



Assessment of Covert Phone Checking Behavior on ... Umar, M. M. (2025)

Assessment of Covert Phone Checking Behavior on Marital Health among Adult Education Married Students in Kano Metropolis, Kano State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined covert phone checking among young married women students in Kano Metropolis, Nigeria, exploring its motivations, impacts, and socio-cultural influences. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. The study population was 621 students from three adult education centers, with a sample of 242 selected via stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, validated by experts and demonstrating good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81). Findings revealed the behavior was universal. The primary motivation was reassurance-seeking and responding to a husband's perceived secrecy, not mere curiosity. A key paradox was identified: while covert checking reduced the women's personal anxiety, it simultaneously caused serious marital arguments, guilt, and hindered open communication. The behavior is firmly rooted in the local context, justified by a strong belief in a wife's right to transparency and the cultural proscription against direct confrontation. Educational enrollment further amplified these dynamics by increasing the women's awareness and confidence. The study concludes that covert phone checking is a culturally-embedded coping strategy for managing marital uncertainty. Recommendations include developing culturally-sensitive therapies that address underlying anxieties and integrating relationship communication skills into adult education curricula to help couples navigate trust in the digital age.

Keywords: *Covert Phone Checking, Marital Conflict, Digital Intrusion, Kano, Socio-cultural Norms.*

Introduction

Marriage has always been a journey of two people learning to share a life, and that inevitably comes with misunderstandings and arguments. For generations, these conflicts played out in the open through conversations, shared silences, or even raised voices within the home. But today, the landscape of marriage has been profoundly reshaped by a small device we all carry in our pockets: the smartphone. Smartphones promise connection, but in marriages, they can sometimes breed suspicion. It is become common for one partner to feel a nagging curiosity or anxiety about who their spouse is talking to online, leading them to secretly glance through their partner's phone. This behavior is a modern-day marital dilemma. It's driven by a need for reassurance but often ends up violating trust, creating a quiet conflict that lives in the shadows of a relationship. To understand this study, it's helpful to define its core ideas. The term "Marital Communication" refers to the ways married couples exchange information, feelings, and meanings, which is the lifeblood of a healthy relationship (Gottman, 2014). When this communication breaks down, it often leads to "Marital Conflict," which is a state of disagreement between spouses that can range from minor differences to major, ongoing disputes (Cupach, 2007). In the digital age, a new source of conflict has emerged, which this study focuses on: "Covert Phone Checking." This is defined as the secret surveillance of a partner's mobile phone—including texts, call logs, and social media messages—without their knowledge or consent (Miller-Ott, 2018). It is a specific type of "digital intrusion" that blurs the line between seeking reassurance and invading privacy. This study wants to understand this quiet conflict, but not in a general sense. It focuses on a specific group of women in Kano Metropolis who find themselves at a unique crossroads. They are "Young Married Women Students," a demographic we define as women under the age of 30, currently in a marital union, and enrolled in formal or informal adult literacy or vocational training centers. This pursuit of education is a key part of their identity, often symbolizing a move toward empowerment and potentially shifting traditional dynamics within the home. Their experiences are shaped by the specific context of "Kano Metropolis," the major urban center of northern Nigeria, characterized by its dense population and its deep-rooted Islamic and Hausa-Fulani cultural norms, which heavily influence family structures and gender roles (Adamu, 2019). So, imagine the inner conflict: a young wife, expanding her world through education, but perhaps feeling uncertain about her husband's activities. In a culture where direct confrontation might be culturally discouraged, the smartphone becomes a tempting tool. A quick, secret check of his phone might feel like the only way to calm her fears without causing a direct confrontation.



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This research is important because no one has really listened to the stories of these women. Most of what we know about digital spying in relationships comes from Western studies (e.g., Elphinston, 2011). The experience of a young, educated woman in Kano, trying to balance modern technology with traditional expectations, is a story that hasn't been told. By exploring their motivations for covert phone checking, this study seeks to illuminate how technology is quietly transforming intimacy and conflict within a unique socio-cultural context.

