technology use as situational but interpret their partner's use as intentional or problematic), which may contribute to relational tension (Amichai-Hamburger and Etgar, 2016.).

Gender also played a role, with women reporting higher levels of negative relationship quality. This may suggest heightened sensitivity to digital behaviours or differential expectations in relationship communication, as was also found by McDaniel and Drouin (2019.). These gender differences warrant further exploration, particularly within the context of digital relationship norms, even more since the majority of the sample in this study was female. Furthermore, better perceived financial conditions were positively associated with higher relationship quality, while financial strain was linked to more negative outcomes. These results align with prior studies indicating that financial stability is a significant contextual factor in romantic satisfaction (Conger, Conger, and Martin, 2009.).

According to the SPT (Carpenter and Greene, 2016.), self-disclosure in intimate relationships deepens over time but eventually tends to plateau in long-term or life-long relationships. Reciprocity in disclosure is typically most pronounced during the middle stages of relational development, after which partners may begin to assume mutual understanding without continued intentional sharing. This stagnation can pose a risk to relational quality if partners fail to actively address it through ongoing communication and negotiation of relational needs. In the present study, the mean

duration of participants' current relationships was 20.59 years, which qualifies as a long-term relationship. This temporal context is particularly important, as results showed that higher levels of mutual communication, specifically, more frequent conversations about SMA use and greater engagement in mutual messaging, were positively associated with the marriage quality. These findings suggest that in long-term relationships, active strategies such as negotiating digital boundaries and maintaining regular partner-based communication can help counteract the potential stagnation predicted by SPT, thereby enhancing relational closeness and satisfaction.

These findings also carry important implications for social services, counselling, and social work practice. Practitioners working with couples should routinely explore digital communication patterns and the meanings partners attribute to online behaviours. Encouraging couples to establish shared expectations regarding social media use, discuss digital boundaries, and adopt collaborative online practices may strengthen relationship resilience. For social workers, integrating digital literacy components into family support programs can help clients recognise how online behaviours influence intimacy, conflict, and emotional connection. Preventive services could additionally incorporate modules that promote healthy digital routines and reduce technoferece in everyday family life.

Taken together, these insights provide a foundation for translating the study's findings into practical applications and set the stage for the broader conclusions drawn below.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal conclusions, making it unclear whether digital behaviours shape relationship quality or whether pre-existing relationship dynamics influence partners' engagement with digital platforms.

A key limitation of the study is the reliance on self-report measures, which may be affected by social desirability and recall bias, particularly for sensitive variables such as negative relational experiences and financial strain. Self-reported estimates of one's own digital behaviour may differ from actual usage patterns. Moreover, partner behaviour was not measured directly but inferred through participants' perceptions. Prior research shows that such perceptions can diverge significantly from objective partner behaviour, and these discrepancies themselves may influence relationship quality. Future research should incorporate dyadic data and objective digital-use metrics to obtain a more accurate and nuanced understanding of digital interactions within couples.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of literature examining the influence of digital behaviours on relationship quality. The findings highlight that not only the frequency of digital platform uses but also the quality and intentionality of digital interactions between partners matter. Specifically, open discussions about SMA use, relationship visibility online, and mutual digital engagement emerged as significant predictors of stronger relationship outcomes. These strategies appear to buffer against potentially negative effects of digital communication and foster emotional closeness.

Based on these findings, several practical recommendations can guide and enhance couple-focused interventions and preventive programs. It is recommended that practitioners support couples in developing explicit agreements about social media use, maintaining transparency, and engaging in regular conversations about digital boundaries. Interventions may also encourage couples to use digital tools as opportunities for connection, e.g., by exchanging supportive messages or coordinating shared online activities. Programs should additionally emphasise that perceived partner behaviour online often matters more than objective usage, highlighting the need for mutual clarification of digital expectations. As digital environments continue to evolve and become increasingly integrated into daily life, understanding their nuanced role in relationship functioning remains a crucial task for both researchers and practitioners.

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## MOGU LI PARTNERSKE STRATEGIJE ZA DIGITALNO OKRUŽENJE SMANJITI NEGATIVAN UČINAK KORIŠTENJA INTERNETA NA KVALITETU PARTNERSKOG ODNOSA?

### SAŽETAK

*Danas, u vrijeme kada je digitalizacija ušla u sve sfere života, važno je utvrditi kako interes i pažnja koje partneri ulažu u korištenje digitalnih sadržaja utječe na kvalitetu njihovog odnosa, koji obrasci predstavljaju najveći rizik, a koji moguće pridonose odnosu. Polazeći od suvremenog modela održavanja odnosa – Modela pozitivnih ponašanja usmjerenih na vezu (Coundouris, Tyson i Henry, 2021.), ovo istraživanje ima za cilj utvrditi koliko korištenje društvenih mreža, korištenje aplikacija za dopisivanje i partnerske strategije u digitalnom okruženju pridonose pozitivnoj i negativnoj kvaliteti partnerskog odnosa. Istraživanje je provedeno na probabilističkom klaster uzorku od 903 ispitanika, prosječne dobi 44,53 godine. Provedene su dvije hijerarhijske regresijske analize gdje su uključene varijable objasnile 12% varijance pozitivne dimenzije partnerskog odnosa i 7,1% varijance negativne dimenzije partnerskog odnosa. Rezultati pokazuju kako bolje financijske prilike kućanstva, manje vremena svakodnevnog korištenja društvenih mreža kod partnera, više razgovora o korištenju društvenih mreža i više međusobnog dopisivanja među partnerima pridonosi višoj pozitivnoj dimenziji partnerskog odnosa te kako ženski spol, lošije financijske prilike kućanstva i manje razgovora o korištenju društvenih mreža pridonosi višoj negativnoj dimenziji partnerskog odnosa. Ovi rezultati pružaju okvir za unaprjeđenje kvalitete partnerskih odnosa te nude uvide u digitalna ponašanja koja mogu usmjeriti i unaprijediti savjetodavni i obiteljski rad, čineći ovo istraživanje osobito relevantnim za praksu socijalnog rada u jačanju partnerskih odnosa u izravnom radu s korisnicima.*

**Ključne riječi:** Model pozitivnih ponašanja usmjerenih na vezu, pozitivna i negativna dimenzija kvalitete partnerskog odnosa, društvene mreže, aplikacije za dopisivanje, partnerske strategije održavanja odnosa, partnerske strategije za digitalno okruženje.



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