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When Content Becomes Conflict: The Influence of TikTok on Couple Interaction from a Family Psychology Perspective

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes in the dynamics of family life, including in the interaction of married couples. TikTok, as one of the most popular social media platforms, is not only a means of entertainment and self-expression, but also has a complex impact on interpersonal relationships in the household. This study aims to analyze the influence of TikTok use on the quality of couple interactions from the perspective of family psychology. A qualitative approach with a case study method was used to explore the experiences of several couples who actively use TikTok, both as viewers and content creators. The results showed that the use of TikTok can be a trigger for conflict in the household, especially if there is an imbalance of attention, negative perceptions of the content consumed by the partner, to the emergence of jealousy and distrust. However, on the other hand, TikTok can also strengthen relationships if used wisely and collaboratively. These findings emphasize the importance of digital awareness and open communication in maintaining couple harmony in the social media era.

Keywords: TikTok, Couples, Domestic Conflict, Family Psychology, Digital Interaction.

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Introduction

The digital era has brought about major transformations in various aspects of human life, including in patterns of interaction and communication within the family. One of the manifestations of this digital revolution is the emergence and popularity of social media, which is now not only a means of sharing information, but also a space for intense social interaction. TikTok, as one of the fastest growing short video-based social media platforms, has attracted millions of users from all walks of life, including married couples. With a variety of interesting features and a highly personalized algorithm, TikTok is able to capture the attention and time of its users significantly.

In the context of domestic life, social media such as TikTok has created a new phenomenon that impacts the quality of relationships between couples. Activities such as watching content individually, creating videos, interacting with other users, and going viral, are now part of the dynamics of husband and wife relationships that never existed before. This phenomenon carries psychological implications that are not simple. On the one hand, social media can strengthen relationships by providing space for expression and fun joint activities. On the other hand, uncontrolled or unagreed use can lead to conflict, jealousy, and feelings of abandonment.

Many couples are starting to experience a shift in the way they communicate. Some husbands or wives feel that their partners are more engaged with TikTok content than with home life. Even in some cases, the emergence of virtual interactions with other users can lead to suspicion or feelings of insecurity in the relationship. This is certainly a challenge in maintaining household harmony in the digital era. Conflicts that may seem trivial at first, such as arguments over screen time, can develop into more complex psychological issues if not handled wisely.

From a family psychology perspective, a healthy husband and wife relationship is underpinned by effective communication, trust and empathy. When social media shifts the focus and quality of interaction between couples, an imbalance arises that can trigger emotional tension. TikTok, with its highly varied and rapidly changing content, can be a latent trigger of conflict in the household, especially if used without shared awareness or clear boundaries. Family psychology emphasizes the importance of emotional awareness, self-control, and openness in building harmonious relationships, which in this context, needs to be faced with the challenges of the increasingly widespread use of social media.

Departing from this reality, it is important to conduct an in-depth academic study to understand how content on TikTok can affect the interaction patterns of couples. This study will not only look at the surface aspects of household conflicts related to social media, but also explore the psychological mechanisms involved, including perceptions, emotional responses, and communication patterns formed. Thus, this study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in the effort to build household harmony amidst the onslaught of the fast-paced and dynamic digital era.

Literature Review

1. Social Media and Husband and Wife Relationship Dynamics

Social media has become an important part of modern life and influences the way individuals communicate, including in husband and wife relationships. According to McDaniel et

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al. (2012), the use of social media in domestic life can provide benefits such as strengthening communication and increasing a sense of closeness. However, in an unhealthy context, social media also has the potential to disrupt relationship quality, especially when its use is unbalanced or leads to jealousy, suspicion and neglect of the partner. Interpersonal relationships can suffer when one party feels that their partner is more emotionally connected to the digital world than to the real relationships in the household (Easley & Wildman, 2020).

2. The TikTok Phenomenon in Couples' Lives

TikTok as a short video platform has a very strong appeal because it is entertaining, interactive, and quickly goes viral. Many couples utilize TikTok to share moments of togetherness or even create content as a couple. However, research by Nandagiri & Philip (2018) shows that platforms like TikTok also create space for distraction and blurred boundaries between private and public interactions. Some cases show that unwise use of TikTok can lead to conflict, such as a partner feeling jealous of their partner's virtual interactions, or feeling left out because the partner is too busy creating content or watching videos.