Statement of the Problem

The pervasive integration of smartphones into daily life has introduced a complex layer to marital relationships, creating new avenues for conflict and distrust. A growing behavior in this context is covert phone checking, where one partner secretly accesses the other's phone to monitor communications. While this phenomenon is recognized globally as a significant source of marital strife, existing research on it is predominantly situated in Western, individualistic societies. This creates a critical knowledge gap, as the motivations, implications, and cultural interpretations of such behaviors are not universal but are deeply shaped by local socio-cultural norms. In non-Western, collectivist settings like Northern Nigeria, and specifically within the densely populated and culturally distinct Kano Metropolis, marital dynamics are governed by strong Islamic and Hausa-Fulani values that emphasize family honor, privacy, and specific gender roles. Within this context, young married women who are also students represent a particularly vulnerable group. They are navigating a unique transition: they are building the foundations of their marriage, while simultaneously pursuing education that empowers them and potentially challenges traditional domestic power dynamics. Caught between modern aspirations and traditional expectations, these women may resort to covert phone checking as a risk-aversion strategy - a way to manage uncertainty and seek reassurance in a society where direct spousal confrontation is often culturally frowned upon.

However, the specific experiences, motivations, and psychological impacts of covert phone checking on this demographic remain entirely unexplored. Without this crucial inquiry, there is a risk of misapplying Western understandings of digital conflict to a context where the meaning of privacy, trust, and marital conflict is fundamentally different. This lack of context-specific knowledge leaves counselors, educators, and policymakers without the necessary insights to address this modern source of marital discord effectively. Therefore, this study is motivated by the urgent need to investigate the covert phone checking behaviors among young married women students in Kano Metropolis. It seeks to uncover the driving forces behind this behavior, its impact on their marital communication and conflict, and how it is shaped by the intricate interplay of their educational pursuits, age, and cultural environment. The findings from this research are essential to develop culturally-sensitive guidance and support systems for couples navigating the challenges of marriage in the digital age within this unique context.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the primary motivations and triggers for covert phone checking among young married women students in Kano Metropolis.
2. To analyze the perceived impact of covert phone checking on marital trust and communication patterns
3. To explore the influence of socio-cultural norms and educational enrollment on the participants' experiences and justifications for this behavior.

Research Questions

1. What are the key motivations (e.g., suspicion, reassurance-seeking, prior conflict) and specific situations that lead young married women students to secretly check their husbands' phones?
2. How does engaging in covert phone checking affect the levels of trust and the nature of open communication within their marriages, from the participants' perspectives?
3. In what ways do the participants' roles as students and the prevailing cultural expectations of privacy and confrontation in Kano shape their decisions to resort to covert phone checking?

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey research design. This design was deemed most appropriate as it facilitates the systematic collection of data from a sample of a population at a single point in time to describe and analyze the variables of interest (Babbie, 2016). The study aims to identify motivations, perceived impacts, and cultural influences on covert phone checking; a survey design allows for the gathering of standardized data from a sufficiently large sample



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to make generalized inferences about the entire population. While the phenomenon under study is deeply personal, a quantitative approach was chosen to first establish the prevalence and broad patterns of this behavior within this specific demographic, providing a foundational dataset that can inform future qualitative inquiries. The research population for this study comprised all young married women students aged 30 years and below enrolled in the three major adult education centers under the Kano State Agency for Mass Education. As per the agency's [2025](#) records, the total population size (N) is [621](#) students, distributed across the centers as follows: Goron Dutse Center for Mass Literacy ([202](#)), Gidan Galadima Center for Mass Education ([251](#)), and City Center for Mass Education ([168](#)). Given the manageable size of the total population, a sample size of [242](#) participants was determined using the Taro Yamane ([1967](#)) formula for a finite population with a 95% confidence level and a precision level (e) of [0.05](#). This sample size ensures the findings are representative of the total population. To select the participants, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. This technique was chosen to ensure fair representation from each of the three centers, acknowledging that each might have slight contextual differences. The population was first stratified into three strata based on the centers. Subsequently, a simple random sampling technique, using a computer-generated random number list based on student rosters provided by the centers, was used to select the proportionate number of participants from each stratum. The distribution of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Size Distribution

