

Digital Dependency and Changing Social Relationships among College Students in Kerala: A Sociological Study

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ABSTRACT

Digital media and mobile technology have become embedded in everyday social life, shaping communication patterns, interpersonal relationships, and self-identity. Among young adults, smartphones function not only as communication tools but also as emotional and social extensions of the self. This study investigates how digital dependency influences the social relationships of college students in Kerala. A qualitative research approach was adopted, with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted among 45 students in three colleges in Palakkad district. The analysis shows that digital dependency produces a mixed outcome. It facilitates sustained communication, peer bonding, and identity performance while simultaneously weakening face-to-face interaction, increasing emotional fatigue, and fostering comparison-oriented anxiety. The study argues that digital dependency is a sociocultural phenomenon tied to peer expectations, belonging needs, and evolving communication norms. The findings contribute to sociological debates on youth culture, emotional life, and the network society in contemporary India.

Keywords: Digital Dependency, Youth Culture, Social Media, Identity Performance, Kerala, Sociological Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has become central to the everyday life of young people, influencing how they communicate, learn, entertain, socialize, and understand themselves. Smartphones, social media platforms, and instant messaging applications have become inseparable from their daily routines. These tools form a constant presence, often carried from the moment one wakes up until sleep. College students in particular experience digital engagement as part of ordinary living rather than as a separate or occasional activity. The boundaries between online and offline spaces blur as digital interactions shape self-perceptions, friendships, and emotional responses. In this context, the digital device functions not only as a communication tool but also as a space for identity exploration and emotional connection.

Smartphones have changed the tempo and texture of social life. Social media platforms allow young people to reach others instantly, create networks that cross physical space, and maintain relationships across time zones and geographic distances. Messaging applications provide real-time updates, quick conversations, and continuous companionship. For college students, digital interaction is no longer supplementary to physical interaction; in many cases, it has become the primary mode through which relationships are formed, nurtured, and sometimes even dissolved (Prensky, 2001). This shift represents more than a change in technology; it reflects a transformation in social norms and expectations surrounding relationships, communication speed, emotional availability, and self-presentation.

This shift is visible in daily routines. Students often check messages upon waking, reply to group chats while traveling to college, scroll through updates between classes, and share moments of their day online. Even when physically present with peers, many remain simultaneously engaged in digital interaction. This phenomenon can be understood as parallel attention, where individuals divide their focus between the immediate environment and the digital space. Conversations frequently alternate between spoken exchanges and typed

messages. Young people who sit together may each be involved in different digital conversations while sharing the same physical setting. This layered interaction suggests a reconfiguration of presence, where digital presence can hold equal or sometimes greater value than physical presence.

Kerala provides a unique and significant context for studying these shifts. The state is known for its high literacy, relatively high educational standards, widespread access to digital devices, and strong culture of communication. With increasing internet penetration and affordable smartphones, digital usage among youth in Kerala has expanded rapidly. Students in both rural and urban parts of the state actively engage with technology for academic purposes, entertainment, socializing, political discussions, and creative self-expression. Therefore, observing digital dependency among youth in Kerala can offer valuable insights into larger patterns of social transformation in contemporary Indian society.

Digital platforms have become important spaces where identity is constructed and negotiated. Students curate their social media profiles by selecting photographs, captions, interests, and online interactions to express who they are or who they wish others to perceive them as. These platforms allow them to experiment with identity in flexible ways, shifting between roles such as friend, student, performer, activist, or humorist. Visibility becomes closely tied to self-worth. Likes, comments, reactions, and followers become indicators of social recognition. Many students develop a habit of checking how others respond to their posts, which influences their emotional state. Friendships, romantic relationships, peer belonging, and group identity are deeply interconnected with digital interaction (Walsh, White, and Young, 2009).

However, these digital interactions also produce psychological and relational consequences. Scholars argue that digital communication, while offering accessibility, may reduce the depth of emotional engagement. Sherry Turkle (2017) suggests that continuous digital interaction can weaken empathetic listening, patience, and the ability to handle silence or emotionally charged conversations. When interactions occur predominantly through screens, individuals may become accustomed to editing, pausing, and carefully constructing their responses. In face-to-face conversation, such control is not possible, and emotions must be expressed in real time. Digital dependency can therefore limit the development of essential interpersonal skills such as vulnerability, negotiation, and active listening.

