

Changing Social Bonds among Young Adults in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies, particularly social media platforms and instant messaging apps, have fundamentally altered how young adults develop, maintain, and interpret social ties. This study investigates the impact of digital communication on modern relationship behaviours among university-aged young adults who were raised as "digital natives." The paper investigates how digitally mediated connectivity alters patterns of intimacy, trust, emotional support, and community formation, drawing on theories of network society (Castells), mediated intimacy (Turkle), dramaturgical self-presentation (Goffman), symbolic interactionism (Blumer), and media multiplexity (Baym). Using a mixed-methods design that included a survey (N = 320) and 25 in-depth interviews with young adults aged 18-28, the findings show that digital media facilitates hybrid online-offline relationships, reconfigures emotional intimacy, intensifies surveillance and relational insecurity, enables new forms of identity and community, and generates emotional strain and digital fatigue at the same time. According to the study, digital communication significantly changes the form, meaning, and emotional texture of social bonds among young adults, rather than simply supplementing pre-existing ones. The work contributes to digital sociology by providing an empirically informed analysis of emergent relational dynamics. It also enriches sociological understandings of social connection and intimacy in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Communication; Young Adults; Social Bonds; Changing of Emotion

INTRODUCTION

Digital communication tools are rapidly mediating ordinary social contact, changing how people communicate with their friends, peers, romantic partners, and larger communities. For many young individuals who identify as digital natives, smartphones and associated platforms serve as a key social infrastructure rather than a supplemental communication tool. Social media programs and instant messaging platforms are strongly ingrained in daily life, influencing expectations of availability, responsiveness, and emotional engagement. This shift has resulted in new forms of closeness and social support while also creating new tensions. Digital communication allows for continual connection, emotional transparency, and relationship maintenance over distance. At the same time, it causes emotional overload, blurring lines between public and private life, increased surveillance, and expectations on identity performance. As a result, social bonds in the digital era are marked by both enhanced connectivity and heightened vulnerability.

The reorganisation of social ties via digital media presents a number of crucial sociological questions:

How do young adults navigate relationships in a world of continual connectivity?

What social meanings are associated with digital interactions and platform-specific cues?

How are trust, intimacy, and identity altered in digitally mediated relationships?

Existing research indicates that digital technologies promote networked individualism (Wellman, 2001), transfer intimacy from face-to-face interaction to screen-mediated communication (Turkle, 2011), and generate hybrid

social environments that blur online and offline borders (Baym, 2015). However, the lived relational experiences of young adults in increasingly digitising countries, particularly outside Western contexts, have received scant attention. This study tackles this gap by examining how digital communication reshapes young adults' everyday relationship behaviours using both quantitative and qualitative data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Communication as Social Infrastructure

Digital platforms are increasingly serving as social infrastructures, shaping how people communicate, interact, and maintain relationships. Castells' (2009) idea of the "network society" emphasises how social organisation is mediated by information flows rather than physical co-presence. WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook have become essential tools for maintaining relationships, particularly among young adults (Boyd, 2014; Ellison et al., 2011).

According to research, instant messaging promotes emotional connection through ongoing micro-interactions like as brief messages, emojis, replies, and status updates (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). These seemingly little transactions serve as relational cues, sustaining relationships and creating a sense of continued connection even in the absence of face-to-face conversation.

Shifting Intimacy and Emotional Communication

Digital communication reshapes emotional closeness by providing constant access while varying the depth and quality of engagement. Turkle (2011) contends that digital technologies prioritise "connection over conversation," resulting in connections that are both intimate and fragile. While internet communication can facilitate emotional exposure, especially during times of vulnerability, it may also limit conversational depth and emotional nuance (Krueger, 2016; Barker, 2019). Furthermore, digital channels create new expectations for responsiveness and availability. When these expectations are not realised, people frequently experience relationship tension, misinterpretation, and emotional uneasiness (Bayer et al., 2020).

Identity, Performance, and Meaning-Making

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework defines identity as a performance influenced by audience expectations. Digital platforms extend these stages of performance, allowing for controlled self-presentation to numerous audiences (Hogan, 2010; Marwick, 2013). Young adults manage their profiles carefully to strike a balance between authenticity, visibility, and social validation. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) explains how digital actions such as likes, comments, views, and read receipts gain symbolic meaning. These cues serve as signs of recognition, caring, and relationship status, influencing how social bonds are seen and appraised.

