



VIRTUAL MARKETPLACES DILEMMAS: THE ETHICAL THREATS OF THE DIGITAL AGE TO MARRIAGE, PREMARITAL SEX AND FAMILY VALUES

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Abstract

Our contemporary era, the digital age, stands at the precipice of a transformative wheel that is altering the way we think, learn and interact. This new era has launched us into a landscape filled with both opportunities and challenges across various levels of our personal, interpersonal, group, and intergroup relationships. However, as we navigate the complexities of the digital age, it is imperative to recognize that it is unleashing an unimaginable erosive impact on our traditional values and institutions; particularly concerning our time-honoured concepts of marriage, premarital relationships, and family values. Therefore, this study aims to examine the ethical threats posed by virtual marketplaces to these values and institutions, with the goal of charting a way forward. It adopts a survey methodology for data collection while employing content analysis as its analytical tool.

Introduction

The digital age has brought about a significant paradigm shift in the way we think, learn and conduct our daily lives (TeamLease Digital, 2023). The proliferation of virtual marketplaces; social media, and online platforms has transformed how we build relationships, communicate, and access information. Unfortunately, it has also created new dilemmas that threaten traditional values and institutions, particularly in the areas of marriage, premarital relationships, and family values. This perspective is supported by the information available on <https://www.Carleton.ca> which states that digital technologies are unquestionably shifting the paradigm of how we experience and understand the world today. On a daily basis, we witness a deluge of digital-driven experiences that exert profound influences—both positive and negative—across the various layers of our individual and collective humanity.

Britz (n.d.), as cited in <https://web.simmons.edu>, agrees with the aforementioned perspective when he describes our contemporary era—also referred to as the Information Age—as a domain characterized by the open world propelled by globalization and internationalization (the trans-border flow of data). According to him, this paradigm shift elicited new ethical and legal challenges. This indicates that the digital age is exerting significant pressure that undermines the foundational principles related to marriage, premarital sex, family, and traditional values.

We are living in an era where information that once took newspapers or radio several hours or days to reach the public is now disseminated in mere seconds. The quantity of information can be likened to a spoonful of water compared to the vastness of the ocean. Traditional media such as newspapers and radio provide only a limited



amount of information per unit of time and target a confined audience. In contrast, the digital information available in the public domain consists of billions of volumes accessible to billions of people virtually simultaneously. Consequently, this creates an environment that fosters the potential for mass misinformation, where truths and untruths are presented side by side in the same media, and where one-way digital communication offers no immediate opportunity for verifying their accuracy.

Thus, virtual marketplaces have become vast expanses akin to oceans where technological innovations and humanity converge, resulting in an array of economic, social, political, cultural, and religious pressures and relationships. This development incidentally opens the floodgates to consumer-driven passions, allowing individuals to pursue both guided and unguided cravings, while simultaneously creating opportunities to exploit gullible individuals to a significant extent. This suggests that there exists a compounding network of forces in virtual marketplaces, where all participants are engaged in a battle of wits over who controls the ideological and behavioural frameworks of individuals, families, institutions, and governments—and by extension, their financial resources.

Consequently, in this melting pot of forces within the virtual marketplaces, rationality, integrity, equity, justice, accountability, and morality are often sacrificed at the altar of greed and unchecked madness. The result is that the lines between ethical principles and unbridled profiteering become highly blurred. Inevitably, these issues pose ethical challenges across various relational dimensions, including family, religion, society, politics, economics, culture, and more. This paper, however, seeks to examine the dilemmas presented by virtual marketplaces as they relate to the ethical threats of the digital age concerning marriage, premarital sex, and family values.

Theoretical Perspectives: This paper is grounded in social network theory. According to Ogbuoshi (2025), social network theory, first proposed by John Barnes in 1954, focuses on how individuals, organizations, or groups interact within their networks. It addresses how relationships and interactions within these networks influence the behaviour of individuals and groups. This is further supported by Dunn (1983), who posits that the theory emphasizes the foundational roles that social interactions play in facilitating attitudinal and behavioural change through personal or group information transmission channels.

The theory relates to two concepts known as networks and nodes. "Networks" refer to the connections among individuals or entities, which are relevant to social media. In contrast, "nodes" signify the individual actors or organizations within these networks (i.e., social media platforms). The various platforms for relationships and interactions—whether virtual or otherwise—can influence individuals or groups both positively and negatively, depending on their explicit and sometimes implicit intentions. Ogbuoshi (2025) succinctly articulates this perspective by asserting that social network theory enhances information transmission through content creation.



This content is shared digitally, tweeted, or retweeted on social media platforms, achieving global reach within seconds. Such rapid dissemination can have both positive and negative effects on the intended audience. Consequently, he states that individuals (social media users), whom he refers to as gatekeepers, have the capacity to set agendas in the public domain by creating either negative or positive content or information. Through digital means, this content can unleash specific effects that were predetermined. This highlights how comments and user activities within digital marketplaces can spread widely online, and the tone of the messaging can significantly impact media audiences and their reactions regarding marriage, premarital sex, and traditional family values. Against this backdrop, this work seeks to employ social network theory, as it is most relevant and suitable for the study.