SN	Adult Education Center	Population	Sample size
1	Goron Dutse Center	202	78
2	Gidan Galadima center	251	97
3	City Center	168	67
	Total	621	242

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire, designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: Section A: Collected socio-demographic data of the respondents (e.g., age, duration of marriage, level of education, number of children). Section B: Focused on the prevalence and motivations for covert phone checking. This section utilized a series of Likert-scale questions to gauge the frequency of the behavior and the level of agreement with various potential triggers (e.g., "I check my husband's phone when I notice he is being secretive," "I check his phone to feel reassured when I am anxious"). Section C: Assessed the perceived impact on marital trust and communication. Participants were asked to rate, on a scale, how they believed the behavior affected open communication and trust levels in their marriage. Section D: Explored the influence of socio-cultural and educational factors. This section contained items designed to understand how cultural norms around confrontation and the participants' identity as students influenced their justification for, and feelings about, covert phone checking. The questionnaire was initially drafted in English but was translated into Hausa, the primary spoken language of the participants, by a certified linguistic expert to ensure clarity and comprehension. The Hausa version was then back-translated into English by a second independent translator to verify conceptual equivalence. To ensure the content validity of the questionnaire, the initial draft was reviewed by a panel of three experts in the fields of Sociology, Educational Psychology, and Communication Studies. Their feedback was used to refine the wording, structure, and relevance of the items to ensure they adequately captured the constructs outlined in the research objectives. A pilot study was conducted with 30 young married women students from a similar adult education center in a neighboring local government area, which was not part of the main study. Data from the pilot study were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha to test the internal consistency and reliability of the Likert-scale sections of the questionnaire. The computed alpha coefficient was [0.81](#), which is considered a good level of reliability (Nunnally, [1978](#)).

Ethical approval for the study was sought and obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Subsequently, formal permission was secured from the management of the Kano State Agency for Mass Education and the heads of the three selected centers. Data collection was scheduled on regular class days to facilitate access to the participants. Before the distribution of the questionnaires, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to the potential respondents, emphasizing the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. The researchers and two trained research assistants were present to distribute the questionnaires, answer any questions, and collect the completed forms. This process ensured a high response rate of over 95%.



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The data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the socio-demographic data and to describe the patterns of responses related to the research questions. Inferential statistics, specifically Chi-square tests and one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), were employed to examine if there were significant differences in covert phone checking behaviors and their perceived impacts across different demographic groups (e.g., center of study, age group). The level of statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Presentation of Result

The data collected from the [242](#) respondents were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. In line with the methodology, both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed. The results are presented below, structured according to the research objectives and questions.

Research Objective 1: To identify the primary motivations and triggers for covert phone checking.

This objective was addressed using frequency and descriptive analysis of the data from Section B of the questionnaire.

Table 2: Prevalence and Motivations for Covert Phone Checking (N=242)

Motivation	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	often	Very often	M	SD
To feel reassured about his love and commitment	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (8.3%)	<u>101</u> (41.7%)	<u>121</u> (50.0%)	4.42	0.62
When I notice my husband is being secretive with his phone.	0 (0%)	9 (3.7%)	71 (29.3%)	<u>189</u> (78.1%)	31 (12.8%)	4.00	0.58
After we have had a disagreement or argument	4 (1.7%)	8 (3.3%)	71 (29.3%)	86 (35.5%)	(30.2%)	3.89	0.95
I feel a general sense of suspicion.	2 (0.8%)	4 (1.7%)	55 (22.7%)	<u>122</u> (50.4%)	59 (24.4%)	3.96	0.76
When he spends a long time talking on the phone.	5 (2.1%)	7 (2.9%)	90 (37.2%)	61 (25.2%)	79 (32.6%)	3.83	0.99
Because I have heard rumors or gossip.	12 (5.0%)	21 (8.7%)	69 (28.5%)	72 (29.8%)	68 (28.1%)	3.67	1.14
Out of curiosity, with no particular reason.	43 (17.8%)	36 (14.%)	54 (22.3%)	67 (27.7%)	42 (17.4%)	3.12	1.38

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale (1=Never, 5=Very Often).

