

Emotional Manipulation in Cyberspace: Examining Digital Deception's Consequences on Intimacy and Trust

Submitted 21 April 2025, Revised 29 April 2025, Accepted 29 April 2025

Tiphonie Gibbs^{1,2*}

¹Department of Cyberpsychology, Capitol Technology University, Laurel, United States

²Anchored in Love Wellness and Consulting, Bowie, United States
Corresponding Email: *tgibbs1@captechu.edu

Abstract

The growing digital communication has opened new avenues for emotional manipulation and deception to occur in personal relationships, especially within the context of marriage. This study aimed to investigate the online practices that best exemplify these negative relational dynamics—catfishing, digital infidelity, and emotional blackmail. It examines the impact of these practices on trust and intimacy. To understand the situation, we conducted two parts of research—one quantitative, the other qualitative. The digital deceptions we found are causing significant emotional distress in those being deceived, making them feel (a) excessively anxious, (b) unduly depressed, and (c) dangerously low in self-trust. They also give rise to relational power dynamics that seem far more imbalanced than the traditional marital roles of husband and wife would suggest. Furthermore, through various cyberpsychological frameworks, we've utilized, it is apparent that these enacted deceptions also cause more relation between the deceivers and those being deceived.

Keywords: Digital Deception, Emotional Manipulation, Intimacy and Trust, Cyberpsychology, Online Relationship Betrayal

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of close personal relationships to digital platforms has introduced significant consequences to the structure and quality of intimate relationships, particularly in the context of marriage. This shift forms a foundation for new forms of manipulation and misconduct (M&Ms), where control and deception occur through technology rather than face-to-face contact, thus changing the dynamics of trust and intimacy in relationships (Holtzman *et al.*, 2021; Davidson *et al.*, 2024). As (Quiroz & Mickelson 2021; Minina *et al.*, 2022) also highlighted, digital deception is not limited to catfishing and online infidelity and can cause severe psychological harm to the participants. Such behaviors are typically regarded as ethically problematic because perpetrators actively construct false personas or entirely fabricated realities online, deliberately manipulating the emotional experiences of their targets.

In the arena of deceit, the impact of digital communication is most apparent, especially in the destruction of trust and intimacy in relationships. Muhammad & Muhammad (2022 and Tandon *et al.* (2021) show that as partners get entangled, they become vulnerable to emotional control, thus eroding the trust that is the bedrock of any healthy relationship. Since digital deception is becoming an intricate phenomenon, the field of cyberpsychology helps us

understand the psychological processes behind the corresponding trends. Hosford (2021) argues that knowledge about them is crucial to creating potentially useful interventions in countering EA's emotional impact.

The Nature of Digital Deception in Marital Relationships

Deception in marital relationships involves different strategies that heavily interfere with communication interdependence between spouses. Minina *et al.* (2022) highlighted catfishing as a type of fraud that consists of creating false online personas to manipulate one's spouse or partner emotionally. Such cheating is made worse by digital infidelity, which is when one partner maintains unauthorized affairs through social media accounts, online dating applications, or instant messaging (Caneppele, 2025)—moreover, creating and using fake profiles that hide critical personal information results in emotional betrayal because partners cannot know the full extent of the significant other's engagement on digital platforms (Pate, 2024). Lies through concealment, in which one partner conceals digital behaviors or relationships, make it even worse to maintain trust, resulting in emotional estrangement and disillusionment (Quiroz & Mickelson, 2021).

Cognitive and emotional factors actively shape the psychological processes underlying digital deception. According to Davidson *et al.* (2024), people involved in digital deception can develop cognitive biases such as denial and justification for their actions. This blurring of reality allows them to persist in their deceitful actions and not feel much guilt. Also, it is essential to examine emotion regulation concerning the experience of affect related to lying: The results showed that emotion regulation is a key feature of deceptive processes. Lundie *et al.* (2024) point out that manipulators employ strategies targeted at controlling their feelings of shame or anxiety for further manipulation. Specific personality characteristics like insecure attachment styles and low self-esteem make users predisposed to perpetrate and be the target of digital deception, significantly when these mental states enhance the effects of betrayal (Minina *et al.*, 2022).

Technology has played a significant part in the propagation of digital deception. In this respect, Tandon *et al.* (2021) found that fake personas are created and upheld by digital technologies, including social media platforms, dating apps, and applications for immediate messaging. One factor that threatens this bond is that the site allows users to remain anonymous and/or selectively give out information about their lives. Technology, therefore, emerges as an enabler of the capability to perpetrate an act of deceit and simultaneously escape the prying eyes of the law.

