From Virtual Connections into Social Disconnections: The Paradox of Digital Intimacy

Njeri Kiaritha[1], Hesborn Chonge[2], Ruth Okapi[3]

United World College, Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The digital era has redefined human interaction, creating unprecedented avenues for connectivity while simultaneously amplifying experiences of social disconnection. This paper interrogates the paradox of digital intimacy, exploring how virtual connections, while seemingly boundless—can erode the quality of face-to-face relationships and deepen loneliness. Drawing from sociological, psychological, and communication theories, the study situates digital connectivity within the contexts of youth and urban dwellers, groups often at the epicenter of rapid technological adoption. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research highlighted three central dimensions; the quality of virtual versus physical connections, the psychological and emotional implications of sustained digital engagement, and the emerging cultural shift in defining intimacy. The findings revealed that while digital platforms create inclusivity and instant accessibility, they often resulted in fragile social bonds, reduced empathy, and a decline in sustained offline relationships. The paper concludes with recommendations for cultivating balanced digital-social ecosystems that foster authentic connectedness in a hyperconnected world.

Keyterms: Digital intimacy, Virtual connection, Social disconnection, Social Connectedness, Phone addiction, Social media.

INTRODUCTION

Human interaction is undergoing a seismic shift in the 21st century, primarily driven by advances in digital communication technologies. Social media platforms, instant messaging apps, and virtual communities now mediate significant aspects of interpersonal relationships, offering individuals the ability to connect across geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. This unprecedented access to others creates what many perceive as “intimacy without proximity.” Yet, beneath the surface lies a troubling paradox: while people are more digitally connected than ever, there is a simultaneous surge in reported loneliness, social fragmentation, and alienation (Turkle, 2017; Twenge, 2019).

This tension forms the core of what this paper terms ‘the paradox of digital intimacy’. The phenomenon encapsulates the contradiction of experiencing closeness and distance, connection and isolation, inclusion and exclusion—all mediated by digital platforms. Youth and urban populations, who are often immersed in digital spaces, become especially vulnerable to this paradox. Their interactions reflect shifting norms in communication and intimacy, with online engagement increasingly replacing face-to-face connections, sometimes at the expense of relational depth and emotional well-being. Against this backdrop, this study examines how virtual connections contribute to social disconnections, unpacking the psychological, cultural, and social implications of this paradox. The paper also situates these experiences within a broader scholarly conversation about digital culture, intimacy, and the redefinition of human relationships.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Examine the quality and depth of virtual connections compared to face-to-face interactions.
2. Explore the psychological and emotional implications of sustained digital engagement.

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3. Investigate the cultural and social shifts in how intimacy and connectedness are defined in the digital era.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives that help illuminate the paradox of digital intimacy. Taken together, these three perspectives highlight how digital technologies both enable and constrain intimacy. They reveal the paradoxical dynamics of contemporary social relationships, where virtual tools offer unprecedented opportunities for connection while simultaneously threatening the depth and stability of human bonds.

The first is Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which argues that communication media differ in their capacity to transmit rich information. Face-to-face interaction is regarded as the richest form of communication because it allows for immediate feedback, the use of multiple cues, and the conveyance of emotional nuance. By contrast, many digital platforms, while efficient and accessible, lack these features, often resulting in misunderstandings, superficial exchanges, or weakened relational bonds.

The second framework is Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), which emphasizes the extent to which a communication medium enables users to experience others as "real" during interaction. Although technologies such as video calls and real-time chats enhance a sense of presence more than text-based messaging, they still fall short of replicating the emotional intensity and authenticity of physical proximity. This helps explain why individuals may feel simultaneously connected and unsatisfied after digital interactions.

Finally, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) provides an important relational lens. Initially developed to explain infant-caregiver bonds, the theory has since been extended to adult relationships, underscoring the human need for secure, consistent, and emotionally fulfilling connections. In digital environments, however, the rapid, transient, and often curated nature of interactions can undermine these secure attachments, fostering insecurity, dependence, or even disconnection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The paradox of digital intimacy has become a focal point of interdisciplinary scholarship, drawing attention from sociology, psychology, communication studies, and cultural studies. This review synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical research on digital connectivity, loneliness, and social fragmentation. It highlights both the promises and pitfalls of virtual connections, particularly in shaping human intimacy and social belonging.

Scholars have increasingly observed that digital platforms create an illusion of closeness while masking underlying social fragmentation. Turkle (2017) describes this as being "alone together", the state where individuals feel surrounded by virtual connections yet deprived of genuine relational fulfillment. Social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp facilitate frequent micro-interactions—likes, comments, and short messages—that simulate connection but rarely cultivate depth (Hampton, 2016). Boyd (2014) adds that digital intimacy often thrives on visibility rather than vulnerability, with online platforms encouraging curated self-presentations that hinder authentic emotional exchange. This trend suggests that while connectivity expands, intimacy quality diminishes, reinforcing the paradox central to this study.