Another consequence is the pressure of comparison. Social media environments are filled with curated images, selective achievements, celebrations, and happy moments. These do not always reflect the complexities of real life, yet they can shape expectations and desires. Students observing their peers may feel inadequate, unsuccessful, or left behind if their own lives do not match the visible narratives of others. This invites performance anxiety and self-doubt. Many describe the need to maintain an attractive digital identity regardless of how they actually feel. In this manner, digital platforms create emotional contradictions. Students may feel socially connected yet inwardly insecure. They may present confidence online while experiencing uncertainty in private.

There is also the expectation of constant availability. Digital communication has created norms where delayed replies or non-responsiveness may be interpreted negatively, sometimes causing tension or misunderstandings. Students feel compelled to remain online, checking messages frequently to avoid missing information or appearing indifferent. This expectation reinforces dependency, where digital presence becomes tied to maintaining relationships.

Despite these challenges, young people do not simply consume technology passively. They actively negotiate their digital practices, make choices, and reflect on their experiences. Some recognize the strain and attempt to limit screen time. Others use digital platforms strategically for academic collaboration, political awareness, personal expression, or career development. Digital engagement is therefore a dynamic process influenced by social environment, cultural norms, emotional needs, and personal agency.

This study seeks to analyse these dynamics sociologically. It asks how digital dependency shapes communication practices, emotional experiences, and the nature of social relationships among college students in Kerala. By focusing on students lived experiences, the research aims to understand how young people interpret and manage their digital involvement. The study views students not as passive recipients of

technology but as active participants navigating changing communication cultures. Their voices, reflections, and choices provide insight into how digital dependency is socially created, maintained, and experienced.

The significance of this research lies in its focus on relationships and emotional life. While technology is often discussed in terms of efficiency, innovation, or access, its deeper impact on how people relate to one another receives less systematic attention. This study contributes to understanding how the digital environment reshapes intimacy, friendship, belonging, and self-concept among emerging adults. In doing so, it highlights the cultural and emotional dimensions of digital dependency as a shared social condition rather than an individual problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of digital dependency intersects with multiple sociological domains including communication studies, youth culture, identity theory, and emotional sociology. The emergence of smartphones and social networking platforms has altered how individuals interact, express themselves, and interpret social belonging. For college students, digital technology often becomes a primary medium through which relationships and identities are constructed. The literature reviewed below focuses on four major thematic areas relevant to this study.

Digital Technology and the Transformation of Communication

Digital technology has significantly transformed the nature, pace, and structure of communication. Castells (2010) conceptualizes contemporary society as a *network society*, where social relationships are organized and mediated through digital networks rather than purely physical proximity. These networks allow instant communication across distances, enabling constant connectivity. This form of communication is often asynchronous, meaning that interactions do not require both parties to be present at the same time. As a result, communication has become more flexible but also more fragmented.

Research shows that digital communication prioritizes speed, efficiency, and brevity rather than reflection or emotional nuance (Baym, 2015). Messages tend to be shorter, more frequent, and mediated by visual cues such as emojis, GIFs, and reaction buttons. These cues serve as symbolic markers of feelings but lack the complexity of tone, expression, or physical presence that characterizes face-to-face conversation.

Turkle (2017) argues that such shifts weaken the quality of interpersonal communication. When young people primarily interact through screens, the capacity for deep listening, patience, and sustained emotional presence may decline. The screen enables users to edit or rehearse messages, reducing spontaneity and vulnerability. While this can provide comfort and control, it also limits genuine emotional expression.

Other scholars note that digital communication creates new norms of availability. The expectation of immediate response has become normalized (Ling & Donner, 2009). Delayed replies may be interpreted as disinterest, disrespect, or emotional distance. This leads to increased pressure to remain constantly connected, reinforcing dependency.

Thus, the transformation of communication through digital platforms is not merely technological but deeply social. It reshapes how meaning is created, how relationships are maintained, and how emotional intimacy is negotiated.