The Impact of Digital Deception on Intimacy

From a relational standpoint, digital deception has an even more profound impact on emotional attachment and closeness. According to (Muhammud & Muhammad, 2022; Davidson *et al.*, 2024), online smarminess undermines the most essential element of intimate relationships: trust. Acts of self-rejection—such as digital infidelity and exaggerated online interactions—erode emotional security and relational safety. This breakdown of trust often leads to insecurity and emotional distress, which can be detrimental to relationship stability. Furthermore, Tandana (2022) notes that individuals who experience manipulation through digital platforms develop anxious attachment patterns often, which in turn impair their ability to form secure and healthy relationships with a partner.

Digital deception gravely distorts the victim's social interactions within the relationship by shifting the balance of power. As Holtzman *et al.* (2021) pointed out, lies compromise straightforward partner communication and, hence, an irresponsible use of power. It creates a power dynamic within the relationship where one player manipulates the other, which is not a balance. This imbalance leads to an emotional vampiric dynamic, usually making a victim feel helpless and all alone in the world. Caneppele (2025) also expounds on how this manipulation excludes the affected partner emotionally and leads to the disintegration of intimacy within the partnership.

Real-life scenarios have shown how technology erodes intimacy and hacks into virtual relationships. According to Quiroz & Mickelson (2021), there are different types of virtual infidelity, including marital infidelity or covert cyber activities. These behaviors erode the trust in a partnership and cause drifting apart and distancing in the relationship. They complained of abandonment and betrayal marked by emotional detachment, lack of communication, and termination of the relationship. These aspects demonstrate the long-term effects of such experiences and testify that digital manipulation is a critical issue in modern relationships.

Trust-Breaking Behaviors: A Deeper Dive

Today, spy-like behaviors and emotional infidelity are increasing in the virtual environment. However, as Muhammud & Muhammad (2022) highlighted, tracking applications and monitoring messages as communication tools can detriment trustworthiness in relational contexts. In this case, partners resort to surveillance to save the relationship, leading to violation. According to Hosford (2021), the psychology of observation is well-developed, poses threats to self-governance, and cultivates fear and submission. Jealousy and surveillance are spying and

monitoring one's partner, which changes the nature of the relationship from an open one based on trust and communication to a suspicious one based on spying.

Another component is emotional manipulation, as a conscious or unconscious act of inflicting pain on an individual who has trusted the manipulator. Emotional manipulation is an incredibly deceptive tactic in the existing digital world, typically known as gaslighting, in which one partner uses technology to alter their partner's view of reality. Propaganda techniques may involve changing the picture or sending fake messages to cause doubt, as illustrated by Quiroz & Mickelson (2021). Of equal importance, such manipulative behaviors not only twist reality but also erode the victim's trust in themselves. Also, emotional blackmail has been on the rise, where one threatens to share personal information or uses a deceived image and message to influence the other person, according to Minina *et al.* (2022). Emotional blackmail is a form of coercive control. It is tough to solve because it causes serious lasting effects on the mental and emotional state of the victim, the latter of which is left defenseless and trapped in this toxic relationship.

Oftentimes, healing from such a betrayal takes time, and restoring a healthy relationship between partners requires a systemic and intentional approach. Aiken et al. (2024) recommend that couples affected by digital deception engage in professional therapy, as emerging therapeutic strategies can help partners understand the underlying reasons for their misconduct and support their journey toward relational healing. Therapists may, for example, guide clients through emotional regulation techniques or facilitate structured communication exercises to help couples re-establish respectful and constructive interaction. Additionally, Muhammad & Muhammad (2022) introduced the concept of a "digital sabbath," where couples intentionally disconnect from their devices to foster emotional closeness. Despite the adverse effects of technology on relational trust, taking a deliberate pause from the virtual world allows partners to reconnect and repair emotional bonds strained by digital interference.

Thus, trust violation behaviors like stalking and emotional abuse are unbreakable cycles that cannot be mended independently. As gleaned from these sources, healing involves both psychological and practical processes of counseling as well as avoidance of further contact with electronic devices to rebuild that rare trust. Based on the excerpts from these sources, one can conclude that healing within the context of a relationship is a process that entails counseling sessions and conscious withdrawal from electronic communications to rebuild intimacy.

Cyberpsychological Models of Trust and Deception

Social Exchange Theory is essential for analyzing digital deception in relationships (Tandana, 2022). Within the participant's deception framework, partners consider likely benefits of deceit, including emotional satisfaction, control over a spouse, or other aspects contrasted with the potential costs of deceit, including the risk of discovery or negative impact on a spouse. Based on this theory, individuals involved in digital deception may feel that they are excused if the results of deception override the couple's consequences, resulting in erosion of trust and intimacy. This model aids in understanding why some people may engage in deceptive behaviors online that are damaging to the relationship.