A striking body of research points to rising loneliness despite increased connectivity. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) demonstrate that loneliness poses health risks comparable to smoking and obesity, while Twenge et al. (2019) associate heavy social media use with higher rates of depression and loneliness among adolescents. Paradoxically, youth—who are most digitally connected—report some of the highest levels of isolation. In urban settings, where digital adoption is rapid, individuals often substitute physical companionship with virtual interactions, resulting in what Klinenberg (2018) calls "social autarky"—the condition of living alone together, even in densely populated areas.

Digital spaces are also reshaping cultural definitions of intimacy. Baym (2015) notes that digital technologies encourage new forms of relational maintenance, such as constant texting or emoji-based expressions of

affection. While these forms extend connection across distance, they risk diluting traditional markers of intimacy, such as physical presence, shared rituals, and embodied affection. Giddens '(1992) concept of "pure relationships"—ties sustained only as long as they provide satisfaction—finds new relevance in online contexts, where relationships are easily initiated and terminated with a click. This fluidity reflects cultural shifts in the valuation of commitment and permanence in interpersonal ties.

Beyond sociocultural shifts, psychological implications of digital intimacy are increasingly evident. Przybylski and Weinstein (2013) identify the "fear of missing out" (FOMO) as a driver of compulsive digital engagement, often linked to anxiety and reduced life satisfaction. Similarly, research by Andreassen et al. (2017) associates problematic social media use with addictive behaviors, which disrupt emotional well-being. Digital intimacy can also foster dependency. Studies suggest that over-reliance on online validation (through likes, shares, and comments) contributes to fragile self-esteem, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Valkenburg et al., 2021). These dynamics underscore the fragility of digital-based connections and their limited capacity to sustain secure psychological attachment.

Comparative studies consistently highlight qualitative differences between digital and physical interactions. Reis et al. (2018) demonstrate that face-to-face communication fosters stronger empathy, nonverbal resonance, and shared emotional regulation—features often absent in digital encounters. Nonverbal cues such as tone, eye contact, and physical gestures provide relational richness that digital media cannot fully replicate (Walther, 2011). Moreover, research on digital learning communities (Hrastinski, 2009) suggests that while online forums enable collaboration, they often lack the immediacy and bonding present in physical classrooms. Such findings reinforce the view that while digital platforms broaden access, they cannot substitute the embodied experience of physical intimacy.

Despite concerns, some scholars emphasize the empowering aspects of digital connections. Wellman and Rainie (2012) argue that online platforms foster "networked individualism," enabling individuals to maintain diverse weak ties across multiple contexts. For marginalized groups, digital connectivity provides inclusive spaces that might not be available offline (Graham, 2014). This perspective tempers the narrative of digital disconnection by underscoring contexts where virtual intimacy strengthens, rather than undermines, social belonging. The paradox, then, lies not in the absence of intimacy, but in its reconfiguration—where inclusivity may expand even as depth contracts.

These studies reveal a paradoxical dynamic: digital platforms simultaneously connect and fragment, empower and isolate, expand networks while weakening bonds. The paradox is most visible in contexts where individuals rely heavily on digital platforms for emotional support, often at the cost of embodied, enduring, and empathic ties. This literature underscores the urgency of interrogating how virtual connections evolve into social disconnections, especially among youth and urban populations. By situating these findings within broader theories of communication, attachment, and social presence, the current study aims to deepen understanding of this paradox and propose pathways toward more balanced and authentic connectedness.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to capture the complexity of the paradox of digital intimacy. A mixed design was particularly appropriate because digital connectivity was examined both in measurable terms, such as time spent on platforms or the number of online contacts and in experiential terms, including feelings of loneliness and perceptions of intimacy. The quantitative strand involved the administration of surveys to assess levels of digital engagement, loneliness, empathy, and perceived social support. The qualitative strand included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to provide deeper insight into lived experiences, personal meanings, and coping strategies related to digital intimacy. Findings from both strands were integrated during interpretation so as to generate a holistic understanding of how virtual connections relate to social disconnections.

The study focused on urban youth (13–24 years) and young adults (25–40 years) living in Kenya. For the quantitative component, a sample of 300 participants were targeted, comprising 150 youth and 150 young

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adults. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation across socio-economic backgrounds. For the qualitative component, 60 participants (30 youth and 30 adults) were selected through purposive sampling to capture diversity in digital habits, gender, and occupation.