Conceptual Definitions: To explore the subject matter of this work, it is essential to clarify the key concepts that frame the study. This undoubtedly provides a foundational understanding of the complex relationship between virtual marketplaces and their ethical threats to marriage, premarital sex, and traditional family values.

- 1. Virtual Marketplaces:** Marketing refers to the aggregation of operations, processes, and techniques used to promote, sell, and distribute products or services to customers. The virtual or digital marketplace is therefore associated with a paradigm shift in marketing brought about by information technology, in which the constraints of time, location, and various human and natural barriers in the processes of buying, selling, and distributing goods and services on a global scale are reduced to mere seconds. The term "virtual marketplace," also known as an online marketplace or e-marketplace, refers to an online platform where buyers and sellers engage in transactions involving goods or services without the need for physical infrastructure. This setup enables immediate interactions and transactions.
- 2. Digital Age:** The Information Age, according to Wikipedia, is an era that began in the mid-20th century, driven by a rapid transition from traditional industries established during the Industrial Revolution to an economy centred on information technology. Another definition, as captured by Study Smarter, describes it as an era characterized by the advancement of technology from analog or mechanical devices to digital technology. This epoch in current human history began in the 1980s and is propelled by information and communication technology (ICT).
- 3. Marriage:** Marriage is defined as the state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law. Furthermore, as defined by Britannica, it is a legally and socially binding union, usually between a man and a woman, which is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that define the rights and duties of the partners and confer status upon their offspring (if any). From the perspective of Christian theology, God designed



marriage as an institution intended to foster humanity's positive sustenance, growth, and development.

According to the National Association of Evangelicals, as cited in their website, the concept of marriage, first described in Genesis and later affirmed by Jesus, is a God-ordained covenant relationship. The relationship that exists between a man and a woman pertains to a lifelong, sexually exclusive commitment that, among other things, seeks to bring children into the world, thereby sustaining his procreative and stewardship role on earth. Marriage, as previously described, refers to a divinely ordained union exclusively between an adult male and female, regulated within the context of cultural, social, legal, and religious boundaries. This indicates that marriage is not merely an individual arrangement but rather a complex intersection of interests through which a new family is created by a man and a woman, guided by divine, social, cultural, legal, and customary obligations. It is no wonder that some scholars have noted that "marriage is a business initiated by heaven but consummated on earth." Jesus supports this perspective on the divine nature of marital union when he states, "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9).

4. **Ethical:** The term "ethical" relates to ethics. According to Krishnamurthy (2011), as cited in <https://www.researchgate.net>, ethics "generally refers to the science of conduct or the fundamental ground rules upon which human activities are regulated." Ethics involves the underlying principles that define human conduct as good or bad. It pertains to the moral boundaries that delineate acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.
5. **Family:** A family is defined as a group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit. It also refers to all the descendants of a people who share a common ancestry.

Here are the rearranged statements under the specified subheadings with grammatical errors corrected and duplicated sentences removed:

Digital Ethical Threats to Marriage: Digital technology is contributing to a high rate of ethical threats to traditional and Christian values on the institution of marriage in Nigeria today through its various communication channels. The internet facilitates the misuse of romantic or sexual relationships, leading to these threats. According to (link unavailable), technology encourages infidelity by facilitating secretive communications that serve as platforms for sexual encounters. Many married couples devote substantial amounts of time to watching pornography, which can lead to destructive behaviours and attitudes toward sex. This pervasive exposure can transform individuals into hypersexualized beings whose choices and conduct are ruled by addiction instead of rationality and godly character.



Moreover, online infidelity cultivates a lifestyle that undermines trust and accountability within marriage. Mileham (2007) suggests that many spouses feel as betrayed, angry, and hurt by online infidelity as they would if their marital partner had physically committed adultery. This troubling trend exerts pressure on marital fidelity by diluting, and in extreme cases robbing, couples of the strong intimacy, confidentiality, and transparency that are essential for a flourishing marriage. Corroborating the above view Al Mujtama Magazine article while discussing the negative impact of social media on marital values, cited a study by Stanford University researcher Katherine Humphreys findings which stated that excessive social media use increases levels of suspicion and distrust between spouses. According to him, 40% of couples who use social media excessively face trust issues, while 34% believe social media increases the likelihood of infidelity. Hearn, et al (2023) equally notes that digital intimacy in recent time is significantly evolving as gender based violence that finds expressions as offline intimate partner violence. The implication of the above submissions is digital technology through the ambience of online intimacy is fuelling the ember of marital infidelity thereby serving as precursor for broken relationships and marriages.