In addition, attachment theory enriches the knowledge of digital deception, especially in the case of anxious or avoidant attachment styles. These scholars state that such persons are most at risk of emotional influence, which puts them in a position where they are most prone to digital deception. People suffering from anxiety-based attachment may remain in toxic relationships and put much value on what they get online, even when it is fake. Similarly, individuals with avoidant attachment styles often display self-protecting mechanisms such as dishonesty within a relationship to maintain emotional detachment and use technology as a buffer to the promotion of intimacy. This emotionality compounds the consequences of digital betrayal, and the victim may struggle to reclaim trust aside from feeling lost.

Cognitive load is another variable of interest regarding the impact of distorted content on learners' psychological states. Davidson *et al.* (2024) opine that self-deception results in limited enhanced thinking or processing of information, such as emotions and decisions. Lying in relationships is prevalent on social media, and dealing with the truth involves emotions and guessing when the other person is lying. This leads to an increase in cognitive load, which then impacts the emotional function of a person and may make them emotionally drained and ill-prepared to handle the deception. Consequently, the victim endures pressure and social tension as the relationship breaks.

The emotional impacts that result from digital betrayal include anxiety, depression, and loss of self-trust (Lundie *et al.*, 2024). These are not limited to affecting the individual who has been deceived but also alter interpersonal relationships. Quiroz & Mickelson (2021) noted that such cyberpsychological frameworks could further enrich the understanding of how videos disrespect trust and intimacy. The cyberpsychological model sets the stage for a more effective approach to trust rebuilding as well as psychological healing from the impacts of cyber deception. Such

frameworks pave the way for understanding how, through technology, individuals have been moved to emulate what their counterparts in today's society are.

Mitigating the Effects of Digital Deception

To address the problem of digital deception in intimate relationships, we need to consider special prevention techniques, psycho-cybernetic rehabilitation and attempts at the renewal of trust within the couple. In Bonilla-Zorita *et al.* (2021) article, digital literacy is essential to identifying these warning cues in cyberspace, thus enabling people to protect their emotional selves. Davidson *et al.* (2024) note that increasing the perception of threats related to digital tools is one way to help decrease susceptibility to interferences. The need for open communication is also emphasized, as Holtzman *et al.* (2021) point out that more positive and emotionally healthy relationships require better discussion on the use of technology in a partnership concerning manipulative behaviors.

Besides the aforementioned preventive measures, cyberpsychologists also recommend clinical interventions to assist those who have become victims of digital deception. According to Caneppele (2025), new forms of therapy, including face-to-face and internet-based therapy tools, aid in managing the effects of digital manipulation. In addition, relationship management technology solutions can prove highly useful in this respect. Davidson *et al.* (2024) note that convenience in specific digital platforms, such as encrypted messaging services and shared digital calendars, makes it difficult for one spouse to deceive another. Through creating a secure environment for communication, such tools allow the partners to come together more transparently.

When digital deception has violated trust and intimacy in a relationship, both partners need to work toward rebuilding it. In this regard, professional help, including couples therapy, has been deemed necessary. Quiroz & Mickelson (2021) demonstrate that with professional help, it becomes easier for the couple under review to deal with the numerous tasks involved in the trust-building process. Furthermore, Muhammad & Muhammad (2022) assert that a technology sabbath works for conflicts in a relationship because it will force the couples to focus on each other. Refusing to rely on technology helps to revive a couple and make them exclusively attracted to each other, as distractions from others might intrude and interfere with a couple's affection. The strategies presented here are a comprehensive process of helping those affected by cyber deception.

METHOD

Data Collection

Participants of this research will complete anonymous surveys and interviews about digital deception within their relationships. Numerous participants will receive specific questionnaires to self-assess their rates of digital deception, their effect on marital trust, and levels of emotional intimacy. Further, semi-structured interviews with therapists specializing in cyberpsychology will also be done to seek their views on the effects of fakeness online on intimate relationships. It is beneficial for gaining an idea of how victims and their families feel and that of the experts regarding how they address this and what kinds of treatment are utilized to work on such issues.

The case studies will also help explain how infidelity takes shape in relationships. Still, as Tandana (2022) has noted, samples of cases provide more context on how manipulation has changed relational interactions. This study will examine several cases of digital betrayal, such as cyber betrayal, spying, or identity theft, to understand how technology can undermine relationship trust and intimacy. These case studies will also outline the consequences of such betrayals and their emotional effects over the long term.