Youth Culture, Peer Belonging, and Social Validation

Youth culture is strongly influenced by peer relationships and the desire for social belonging. The period of late adolescence and early adulthood is marked by identity exploration, self-expression, and the search for recognition. Social media platforms offer spaces where young people display and negotiate identities through images, captions, interests, and interactions (Boyd, 2014).

Prensky (2001) referred to today's youth as *digital natives*, individuals who grow up immersed in digital environments. For them, social media is not simply a communication tool but a public arena in which self-

performance occurs. Likes, comments, follower counts, and shares become mechanisms for social validation. These visible metrics serve as indicators of popularity and social worth.

Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation is particularly relevant here. Social media platforms function like stages where individuals manage impressions to influence how others perceive them. Students curate images and posts to portray themselves as confident, sociable, or aesthetically appealing. However, this process can create emotional tension when the performed identity does not align with the individual's private emotional experiences (Hogan, 2010).

Peer belonging also shapes platform usage patterns. Group chats, meme exchanges, shared playlists, and collaborative online spaces contribute to shared identities and collective cultural meanings. Participation in these networks becomes essential for maintaining social relevance. Failure to engage can lead to feelings of exclusion or invisibility.

Yet, such environments can intensify comparison and competition. Social media emphasizes idealized self-presentations, often filtered, polished, and selectively shared. This may result in self-evaluation based on unrealistic standards (Chou & Edge, 2012). The constant need to appear "present" and "successful" contributes to emotional pressure and identity instability.

Emotional Consequences of Digital Dependency

Digital dependency is associated with various emotional and psychological experiences. Constant connectivity may lead to emotional exhaustion, reduced concentration, and sleep disturbances (Kushlev, Proulx & Dunn, 2016). Students often experience *FOMO* (Fear of Missing Out), in which they feel anxious about being disconnected from ongoing conversations, trends, or social happenings (Przybylski et al., 2013). This anxiety reinforces compulsive checking behaviors.

Continuous digital engagement also fragments attention. Users frequently switch tasks to respond to notifications or scrolling, reducing the ability to remain mentally present in academic or social settings. This can negatively affect academic performance and emotional stability (Rosen, Lim, Carrier & Cheever, 2014).

Moreover, emotional communication through screens may flatten emotional nuance. Messages lack tone, posture, and facial expression, making misunderstandings more likely. Turkle (2017) notes that this shift may reduce empathy because young people become accustomed to communicating without engaging with the emotional presence of the other person.

On the other hand, digital platforms can also serve as emotional support systems. They allow individuals to express emotions, seek encouragement, and maintain relationships across distance (Manago, Taylor & Greenfield, 2012). Thus, digital dependency produces both supportive and stressful emotional landscapes.

The Kerala Context

Kerala's socio-cultural environment adds unique dimensions to digital dependency. The state has one of the highest literacy rates in India and a strong culture of communication and social awareness. With increasing internet accessibility and smartphone penetration, young people in Kerala actively participate in digital platforms for education, entertainment, activism, and community building.

Students in Kerala are generally articulate, socially engaged, and aware of broader social and political issues. Digital platforms extend their opportunities to participate in discussions, share cultural content, and engage in public debates. At the same time, digital transitions introduce new relational norms that may weaken traditional patterns of face-to-face interaction and community-based socialization.

Communal gatherings, shared cultural spaces, and extended family networks have historically shaped social belonging in Kerala. The growing emphasis on individualized digital spaces may shift these patterns toward more personalized, image-based, and performance-oriented interaction.

Thus, digital dependency in Kerala does not simply reflect global trends but intersects with local cultural values, educational structures, and community identities.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three interrelated theoretical perspectives that help explain how digital dependency shapes communication practices, identity construction, and social belonging among college students. The frameworks of Symbolic Interactionism, Network Society Theory, and Goffman's Theory of Self-Presentation together provide a sociological lens for understanding how online interactions influence relationships and emotional experiences.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic Interactionism is rooted in the idea that social reality is constructed through interaction. Meanings do not exist independently; they are formed, negotiated, and modified through communication. Traditionally, these interactions relied on physical presence where tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language shaped interpretation. However, digital communication alters these interactional cues.