Interpretation of Table 1:

The analysis reveals that covert phone checking is a universal behavior within the sample, with all [242](#) respondents ([100%](#)) admitting to engaging in it. The primary motivation, with the highest mean score (M=[4.42](#), SD=[0.62](#)), is reassurance-seeking. Half of the participants (50%) engage in this behavior "Very Often" for this reason, indicating a profound need for emotional security. The second strongest trigger is reacting to a husband's secretive behavior (M=[4.00](#), SD=[0.58](#)), with [78.1%](#) of women doing this "Often." This suggests that perceived secrecy is a significant catalyst. Furthermore, post-conflict checking (M=[3.89](#), SD=[0.95](#)) and general suspicion (M=[3.96](#), SD=[0.76](#)) are also major drivers, painting a picture of a behavior deeply intertwined with relational uncertainty and anxiety.

Research Objective 2: To analyze the perceived impact of covert phone checking on marital trust and communication.

This objective was addressed by analyzing the data from Section C of the questionnaire.



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Table 3: Perceived Impact of Covert Phone Checking on Marital Trust and Communication (N=242)

Statement of perceived impacts	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD
Checking his phone helps to reduce my anxiety.	2 (0.8%)	3 (1.2%)	12 (5.0%)	110 (45.5%)	115 (47.5%)	4.38	0.70
This behavior has caused a serious argument in my marriage.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	10 (4.1%)	102 (42.1%)	130 (53.7%)	4.50	0.57
After checking, I usually feel guilty.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.8%)	121 (50.0%)	119 (49.2%)	4.48	0.52
If my husband knew, it would damage our relationship.	0 (0%)	6 (2.5%)	4 (1.7%)	140 (57.9%)	92 (38.0%)	4.31	0.62
I find it more difficult to communicate openly after I check	3 (1.2%)	3 (1.2%)	4 (1.7%)	129 (53.3%)	103 (42.6%)	4.35	0.72
The trust between us has been weakened because of this.	43 (17.8%)	40 (16.5%)	31 (12.8%)	66 (27.3%)	62 (25.6%)	3.26	1.47
The trust between us has been weakened because of this	43 (17.8%)	40 (16.5%)	31 (12.8%)	66 (27.3%)	62 (25.6%)	3.26	1.47

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Interpretation of Table 2:

The findings reveal a profound paradox. On one hand, women report that the behavior is highly effective in reducing their anxiety (M=4.38, SD=0.70). On the other hand, they overwhelmingly acknowledge its negative consequences. A vast majority agree or strongly agree that it has caused serious arguments (95.8%, M=4.50), induces guilt (99.2%, M=4.48), and would be damaging if discovered (95.9%, M=4.31). Critically, they perceive that it makes open communication more difficult (95.9%, M=4.35). However, the perception of its direct impact on trust is more divided (M=3.26, SD=1.47), suggesting that while the act is recognized as harmful to communication and a source of conflict, some women may rationalize it as a necessary action that does not fundamentally erode their overall trust in the relationship.

Research Objective 3: To explore the influence of socio-cultural norms and educational enrollment. This objective was addressed by analyzing the data from Section D. A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to explore the influence of education level on motivations, but no significant differences were found ($p > .05$), indicating that the behavior and its drivers are consistent across different educational levels within this student population.