Digital Trust, Surveillance, and Relational Insecurity

Digital platforms increase relational risk through a variety of visibility features like as read receipts, "last seen" indicators, article views, and profile changes. Previous research has repeatedly shown that such characteristics are linked to greater relational anxiety, envy, and daily surveillance activities (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015; Tokunaga, 2016). These affordances shift trust from a relatively implicit emotional orientation to a continual interpretative process that requires users to monitor, assess, and respond to digital availability and responsiveness indicators. These cues may have contradictory effects on young adults: while they can provide reassurance and a sense of intimacy, they can also destabilise relationships by increasing scepticism, misinterpretation, and increased emotional uneasiness.

Digital Communities and Networked Belonging

Digital platforms also make it easier to create online communities that allow people to explore their identities, feel a sense of belonging, and receive emotional support. These communities frequently bring together people who have similar interests, attitudes, or experiences, resulting in affinity-based bonding that crosses geographical and social borders (Kanai, 2019). For young people who face marginalisation, loneliness, or misrecognition in offline settings, digital communities might provide alternative relational worlds where validation, recognition, and collective meaning-making are feasible. As a result, networked belonging should be viewed as a separate social arena with its own rules, hierarchies, and emotional economies, rather than simply an extension of offline sociality.

Inequality, Fatigue, and Emotional Labor in Digital Life

Despite increased connectivity options, persisting inequalities in access, skills, and emotional capacity continue to shape digital engagement (van Dijk, 2020). Aside from material and technological differences, people vary greatly in their capacity to manage the affective demands of constant online involvement. Sustained exposure to digital contact has been associated to burnout and exhaustion, sometimes known as "social media fatigue" (Dhir et al., 2018). Young adults commonly cycle between immersion and retreat, balancing the need to stay connected with the need to maintain mental health. These patterns demonstrate how digital life redistributes emotional labour unevenly, resulting in new types of relationship and psychological distress.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses five complimentary sociological and communication theories to conceptualise the structural, symbolic, affective, and performative aspects of digitally mediated social connections.

Network Society Theory

Castells' idea of the network society emphasises the importance of digital networks in creating modern social organisation. According to this viewpoint, social relationships are increasingly mediated through flows of information and communication rather than just by physical co-presence. This concept offers a macro-level perspective on how digital infrastructures alter patterns of interaction, connectedness, and social integration.

Dramaturgical Theory

Goffman's dramaturgical approach views social interaction as a type of performance with stages, audiences, and scripts (Goffman, 1959). Digital platforms enhance and change these dramaturgical dynamics by providing persistent, searchable, and networked self-presentation settings. Individuals participate in ongoing impression management when analysing the performances of others, which increases reflexivity and self-monitoring in everyday relationships.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism emphasises how social meanings emerge via interaction and shared interpretation (Blumer, 1969). In digital surroundings, symbolic indications such as likes, reactions, emoticons, and message timeliness take on relationship meaning, impacting expectations, emotional interpretations, and judgements of closeness or neglect. This viewpoint is especially beneficial for examining how habitual digital gestures affect trust, conflict, and relational understanding.

Mediated Intimacy

Turkle's notion of mediated intimacy investigates how digital technologies modify emotional communication, resulting in forms of connection that are continuous, immediate, and highly available, but are frequently seen as fragmented or emotionally shallow (Turkle 2011). This concept highlights the paradoxical character of digital

intimacy, which combines increased connectivity with concerns about authenticity, depth, and emotional presence.

Media Multiplexity

According to media multiplexity theory, strong social links are maintained by using numerous communication channels rather than relying on a single medium (Baym 2015). This method is beneficial for understanding how modern relationships function in hybrid online/offline situations, where digital connection complements rather than replaces face-to-face involvement.

Analytical Integration

Together, these theoretical views allow for a multifaceted investigation of digitally mediated social ties, incorporating structural factors, symbolic meanings, affective dynamics, and performative practices. This framework establishes a solid conceptual platform for investigating how young adults navigate trust, belonging, and relational stability in increasingly networked social situations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to capture both structural patterns and lived experiences in digitally mediated social relationships. A survey was used to detect general trends in digital communication patterns, while in-depth interviews revealed subtle information on participants' subjective interpretations, feelings, and relational negotiations. The mixture of approaches allows for methodological triangulation, which improves the validity and interpretative depth of the results.

Sample and Participants

The study sample consisted of young persons aged 18 to 28, representing a cohort that is heavily involved in digital communication spaces.