Digital Ethical Threats to Premarital Relationship/Sex: Premarital sex refers to sexual activity that occurs between individuals who are not yet married to each other. It is regarded as a moral evil or a sin in the Bible and is commonly referred to as fornication. The unusual floodgates of premarital sex through digital technology have opened an accepted but harmful lifestyle, as several platforms are deployed to market free sexual invitations across all age groups. According to Wragg (January 13, 2023), technology has globalized the way we live, work, socialize, and develop relationships, introducing new dimensions of sexual allurements and aberrations online.

Wragg (2023) supports the view that excessive indulgence in pornography can lead to self-destructive behaviours and unhealthy coping mechanisms. King Solomon warns that an unguarded sexual lifestyle is a lethal instrument that shortens one's lifespan (Proverbs 7:25-26). He emphasizes that illicit sex can lead to destruction, ruin, and the loss of integrity.

Digital Ethical Threats to Family: The digital age is eroding the foundational concept of family, leading to the normalization of traditionally condemned behaviours such as adultery, fornication, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, and nudism. Online marketplaces have transformed sex into a billion-dollar global industry, promoting a culture of exploitation and degradation. Many women today would rather work as sex workers than engage in positive but demanding productive ventures. This societal shift damages families, as children are raised in an environment that resembles that of animals rather than human beings.

Dedkova, Smahel., & Just (2022) are in agreement with above submission when they posit that " home users of information and communication technologies are often the



target of online attacks. At the same time, they tend to lack the knowledge and skills to effectively protect themselves. Families with children are in a particularly difficult position since parents are responsible not only for their own digital safety but also for their children's". What this means is that in the digital age, families have become vulnerable to the negative impacts of online trends, with children and young adults being particularly susceptible to exposure to harmful and explicit content. This can lead to the adoption of warped and unhealthy attitudes towards sexuality, ultimately affecting the well-being of young individuals and, in some cases, unguarded adults.

Conclusion: This paper concludes that digital ethical threats are severely impacting marriages, premarital relationships, and families. Digital technology is fuelling marital infidelity, destructive behaviours, and trust issues, while normalizing premarital sex and traditionally condemned behaviours such as incest, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, one wife -multiple husbands marriage amongst others. Families, especially those with children, are vulnerable to online attacks and exploitation arising from lack of knowledge and skills to protect themselves. Moreover, online marketplaces by promoting a culture of degradation and sex without restraint has, transformed sex globally into a billion-dollar industry thereby fostering a culture of dehumanized, depraved and illicit humanity.

Recommendations: Based on the foregoing here are some recommendations for redressing ethical threats to marriage, premarital sex, family, and traditional values in the digital age:

1. **Promotion of critical thinking:** The media, parents, schools and the Church should strive to build society that produces individuals who are critically driven in evaluating issues of core values of marriage, relationship, family and traditional or fundamental values of life so as to build people of character and healthy online habits.
2. **Empowering Citizens through Education:** Governments can play a vital role in promoting education that reduces unethical online behaviours. By introducing relationship studies and digital literacy programs in schools, citizens can develop essential skills for building healthy relationships, identifying online threats, and practicing empathy, transparency, and accountability in their online interactions.
3. **Emphasizing Sexual Purity:** The Church community, religious leaders, parents, schools, and media should promote and model sexual purity, recognizing our responsibility to God, others, and ourselves as the foundation for building strongly bonded societies. This involves avoiding and condemning such behaviours considered sinful or immoral, such as the following:
 - Fornication: sexual activity outside of marriage
 - Adultery: sexual activity with someone other than one's spouse
 - Lust: intense desire or attraction that can lead to sinful behaviour



- Impurity: behaviours or thoughts that are considered unclean or immoral such as pornography, nude dressing amongst others. By upholding moral integrity and holiness in thoughts, words, and actions, the Christian community can set a positive example.
- 4. Rooting Values in Faith: The Church community should promote evangelistic activities that preach Biblical conversion and godly living, helping people experience a transformative life that embodies wholesome living, including healthy online habits and sexual integrity. By promoting a Biblical worldview that advocates for repentance and genuine heart transformation, the religious community can mobilize a generation of men and women whose ethical foundations are driven by faith rather than public opinion or base instincts, motivated by a deep reverence for God and the promise of His abundant blessings.
- 5. Support sex education and healthy sexuality: Government should promote sex education that promotes healthy attitudes towards sex, relationships, and consent, with a view to fostering responsible sexual behaviour.
- 6. Government should provide adequate legislation that foster accountability and responsibility in marriage, sex and family relationships: Individuals should be held accountable for their actions, and take responsibility for their choices and behaviours in online and offline relationships.
- 7. Strengthen family and community bonds: Foster strong family and community relationships, and promote values such as commitment, fidelity, and responsibility.
- 8. Develop and enforce policies and laws: Policymakers and lawmakers should develop and enforce policies and laws that protect individuals from online exploitation, harassment, and abuse, and promote a safe and respectful online environment.
- 9. Provide support and resources: Government and non-governmental agencies should provide assistance and counselling support for individuals who have been affected by online exploitation, harassment, or abuse.
- 10. Parents and guardians should keep track over their children's online activities, so as to engage them with an open and honest conversations with respect to online safety and responsibility.



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