Table 4: Influence of Socio-Cultural and Educational Factors (N=242)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	M	SD
A wife has a right to know everything on her husband's phone.	4 (1.7%)	6 (2.5%)	7 (2.9%)	105 (43.4%)	120 (49.6%)	4.37	0.76
Directly asking my husband might be seen as disrespectful.	5 (2.1%)	7 (2.9%)	3 (1.2%)	102 (42.1%)	125 (51.7%)	4.38	0.80
My education has made me more aware of my rights.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	141 (58.3%)	101 (41.7%)	4.42	0.49
Being a student makes me more confident and concerned	2 (0.8%)	3 (1.2%)	5 (2.1%)	130 (53.7%)	102 (42.1%)	4.35	0.67



In our culture, it is better to secretly check than to confront	76 (31.4%)	76 (31.4%)	20 (8.3%)	32 (13.2%)	38 (15.7%)	2.51	1.46
The privacy of a husband's phone should be respected.	82 (33.9%)	71 (29.3%)	13 (5.4%)	35 (14.5%)	41 (16.9%)	2.51	1.53
My pursuit of education is a source of tension.	65 (26.9%)	73 (30.2%)	22 (9.1%)	50 (20.7%)	32 (13.2%)	2.63	1.40

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Interpretation of Table 4:

The data highlight a complex interplay of modern and traditional forces. There is a very strong belief that a wife has a right to full phone transparency (M=4.37) and that direct confrontation is culturally framed as disrespectful (M=4.38). This combination creates a powerful justification for covert checking. Furthermore, education plays a key role: women strongly feel that being a student has increased their awareness of rights (M=4.42) and their general confidence and concern about the marriage (M=4.35). However, they do not uniformly reject cultural norms, as seen in the ambivalent responses regarding whether secret checking is preferable to confrontation (M=2.51) and whether a husband's phone privacy should be respected (M=2.51). This indicates a state of normative conflict, where modern ideals of rights and transparency clash with traditional expectations of wifely deference and male privacy.

Discussion of Findings

This study set out to investigate the under-explored phenomenon of covert phone checking among young married women students in Kano Metropolis. The findings reveal a behavior that is both pervasive and paradoxical.

1. **Motivations:** The primary driver is not malice, but a deep-seated need for reassurance and a response to perceived secrecy from husbands. The behavior is triggered by specific relational contexts like post-argument tension and general suspicion.
2. **Impact:** A clear double-edged effect is evident. While covert checking effectively reduces anxiety for the woman, it is simultaneously recognized as a major source of marital conflict, guilt, and hindered communication. The women operate with a clear understanding of the potential relational damage if discovered.
3. **Socio-Cultural Context:** The behavior is firmly rooted in the local cultural context. The strong belief in a wife's right to knowledge, coupled with the cultural proscription against direct confrontation, creates a normative vacuum that covert checking fills. Their pursuit of education amplifies their awareness and confidence, intensifying their concerns and potentially legitimizing the behavior as a form of risk management in a changing marital power dynamic.

Conclusion

This research concludes that covert phone checking among young married women students in Kano is not merely a personal act of suspicion, but a culturally-embedded coping strategy. It is a symptomatic response to the tensions arising at the intersection of digital technology, evolving gender roles fueled by female education, and deep-seated traditional norms that discourage open marital communication about insecurity. These women are navigating a complex reality where modern tools (smartphones) and aspirations (education) collide with traditional marital structures, and covert phone checking emerges as a risky, yet for them, necessary strategy to manage uncertainty and seek emotional security without violating cultural codes of conduct.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **For Counselors and Therapists:** Marital therapy in this context should move beyond labeling this behavior as simply "wrong." Practitioners should address the underlying reassurance-seeking and anxiety that drive it. Culturally-sensitive interventions should focus on helping couples develop alternative, open communication strategies that can function within the cultural framework, perhaps by framing open discussion as a means to preserve family harmony rather than as wifely defiance.



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2. For Educators and Policymakers: Adult education programs should integrate digital literacy and marital communication modules into their curricula. These modules should educate both men and women on the impact of digital intrusion on trust and provide constructive tools for managing jealousy and building trust in the digital age, contextualized within local values.
3. For Future Research: This quantitative study provides a foundational overview. Future research should employ qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, focus groups) to explore the nuanced lived experiences, emotional turmoil, and strategic rationalizations of these women in greater depth. Longitudinal studies could also track how these behaviors evolve as these women progress in their educational and personal journeys.
By understanding the "why" behind the behavior, stakeholders can better support couples in Kano and similar contexts to navigate the challenges of intimacy and trust in the digital age.

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