- A total of 320 people completed the online survey.
- Purposefully selected 25 participants from the survey pool for in-depth interviews to ensure gender diversity, technology usage patterns, and relational experiences.
- Participants included university students and early-career professionals going through transitions in education, job, and personal relationships.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were gathered using a standardised online questionnaire delivered through Google Forms. The poll includes questions about digital communication patterns, relational trust, emotional experiences, and the perceived influence of platform features. Semi-structured interviews were done via Zoom and WhatsApp to collect qualitative data, providing participants with flexibility and accessibility. The interview guide focusses on topics such as digital intimacy, trust, surveillance, belonging, and emotional weariness. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant permission.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical approaches to uncover patterns and distributions in digital communication practices and relational interactions.

Thematic analysis was used to examine qualitative interview data in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This included data familiarisation, preliminary coding, theme development, review, and refinement. The analytical procedure was iterative and interpretive, allowing themes to develop inductively while being guided by the study's theoretical framework.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly maintained throughout the study process. All participants provided informed consent before data collection began. Participants' identities were completely anonymised, and any identifiable information was deleted from transcripts and datasets. All data was securely saved on password-protected devices and utilised only for academic research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Bonding as Relational Maintenance

The findings show that young adults rely substantially on routine micro-interactions like likes, emoticons, short messages, and comments to maintain relationship continuity in everyday life. This low-effort, high-frequency gestures serve as symbolic affirmations that connections are still active and acknowledged. This pattern lends support to ambient awareness research, which contends that digital communication allows people to maintain a persistent sense of social presence even when they are not interacting with others. Messaging apps, in particular, create a sense of "being there" even in the absence of real interaction. In this perspective, Granovetter's (1973) distinction between strong and weak relationships should be reconsidered. The findings indicate that weak links thrive in digitally mediated contexts precisely because they require little emotional or temporal investment while allowing for frequent engagement. Digital platforms thus recalibrate relational maintenance by privileging continuity over depth, reshaping how social bonds are sustained in everyday life.

Hybrid Online/Offline Relationships

Most participants defined their relationships as hybrid, mixing face-to-face engagement with ongoing internet communication. Digital platforms augmented physical meetings by allowing for regular check-ins, emotional support, social activity planning, and the sharing of everyday moments through photographs and tales. These activities support Baym's (2015) media multiplexity theory, which holds that strong links are maintained through various communication channels rather than a single medium.

At the same time, entirely digital interactions evolved, notably in shared-interest venues like gaming communities, fandoms, and online study groups. These interactions were frequently maintained without prior offline contact, demonstrating the expanded relational possibilities offered by networked communication. Such findings align with Wellman's (2001) concept of networked individualism, illustrating how digital spaces allow individuals to form and maintain meaningful ties beyond geographic proximity and traditional social boundaries.

Emotional Labor and Expectations of Availability

Emotional weariness as a result of expectations of constant availability was a common subject in interviewees. Many participants reported feeling compelled to answer promptly, with delayed responses typically misinterpreted as disinterest, neglect, or relational decline. These dynamics increased relational discomfort and uncertainty, which supports Bayer et al.'s (2020) results on responsiveness norms in digital communication.

Relational pressure was frequently caused by delayed responses, confusing message tone, uneven participation, or feelings of "ghosting." In this regard, digital communication necessitates not just time but also emotional control and interpretive effort. Digital labour thus becomes a type of emotional labour, echoing Gregg's (2011) concept of affective work in the information age, in which relational maintenance necessitates constant emotional availability.

Trust, Surveillance, and Relational Vulnerability

Read receipts, online status indicators, and article views have all evolved as strong relational cues. Participants consistently interpreted these cues as markers of interest, avoidance, honesty, or deception, thereby incorporating surveillance methods into ordinary interpersonal encounters. These findings corroborate previous research on digital partner surveillance, which ties visibility affordances to increased monitoring and relational insecurity (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015).

While similar features might increase emotions of closeness and confidence, they also highlight vulnerability by emphasising absence, delay, or disengagement. As a result, digital trust becomes weak and contingent, continuously negotiated through the interpretation of platform-generated indications rather than based entirely on human understanding.

Identity Performance and Digital Self-Presentation

Participants deliberately curated separate digital identities across many channels. Instagram was mostly used for aestheticised and aspirational self-presentation, whilst messaging services like WhatsApp were associated with more informal, intimate, and authentic expressions of identity. This contrast echoes Hogan's (2010) distinction between exhibition-curated, profile-based displays and performance-interactive, conversational self-presentation.

These actions demonstrate the ongoing relevance of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical paradigm in digital situations. Young adults navigate several audiences and stages at the same time, constantly managing their impressions while maintaining authenticity and visibility. Thus, digital platforms strengthen rather than weaken reflexivity in identity development.