3. Marital Conflict and Family Psychology

In the study of family psychology, the relationship between husband and wife is considered the core of emotional stability in the family. According to Bowen (1978) in family systems theory, when there is a breakdown in communication or an imbalance of attention in a couple, conflict tends to arise. Conflicts between couples triggered by social media can be classified as latent conflicts that are difficult to see directly, but can trigger long-term impacts on household harmony if not resolved immediately. Giddens (1992) also highlighted that modern relationships have become more “reflective”, meaning that couples now re-evaluate their relationships more based on perceptions of intimacy, openness, and emotional expectations.

4. Perception, Emotion and Digital Interaction in Households

Cognitive and emotional psychology sees that the perception of a digital action (such as liking another user's video, or creating provocative content) can lead to emotional responses such as jealousy, anger or offense. According to Walther (1996) in Social Information Processing Theory, digital interactions can lead to misunderstandings or interpretations that do not match the original intent, especially in intimate relationships. Therefore, it is important to have open communication in response to the use of digital media between couples.

5. Previous Research

Several previous studies have shown that social media can impact the quality of marital relationships. Research by Clayton et al. (2013) states that the frequency of social media use is positively correlated with levels of jealousy, conflict, and even intention to divorce. Meanwhile, a study by Halpern et al. (2016) showed that intense but not quality digital communication can reduce overall relationship satisfaction. However, not many studies have specifically highlighted the TikTok platform and its effects on married couples from a family psychology perspective, making this research relevant and important to broaden the understanding of household dynamics in the digital age.

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Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of phenomenological study, to deeply understand the experiences of couples related to the impact of using TikTok on household interactions.

Research Subjects

The research subjects were married couples who actively use TikTok, with the criteria:

- Have been married for at least 1 year.
- Using TikTok at least 1 hour per day.
- Have experienced conflict triggered by the use of TikTok.
- Sampling was done purposively, with a total of 6-8 couples or until the data was considered saturated.

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through:

- In-depth (semi-structured) interviews
- Documentation (if available)
- Light observation of the couple's communication patterns (if possible)

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, namely by identifying patterns or themes that emerged from interview transcripts and other data obtained.

Data Validity

Data validity was maintained through triangulation, participant confirmation (member checking), and researcher reflective notes.

Results and Discussion

1. The Presence of TikTok as a New Domestic Reality

TikTok has become one of the most dominant social media platforms in today's digital age. With short video features, personal preference-based algorithms, and the possibility to interact with users globally, TikTok creates a very interesting virtual space. The app offers quick entertainment, information, pop culture trends, and a space for self-expression. However, its use in a family context-especially in a husband and wife relationship-brings up a unique dynamic.

In this study, the majority of married couples revealed that TikTok was initially perceived as light entertainment. However, over time, there was a disruption to the quality of communication and time together. One participant revealed:

"We sit on the same sofa, but each of us has a cellphone. Sometimes he laughs to himself watching TikTok, I feel like I don't exist." - (Interview, Couple A)

This phenomenon suggests an "empty presence" in relationships, described by Sherry Turkle as the effect of digital relationships replacing real interactions. In family psychology, emotional presence is considered more important than physical presence. When a partner's presence in a shared space is not accompanied by emotional engagement and full attention, the relationship becomes vulnerable to psychological disintegration (Hidayat, N., Ilahi, L. K., Najiatus, & Arifah, H. K. N., 2024).

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2. Digital Distraction and Interference with Emotional Connection

TikTok has an algorithm that actively prolongs user engagement time. The infinite scroll of content and diversity of topics make it easy for users to lose track of time. This creates digital distractions that hinder the quality of interactions between couples.

From Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory perspective, any disruption in the relational system - including technological disruption - can cause emotional tension in the family system. When one partner feels neglected or de-prioritized due to social media use, there is an emotional imbalance that can trigger latent conflict (Hidayat, N., Arifah, H. K. N., K, K. C. Y., & Hidayati, A., 2023).

"I felt 'lost' to TikTok. He would rather scroll than chat or eat together." - (Interview, Couple C)

This kind of conflict is often not realized as a big deal, but if left unchecked, it can reduce the level of marital satisfaction. One of the declining indicators is emotional intimacy, which is the ability of couples to understand each other and connect inwardly.

3. Emergence of Digital Jealousy and Mistrust

One interesting aspect of this study is the emergence of digital jealousy. Some participants, especially wives, felt uncomfortable when their partners watched sensual content or were too interactive with other users. While there is no direct communication, actions such as liking, saving or commenting on other users' videos can trigger suspicion (Najiatun, Wulandari, N., Hidayat, N., Arifah, H. K. N., Khan, H. A. U., & Rohmayati, N. S., 2025).