In digital spaces, meaning is conveyed through symbols such as emojis, reaction icons, typing speed, punctuation style, and message timing. For instance, the use of a heart emoji may signal affection, while a short reply or delayed response may be interpreted as disinterest or conflict. Even the act of being "online" or viewing someone's status update becomes meaningful, shaping perceptions of closeness, availability, or emotional distance.

Symbolic interactionists argue that individuals continuously interpret and reinterpret such symbolic cues to understand relationships. In digital platforms, these interpretations may be more ambiguous because emotional cues are limited or controlled. Students may spend time analyzing the tone of a text message or the meaning of a "seen" notification. Thus, digital communication introduces new layers of interpretation and emotional negotiation.

This framework highlights how digital dependency is not only behavioral but symbolic. Students engage in constant meaning-making as they navigate digital interactions, allowing devices and platforms to shape their emotional and relational experiences.

Network Society Theory

Network Society Theory, developed by Castells (2010), emphasizes that contemporary social life is increasingly structured within digital networks rather than physical or geographically-defined communities. In this framework, networks become the central form of social organization, linking individuals through flows of information, images, and emotions.

For college students, friendships, affiliations, support systems, and even romantic relationships often exist and evolve within these digital networks. Belonging is expressed not only through physical social activities but also through participation in shared digital spaces such as group chats, Instagram circles, and collaborative online communities.

Being part of a network provides emotional security and identity reinforcement. However, exclusion or invisibility within the network can create feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, or social isolation. For example, being removed from a group chat or not included in a tagged photo can produce real emotional consequences. Thus, the network society makes social belonging both expanded and fragile.

Network Society Theory helps explain why students feel compelled to remain connected. Disconnection is not merely technological—it risks social invisibility. Students' identities become intertwined with their digital presence, and maintaining this presence becomes a requirement for social participation.

Goffman's Theory of Self-Presentation

Goffman's (1959) theory views social life as a stage where individuals perform roles for an audience. Identity is not fixed; it is actively constructed to create desired impressions. In face-to-face communication, this performance is shaped by clothing, mannerisms, tone, and behavior. In digital spaces, the performance becomes more controlled, curated, and continuous.

Social media amplifies self-presentation because the audience is always present and potentially large. Students select photos, captions, profile layouts, and shared experiences carefully to portray identities they consider socially desirable. The ability to edit and revise before posting intensifies identity performance.

However, the pressure to maintain consistency between offline and online identities can create emotional strain. Students may feel compelled to present happiness, confidence, or sociability even when experiencing stress or insecurity. The digital self becomes a strategic construction rather than a spontaneous expression.

This perspective helps explain comparison-based anxiety and emotional fatigue. When students constantly observe others' curated lives, they evaluate themselves against idealized standards. The digital environment thereby transforms identity construction into both a personal and public activity.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding digital dependency as a sociocultural and emotional phenomenon. They reveal how meaning, belonging, and identity are negotiated in digital spaces, shaping the nature of social relationships among college students in Kerala.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to understand the lived experiences of digital dependency among college students. The focus was not merely on the frequency of digital device use but on how students make meaning, negotiate identity, and sustain relationships in digital environments. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to explore subjective experiences, emotional nuances, and interpersonal interpretations that cannot be effectively captured through quantitative measurements alone. This approach recognizes students as active social agents who continuously interpret and respond to digital communication practices in their everyday lives.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was selected to explore the depth and complexity of students' interactions with digital technology. Qualitative research is particularly suited to examining social phenomena that involve personal feelings, shared meanings, and cultural expectations. In this study, digital dependency was understood not as a fixed behavioral category but as a dynamic social process shaped by peer relations, emotional needs, identity expression, and cultural contexts.

The research therefore sought to interpret how students themselves describe their digital practices, how they reflect on their emotional and relational experiences, and how they negotiate tensions between online and offline communication. Rather than generalizing findings to all college students, the aim was to develop a contextual, grounded understanding of experiences specific to the social and cultural environment of Kerala.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in three colleges located in the Palakkad district of Kerala. This district was selected because it contains a mix of rural and semi-urban educational environments, allowing for variation in students' socio-economic backgrounds and digital access. The three colleges represented distinct institutional categories:

1. A government arts and science college with a predominantly middle- and lower-income student population.
2. An aided college with students from mixed socio-economic backgrounds.
3. A self-financing college where students generally had higher levels of access to personal digital devices and uninterrupted internet connectivity.