Digital Communities and Networked Belonging

Digital communities have emerged as important sources of belonging and emotional support. Participants reported being involved in fandom networks, online study groups, gaming communities, and mental health forums. These places promoted shared identity, mutual recognition, and affective solidarity, supporting Boyd's (2014) concept of networked publics.

Many young adults said that digital networks helped them feel more understood and allowed them to express themselves freely. This lends credence to Kanai's (2019) notion that digital spaces permit forms of managed authenticity, allowing people to negotiate identity and belonging outside of the limits of offline social norms.

Inequalities in Digital Access and Skills

Despite extensive access to digital channels, inequities remained, especially among educated youth. Variations in digital literacy, confidence, and communication competence influenced participants' ability to gain relational benefits from online engagement. These findings are consistent with van Dijk's (2020) multidimensional model of the digital divide, which emphasises that inequality goes beyond access to skills, usage patterns, and consequences. As a result, digital communication does not yield consistently empowering consequences; rather, it replicates and reconfigures existing social inequities within relationship life.

Digital Fatigue and Cycles of Withdrawal

Participants typically described intensive periods of internet involvement followed by intentional retreat. To manage emotional overload and restore mental equilibrium, coping mechanisms such as temporary deactivation, muffled notifications, and "silent mode" were adopted. Dhir et al. (2018) discovered patterns of social media exhaustion, which these habits match.

However, disengagement frequently resulted in relational misunderstandings since reduced visibility or responsiveness was seen negatively by others. This tension exemplifies the paradox of digital well-being, in which self-care routines can unintentionally damage social interactions.

Gendered Dimensions of Digital Sociality

Gender inequalities were seen in patterns of digital involvement. Women reported using digital platforms more frequently for emotional support, relationship maintenance, and community participation, whereas men preferred entertainment-oriented applications like gaming. Women also reported higher sensitivity to digital cues such as message timeliness and perceived responsiveness.

These findings are consistent with previous research that found gendered communication methods and emotional labour in digital contexts (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012), implying that digital sociality both reflects and reinforces existing gender norms.

Synthesis: The Redefinition of Social Bonds

Taken together, the data show that digital communication alters social relationships by increasing interaction frequency, changing intimacy, broadening relational networks, and escalating emotional and interpretive labour. Digital platforms present new forms of vulnerability while also providing new options for belonging and self-expression.

Rather than simply changing existing relationships, digital technologies actively reshape the meaning and practice of relationality among young people. Social ties are no longer defined exclusively by physical presence or chronological continuity, but are increasingly negotiated by visibility, responsiveness, and symbolic interaction in networked environments.

Conclusion: Rethinking Relationship in a Digitally Saturated World

This study demonstrates that digital communication is more than just an extension of social interaction; it is a driving force in the redefining of social relationships among young individuals. Relationships are now sustained through continual symbolic maintenance rather than episodic meetings, with micro-interactions such as likes, read receipts, emoticons, and brief messages carrying disproportionate emotional and relational weight. Intimacy is no longer based primarily on physical co-presence; rather, it comes from constant connectedness, ambient awareness, and mediated availability.

The findings show that young adults live in a hybrid relational ecology, in which online and offline interactions are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing. While digital platforms provide more options for connection, belonging, and identity experimentation, they also present new types of relational vulnerability. Emotional labour, surveillance techniques, demands of constant availability, and cycles of digital exhaustion all demonstrate how connectedness may increase both closeness and tension. In this way, digital communication creates a contradictory social condition: relationships become more frequent but more fragile, more visible yet more unpredictable.

Importantly, this study emphasises that digital relationality is unevenly experienced. Gendered emotional engagement patterns and ongoing digital inequities influence who benefits the most from digitally mediated social life. These disparities call into question technologically deterministic narratives and reinforce the fact that digital environments are still profoundly entrenched in larger frameworks of power, access, and social norms.

The findings suggest that digital media should be viewed as relational infrastructures rather than channels of interaction—spaces where intimacy, trust, and identity are actively enacted, monitored, and negotiated. Classical sociological notions like weak links, dramaturgy, and networked individualism are still valid, but they need to be adjusted to account for the emotional intensity, visibility, and temporal demands of platform-mediated interactions.

Future study should take a cross-cultural and longitudinal perspective, investigating how algorithmic governance, platform design, and sociopolitical circumstances impact changing norms of relational life. As digital communication becomes more pervasive in everyday interactions, understanding how young adults navigate connection, vulnerability, and belonging becomes critical not only for sociology, but also for redefining the entire meaning of social relationships in the digital age.

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