In Bowlby's Attachment Theory, emotional attachment in adult relationships includes security, trust and exclusivity. When these elements are disrupted by ambiguous digital activities, such as content deemed "seductive", protective responses of jealousy, suspicion and even emotional withdrawal emerge.

This phenomenon is also reinforced by media richness theory, which states that digital communication often loses context and nonverbal nuances, making it prone to misinterpretation. A husband said:

"I don't feel wrong because I only saw the video. But my wife thinks I am unfaithful." - (Interview, Couple E)

This suggests that there is a perception gap between couples in interpreting digital activities, which if not communicated openly, will increase conflict.

4. Changes in Couples' Communication Patterns Due to TikTok Consumption

Before the intensive use of TikTok, most couples had dedicated time to talk and discuss. However, this study found that couples' quality time began to be displaced by screen time. This caused communication patterns to become more practical and superficial.

According to John Gottman, one indicator of household harmony is the frequency and depth of positive and supportive communication. When conversations contain only routine or practical instructions, relationships lose emotional depth. Couples feel less understood, less appreciated,

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and slowly become emotionally cutoff (Nurul Hidayat, Jannatul Firdaus, Hertin Khalifatun Nisa Arifah, Any Sani'atin, Edi Awan, & Nur Diana Khalida., 2025).

"We used to talk before going to bed. Now we each hold our phones until we fall asleep." - (Interview, Couple F)

This change is not just about time, but also the quality of emotional engagement that is eroded by fast, entertaining and addictive content such as that presented by TikTok.

5. Adaptive Strategies and Social Media Conflict Management

Yuni K, K. C., Hidayat, N., & Musfiroh, A. (2025) While many couples faced challenges, some also demonstrated adaptive strategies in managing TikTok-related conflict. Some couples set device-free hours, set TikTok time only at certain hours, or even create content together as a form of collaborative activity.

This strategy supports Bandura's idea of reciprocal determinism, that environment, behavior and cognition influence each other. When couples have shared awareness and control over digital media, conflict can be prevented or mitigated.

One couple stated:

"We now make TikTok content together. So we don't interfere with each other, but support each other." - (Interview, Couple G)

This shows that social media is not always a threat, but can be a relationship strengthening tool if managed consciously and openly. From the results of this study, it can be concluded that TikTok has the potential to be a source of conflict in couple interactions, especially when its use is individualistic, uncommunicated, and disrupts emotional engagement. Conflicts that arise can be in the form of neglect, jealousy, distrust, and decreased quality of communication.

However, the role of social media is essentially neutral. Its positive or negative impact depends on how couples manage its presence in the relationship space. When couples are able to make TikTok a tool for collaboration, joint expression, or even humor in domestic life, then this media can actually strengthen intimacy and emotional closeness.

From a family psychology perspective, the success of a relationship lies not in the presence or absence of conflict, but in the ability of couples to manage conflict in a healthy way, including in the face of evolving digital realities (Rahman, H., Abidin, R. Z., & Hidayat, N., 2025).

Conclusions and Practical Implication

This study shows that the use of TikTok has a significant influence on married couples' interactions, both in terms of communication, emotional engagement, and relationship stability. TikTok, as part of digital culture, can serve multiple functions: being a means of entertainment and creativity, but also a potential source of latent conflict when used unwisely.

Some common conflicts found in this study include:

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1. Spousal neglect due to excessive use of TikTok.
2. Digital jealousy, particularly towards content or interactions with the opposite sex.
3. Decreased quality of communication as shared time is replaced by individualized content consumption.
4. Perceptual gap between partners in understanding the boundaries of digital interactions.

However, on the other hand, some couples are also able to use TikTok as a collaborative medium to strengthen the relationship through shared content or screen time management agreements. This proves that the impact of social media on couple relationships is highly dependent on digital awareness and the quality of communication within the household.

Based on the findings and analysis, the following suggestions are made:

1. For Married Couples:

- The need to build a mutual agreement regarding the limits of TikTok use so as not to interfere with quality time and communication.
- Increase openness and empathy, especially in conveying discomfort related to your partner's digital activities.
- Make TikTok a collaborative tool and space for joint expression, not as a competitor in relationship attention.

2. For Family Psychology Counselors or Practitioners:

- Need to include the issue of social media use in couples counseling sessions, especially for younger generations who are familiar with the digital world.
- Education on emotional digital literacy, namely how to understand the emotional impact of digital interactions on couples.

3. For Future Researchers:

It is recommended to conduct further research with a quantitative or mixed approach to obtain more extensive and measurable data.

It is also worth exploring other social media (such as Instagram or YouTube Shorts) and comparing them to the dynamics of husband and wife relationships.

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