This variety provided a comparative perspective, allowing the study to explore whether institutional culture and socio-economic conditions influence patterns of digital dependency and its effects on relationships.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on students who actively use smartphones and social media. The sample included 45 students, aged 18 to 22, with 25 female and 20 male participants. All participants used smartphones daily, and reported an average screen time ranging from 4 to 7 hours per day, although some indicated usage could increase during exam breaks or leisure periods.

Purposive sampling was chosen because the research required participants who could meaningfully discuss their digital practices. Students who rarely used digital media were not included, as the objective was to examine relationships among individuals who were actively part of digital communication networks.

Data Collection Methods

Three complementary methods were used to gather data, enabling both individual expressions and collective perspectives to emerge:

Method	Purpose	Details
Semi-Structured Interviews	To explore personal narratives and emotional experiences	Each interview lasted 25–40 minutes, conducted one-on-one
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	To examine shared peer norms, group dynamics, and cultural expectations	Separate FGDs held for male and female participants to ensure openness
Field Observations	To observe real-time interaction patterns and digital engagement in everyday settings	Conducted discreetly in common areas such as canteens, verandas, and library corridors

Interviews and discussions were held in both English and Malayalam, depending on participant comfort. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe deeper into themes such as identity presentation, emotional coping, and peer pressure. Field observations provided context to statements made during interviews, allowing the researcher to compare self-reported experiences with actual behavior.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and meaning structures within the data. The analysis involved multiple stages:

1. Familiarization: Reading transcripts repeatedly to understand the depth and tone of participants' narratives.
2. Coding: Assigning labels to meaningful units of text, such as statements expressing comparison anxiety or group chat pressure.
3. Categorization: Grouping related codes into conceptual categories such as:
 - Connection and Belonging
 - Identity Expression
 - Emotional Strain
 - Communication Avoidance
 - Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)
4. Theme Development: Synthesizing categories into broader themes that represented core dynamics of digital dependency.

Themes were compared across gender groups and institutional settings, allowing the study to identify similarities and subtle contextual differences.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical protocols for qualitative research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained in writing. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and identifiable information was excluded from transcripts and reporting. The researcher took care to avoid judgmental language, recognizing that digital dependency is a socially shaped behavior rather than a personal flaw. The intention was to create a safe and open conversational environment where students felt comfortable sharing personal experiences without fear of stigma.

Findings and Analysis

The data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations revealed a complex and layered experience of digital dependency among college students. The findings highlight how smartphones and digital platforms have become intertwined with emotional life, identity construction, and social belonging. Five major themes emerged through thematic analysis.

The Smartphone as an Extension of the Self

Participants consistently described the smartphone as more than a technological device. It was perceived as an emotional anchor, a source of comfort, and a constant companion. Students often personified their phones, referring to them in relational terms rather than functional ones. Many expressed a sense of “incompleteness” when separated from their phones:

“The phone is like my companion. When I feel upset, I scroll. When I feel bored, I scroll. It is always with me.”

This highlights the symbolic and emotional significance attached to the smartphone. For some, the device functioned as a coping mechanism to manage loneliness, stress, or boredom. Others mentioned that simply holding the phone provided reassurance:

“Even when I am not using it, I hold it in my hand. It gives a sense of control.”

Such responses indicate that digital dependency is tied to emotional regulation. It supports Walsh et al. (2009), who argue that mobile devices act as psychological extensions of the individual. This phenomenon suggests that the smartphone has become integrated into the self-concept of students, influencing not only communication but emotional states and self-realization.

Digital Communication as a Primary Social Mode

Participants overwhelmingly reported that the majority of their interactions with peers occur through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Telegram. Face-to-face conversations, although still valued, were described as less common and sometimes more emotionally risky.