Data Approach

Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and case-study approaches will be utilized in this study to obtain detailed and descriptive data about the psychological effects of digital deception. Davidson *et al.* (2024) noted that the most suitable method is qualitative in social media or other platforms that capture human feelings, sentiment, and interpersonal affection for emotional regulation in the cyber-world. Another advantage of using focus groups is that participants already show tendencies toward forming universal patterns in perception across multiple participants. The interviews will assist in establishing the extent of distress caused by gross digital deception among the victims. As previously suggested, the case studies will also demonstrate some actual events that can occur in marriage relationships, proving how cyber deception affects people mentally and behaviorally.

Quantitative methods will also be used to measure the level of nondisclosure and its impact on relationships. Self-administered questionnaires will be employed to assess the prevalence of infidelity, emotional mistreatment, and other forms of deceit in marriages and its effect on intimacy and trust. Minina *et al.* (2022) opined that. In contrast, quantitative information is incomplete in isolating digital deception patterns; integrating quantitative data with qualitative information provides a more vivid understanding of the impact of digital deception on marital

relationships. Using quantitative and qualitative methods also ensures more accurate prevalence data while incorporating the participants' experience.

Justification of Approach

Therefore, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches is relevant, especially in this study, to bring out a comprehensive understanding of the effects of digital deception. According to Quiroz & Mickelson (2021), digital deception transgresses basic trust forms. It produces emotionally laden responses for which the remainder cannot be captured solely by narrative and quantification.

This contributes to creating an awareness of the emotionally authentic reality in the short term while providing essential data on the rates and the specific nature of deceptive behavior in the digital realm. Combining both approaches would mean that the research will be more exhaustive in capturing the phenomenon in its natural context, hence helping to establish the appropriate interventions when couples experience manipulation through technology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cheating is now a prevalent issue in current relationships, with current studies indicating the growth of digital infidelity across the different social networks. According to Holtzman *et al.* (2021), deception is more common in social media platforms, dating applications, and messaging apps. These applications enable the creation of fake personalities, the anonymity of individuals, and social manipulation, with its negative impacts not being felt immediately. As a result, people are often unaware of the fact that infidelity is a common practice that couples incite in their relationships, thereby undermining the affectionate intimacy that constitutes the core of every bond.

Emotional loss is another aspect of digital deception that usually hurts the psychological state of a victim. In their self-completed online questionnaires, Aiken *et al.* (2024) observed that subjects in digitally manipulated relationships experience elevated normalized anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and diminishing trust in their partner. This violation of trust complicates matters as victims are unable to move on and relate to their partners sexually in a positive way. This shift in patterns within the relationship negatively impacts the individuals' psychological well-being and carries long-term consequences.

As Muhammad & Muhammad (2022) categorized the cases of deception based on the type of technologies that the offenders use, different kinds of technology used in these cases include the following. They consist of the social networks that afford the creation of fake accounts and

the encrypted messengers that facilitate clandestine discussions. (Murikkattu *et al.*, 2024). These environments offer camouflage and space, enabling cheating, which becomes complicated for the partners to identify. This fact underlines the necessity to provide more attention to safety measures within the digital environment, as some users may be vulnerable to being manipulated and betrayed.

CONCLUSION

Thus, as relationships become digitalized, the levels of trust and intimacy decline, and trust is more easily betrayed. Some of the most common negative online interactions are seen through social media and messaging apps, which have shifted the ways of forming emotional bonds. Cheating thus erodes trust, creating instability in the relationship where one partner has acted deceitfully. Not only does it decrease intimacy, but it also causes anxiety, insecurity, and other psychological consequences for the victim in the long run.

Due to the increasing dynamicity of digital deception, future research should be conducted to understand its effects on people's emotional health and the stability of their relationships. As the technologies grow, so do the ways to exploit them; therefore, it is essential to investigate the psychological impacts of such behavior. It is imperative to extend current research on several forms of digital deception and their impact on users and their relationships, including potentially adverse effects such as increased stress levels.

Enhancing the advocacy for more focused research will require the remedies stated above. It is necessary to focus on developing policy and practice-based solutions targeting individuals' deceptive behavior and the broader social impacts of digital deception. The researchers need to understand these behaviors on a psychological level to develop an actionable plan that can reduce the adverse effects of digital manipulation and offer support to the victims.