Students noted that digital communication allowed them to carefully manage how they express themselves:

“It is easier to say things in chat. I can think before I type. In person, I may hesitate.”

This suggests that digital interaction offers emotional safety through *control*. Unlike face-to-face conversation, which requires spontaneous responses, digital communication allows time to think, edit, and refine messages. While this reduces vulnerability, it may also decrease emotional authenticity. Several participants acknowledged that digital conversations often feel “lighter” or “less serious,” lacking the depth of in-person interaction.

This supports Turkle’s (2017) argument that digital communication can weaken the emotional substance of conversation. Students may appear more expressive online, yet may struggle to articulate emotions in direct

interactions. Thus, digital communication becomes both enabling and limiting—facilitating connection but reducing emotional depth.

Group Chats and Peer Norms

Group chats emerged as central spaces for social belonging. Class groups, friendship circles, and interest-based chat groups formed digital communities within which identity and relational ties were maintained. However, these group spaces also generated pressure to remain constantly present.

“If I don’t reply for some time, I feel I am missing something important.”

The sense of urgency within group chats created a social obligation to respond promptly. Delayed replies were sometimes interpreted as disinterest or emotional distance. Students reported anxiety when the group was active and they were offline, describing a fear of social exclusion.

Group chats also structured humor, shared experiences, and peer narratives. Inside jokes and shared references shaped group identity. However, those who could not follow or participate frequently risked marginalization. This reinforces Prensky’s (2001) view that digital integration shapes peer belonging and identity affirmation.

The group chat dynamic illustrates that digital dependency is not merely individual—it is *socially reinforced*. Students remain connected not only out of personal preference but because digital participation is essential for maintaining social membership.

Social Media as a Stage for Identity Performance

Participants described social media, particularly Instagram, as a space for constructing and presenting identity. Profiles were often curated to display confidence, happiness, attractiveness, or sociability. Many acknowledged that their online personas were intentionally selective and did not fully reflect their real emotional experiences.

“I try to look cheerful in photos even when I am stressed. It is like we have to show we are doing well.”

This aligns with Goffman’s (1959) theory of self-presentation, where individuals perform identities for an imagined audience. Students consciously edited images, selected specific angles, and refined captions to produce a desirable impression.

However, this performance created emotional strain:

“Sometimes I post things I don’t feel. But if I stay silent, others may think something is wrong.”

This indicates that self-presentation online is not only self-driven but shaped by perceived peer expectations. Silence on social media may be interpreted as social withdrawal, prompting individuals to feel pressured to maintain digital visibility.

The findings reveal that social media amplifies identity performance by making the audience ever-present. Students reported spending significant mental energy thinking about how posts would be received, how others might interpret their images, and how they appeared in comparison to peers.

Emotional Fatigue, Comparison, and Anxiety

A prominent theme among participants was emotional fatigue resulting from continuous exposure to curated content on social media. Students compared their daily lives to the “highlight reels” of others. As one participant explained:

“Everyone looks perfect online. When I scroll, I start thinking my life is not good enough.”

This comparison-based anxiety contributed to self-doubt, reduced self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion. Many participants recognized these negative effects but felt unable to disconnect. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) acted as a significant barrier to reducing screen time.

This aligns with Kushlev, Proulx, and Dunn (2016), who argue that continuous digital engagement leads to emotional depletion and decreased mental well-being. Participants reported cycles of scrolling, comparison, momentary validation through likes, followed by renewed anxiety.

Despite awareness of these emotional consequences, peer norms and social expectations reinforced digital dependency. As one participant stated:

“We know it affects us, but if we stop, we feel left out.”

Thus, dependency persisted not simply because of habit but because digital disengagement threatened social belonging.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital dependency among college students is a relational and emotional phenomenon rooted in identity, belonging, and social expectations. Smartphones and social media do not simply mediate relationships; they shape how relationships are imagined, negotiated, and valued.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illustrate that digital dependency among college students in Kerala is not merely a product of technology use, but a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by cultural expectations, peer networks, and emotional needs. The motivations driving digital engagement are closely tied to the desire for belonging, visibility, and identity affirmation. Students use digital platforms to remain connected to peer groups, express themselves, and negotiate their place within social circles. In this sense, smartphones and social media platforms function as tools for maintaining social presence and relational continuity.

Digital spaces enable students to be constantly involved in the lives of their peers. Group chats, status updates, and social media timelines create a sense of shared experience even when individuals are physically separated. This form of mediated companionship reduces feelings of isolation and reinforces bonds of familiarity. However, the continuous nature of these interactions also introduces pressure to remain available, responsive, and visible. The expectation of constant online presence becomes a condition for social acceptance. Students may fear that withdrawal from these platforms would result in gradual invisibility within their social circles.

Identity is increasingly shaped through external validation rather than internal reflection. Students construct curated versions of themselves to meet perceived social expectations. The “imagined audience” present in digital spaces shapes decisions about what to post, how to present personal experiences, and how emotions are displayed. This aligns with Goffman’s (1959) perspective that identity is a performance regulated by audience reactions. However, the difference in the current context is the permanence and visibility of the performance. What is shared online can be viewed, liked, commented on, and revisited, amplifying its emotional significance.

This situation reflects Castells’ (2010) concept of a network society, where social belonging and identity are increasingly constructed through digital networks rather than physical communities. In this context, the smartphone becomes a *social passport*—a necessary instrument for accessing social life. It also becomes a *tool of self-presentation*, enabling individuals to shape how they are seen by others. Additionally, it acts as a *mediator of emotional life*, providing distraction, validation, and companionship during moments of stress or uncertainty.

However, digital dependency also carries significant consequences. One of the most notable is the reduction in emotional depth during communication. Digital interactions allow individuals to edit and refine their messages, which limits spontaneous emotional expression. This can weaken the ability to manage real-time emotional exchanges in face-to-face situations. Many students reported discomfort during in-person conversations, indicating a decline in interpersonal communication skills.

Another consequence is increased emotional vulnerability. Exposure to idealized images and achievements of peers on social media platforms contributes to comparison, insecurity, and performance anxiety. The emotional

fatigue reported by participants indicates that digital environments can be psychologically demanding, even as they provide social connection.

Therefore, digital dependency among college students in Kerala should be understood as a collective cultural pattern rather than an individual weakness. It emerges at the intersection of peer expectations, media influences, and evolving communication practices. The challenge lies not in eliminating digital engagement, but in cultivating forms of digital participation that support emotional well-being, authentic self-expression, and meaningful relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital dependency significantly shapes communication practices, emotional experiences, and identity formation among college students in Kerala. Digital platforms have become central to the everyday lives of students, influencing how they interact, express themselves, and relate to others. The smartphone, in particular, has evolved into an emotional companion and social interface rather than merely a technological device. Through constant connectivity, students maintain relationships, share experiences, and participate in peer networks. However, this continuous engagement has also redefined the nature of presence, intimacy, and attention.

The findings reveal a clear paradox: students report feeling socially connected through digital media, yet simultaneously experience emotional distance and diminished face-to-face communication. While digital interaction enables convenience and emotional safety—allowing individuals to think before responding and avoid vulnerability—it also reduces spontaneous, empathetic, and nuanced forms of expression. Digital communication can provide belonging, but it may also increase comparison, insecurity, and performance anxiety. The rise of curated online identities intensifies the pressure to appear confident, attractive, and successful, even when these portrayals may not reflect lived realities.

Therefore, digital dependency among youth must be understood as a cultural and relational phenomenon rather than merely a behavioral habit. It is shaped by peer norms, institutional expectations, and wider social transitions toward network-mediated relationships. The challenge is not to discourage digital engagement but to foster healthier and more mindful forms of use.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Colleges can integrate digital well-being and emotional literacy programs into campus life, helping students critically reflect on their media engagement.
- Families can encourage shared offline activities such as meals, informal conversations, or outdoor routines to strengthen interpersonal bonds.
- Students can practice self-regulation strategies such as limiting notification exposure, engaging in intentional screen breaks, and prioritizing face-to-face interactions.

Future Research

Further studies could compare urban and rural patterns of digital dependency, explore gendered differences in digital emotional expression, and examine the long-term implications of digital dependency for mental health, academic performance, and interpersonal development.

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