SUGGESTIONS

Higher education and technological competence are relevant in preparing people to counter digital betrayal in relationships. In this study, Bonilla-Zorita *et al.* (2021) explain that as interface interactions rely on computers, it is vital to grasp the subtleties of online interactions. Introducing people to the signs of manipulation—faking an identity, using the internet as a tool for emotional abuse, being unfaithful through cyberspace — helps prevent further damage to relationships resulting from deception. Thus, raising awareness about the effects of cyber deception can help individuals avoid or adopt the type of attitude they develop on social media.

In the same way, new technologies allow for improving trust and communication within couple relationships with the help of digital relational media. Holtzman *et al.* (2021) observe that integrating technology into society has significantly altered how couples express their physical affection. To paraphrase, developing applications that ensure openness, like mutual observance of each other's digital activity, can assist couples in fighting tricks and regaining confidence. For instance, social applications like shared calendars or encrypted messaging services can provide means to improve relationships and decrease poor or dishonest interactions. Developing such tools could go a long way in reducing the threats posed by digital deception.

In addition, there is a need for policy advocacy to enhance the formulation of laws and regulations aimed at preventing digital deception and manipulation. Pate (2024) notes that the current laws are limited in their handling of technology-facilitated abuse, particularly in the context of partner abuse. Future legislation that targets cyber manipulation and online surveillance could also be aimed at putting more legal frameworks in place so that people can seek justice when they have been deceived. Therefore, future cyberpsychological research must extend these findings to continue building an understanding of the role of digital deception in relationships. As Muhamud & Muhammad (2022), understanding the long-term impacts of betrayal on feelings and thoughts will improve treatment approaches for digital deception victims. Therefore, funding should be directed toward scientific studies that set up legislation and rules to help eradicate the impact of manipulation on society.

REFERENCES

- Aiken, M. P., Davidson, J. C., Walrave, M., Ponnet, K. S., Phillips, K., & Farr, R. R. (2024). Intention to hack? Applying the theory of planned behavior to youth criminal hacking. *Forensic Sciences*, 4(1), 24-41. <https://doi.org/10.3390/forensicsci4010003>
- Bonilla-Zorita, G., Griffiths, M.D. & Kuss, D.J. Online Dating and Problematic Use: A Systematic Review. *Int J Ment Health Addiction* 19, 2245–2278 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00318-9>
- Caneppele, S. (2025). Observing, Measuring, and Researching Cybercrime: A Scoping Review of Systematic Reviews Since 2010s. In M.F. Aebi, F. Miro-Llinares, & S. Caneppele (Eds.), *Understanding crime trends in a hybrid society*, (pp. 101-123). Springer Briefs in Criminology. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-72387-2_5
- Holtzman, S., Kushlev, K., Wozny, A., & Godard, R. (2021). Long-distance texting: Text messaging is linked with higher relationship satisfaction in long-distance relationships. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, 38(12), 3543–3565. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211043296>

- Hosford, K. (2021). Hacker Generations, Subcultures, and Hat Colours: A More Practical Approach to Classification. *Cybercrime in Action an International Approach to Cybercrime*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356285258>
- Lundie, M., Lindke, K., Amos-Binks, A., Aiken, M. P., & Janosek, D. (2024, January). The Enterprise Strikes Back: Conceptualizing the HackBot-Reversing Social Engineering in the Cyber Defense Context. In HICSS (pp. 984-993). <https://iss.ch/resources/site-media/2024/05/The-Enterprise-Strikes-Back-pdf.pdf>
- Minina, A., Masè, S., & Smith, J. (2022). Commodifying love: value conflict in online dating. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38(1–2), 98–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2033815>
- Muhammad, F. S., & Muhammad, H. (2022). Cybercrime through love scams: What women should know?. *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Studies*, 8(2), 41-54. <https://doi.org/10.24191/jcis.v8i2.3>
- Murikkattu, N. E., Shah, D., Singh, N., Bhatia, M. S., & Sinha, A. (2024). The experiences of individuals in maintaining a long-distance relationship through social media. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*, 23(2), 2736-2743. <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.23.2.2570>
- Pate, S. (2024). Platform Liability for Platform Manipulation. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4990050>
- Quiroz, S. I., & Mickelson, K. D. (2021). Are online behaviors damaging our in-person connections? Passive versus active social media use on romantic relationships. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 15(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2021-1-1>
- Tandana, E. A. (2022). AMID THE THREAT OF CYBERCRIME. *QUAERENS: Journal of Theology and Christianity Studies*, 4(2), 129-147. <https://doi.org/10.46362/quaerens.v4i2.214>
- Tandon, A., Dhir, A. & Mäntymäki, M. (2021). "Jealousy due to social media? A systematic literature review and framework of social media-induced jealousy". *Internet Research*, 31(5), 1541-1582. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-02-2020-0103>