The primary quantitative tool was structured survey questionnaire which assesed patterns of digital engagement, including hours spent online, preferred platforms, and types of usage, while incorporating standardized scales, namely: the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996), and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983) measuring empathy, and the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995). In addition, participants will be asked to maintain seven-day usage diaries in which they log the amount of time spent online, the purposes of their engagement, and any associated emotional reflections. The qualitative strand employed multiple tools. Semi-structured interviews explored participants 'experiences of digital intimacy, perceptions of its benefits, and perceived costs of virtual communication. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with six groups of 8–10 participants each. The qualitative strand involved participant observation of selected WhatsApp groups and Instagram communities. Field notes documented communication patterns, frequency of engagement, and emotional tone within these digital spaces.

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics such as means and frequencies were computed to profile digital use. Correlation analysis was employed to explore the relationships between digital engagement, loneliness, and empathy, while regression analysis will be used to test the predictive value of online behaviors on indicators of social disconnection. Qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Coding categories included, among others, illusion of intimacy, screen-induced isolation, phubbing, and adaptive technology use.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental consent sought for minors under the age of 18. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and sensitive handling of emotional disclosures was prioritized, including referrals to professional support where necessary.

RESULTS

The findings are presented according to the three main objectives of the study. Data from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the paradox of digital intimacy.

Quality and depth of virtual connections compared to face-to-face interactions

The survey findings revealed a clear generational difference in patterns of digital engagement. Youth between the ages of 13 and 24 reported an average of 6.2 hours of daily screen time, considerably higher than the 4.5 hours reported by adults aged 25 to 40. For many participants, digital interaction had become the main channel for social engagement. Indeed, nearly two-thirds of youth (64%) and almost half of adults (47%) acknowledged that online communication served as their primary form of interaction with others.

Table 1. Daily Screen Time and Online Communication Dependence

Group	Average Screen Time (hrs)	Online as Primary Interaction (%)
Youth	6.2	64
Adults	4.5	47

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Platform use further reflected the centrality of digital spaces in e veryday life. WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform for both groups, with 82% of youth and 90% of adults reporting regular use. Among younger participants, however, visual and entertainment-driven platforms played a more prominent role, with 72% engaging with Instagram and 65% with TikTok on a daily basis.

Table 2: Top Platforms Used by Youth and Adults

Platform	**Youth (%)**	**Adults (%)**
Instagram	72	72
TikTok	65	65
WhatsApp	82	90

While the quantitative data confirmed the heavy reliance on digital platforms, qualitative accounts shed light on the lived experience behind these statistics. Many youth described online connections as "convenient but shallow," expressing that digital spaces often failed to capture the authenticity of in-person relationships. As one 19-year-old explained, "Friends online don't really know the real me," while another added, "It's easy to chat, but when we meet face-to-face, it feels awkward" (Youth, 22).

Adults, by contrast, emphasized the tension between professional and personal spheres of communication. A 32-year-old participant admitted, "By the time I put away my laptop, I have no energy left for real conversations," while another observed, "I talk to clients all day on WhatsApp, but my partner says I hardly talk at home" (Adult, 28). These reflections highlight how digital interactions, while indispensable for work and efficiency, can inadvertently erode opportunities for deeper personal engagement.

The results illustrated the paradox of digital connectivity: virtual platforms have become central to social life, yet both youth and adults recognize their limitations in fostering depth, authenticity, and emotional fulfillment.

Psychological and Emotional Implications of Sustained Digital Engagement.

The findings reveal that sustained engagement with digital platforms has significant psychological and emotional consequences. Results from the UCLA Loneliness Scale indicated that more than half of youth (58%) and 41% of adults fell within the moderate-to-high loneliness range, pointing to a substantial burden of isolation despite constant online connectivity. Measures of empathy, using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, further revealed that heavy digital users consistently recorded lower empathy scores compared to moderate users, a difference that was statistically significant ($p < .05$). Social confidence also appeared compromised, with 53% of youth admitting they felt "less confident" initiating face-to-face conversations than starting online chats.

Table 3: Indicators of Loneliness, Empathy, and Social Skills

Measure	**Youth (%)**	**Adults (%)**
Loneliness (moderate-high)	58	41
Lower empathy among high digital users	Yes	Yes
Less confident initiating face-to-face (%)	53	—

The quantitative results were reinforced by rich qualitative narratives that illuminated how digital interactions

create a sense of "illusory connection." For example, a 20-year-old reflected, "Sometimes I scroll for hours. It feels like I'm with people, but then I realize I'm just alone in my room." Similarly, an 18-year-old explained, "Even when I'm with friends, everyone is on their phone—it's like we're together but not really." Such accounts highlight how virtual presence often substitutes—but does not fully replace—meaningful social contact. Adults, meanwhile, described the toll of digital reliance on their interpersonal competence. One 27-year-old observed, "I notice I avoid eye contact in meetings because I'm more used to typing my feelings than saying them." Others emphasized the disruptive nature of phubbing—checking one's phone during in-person interactions. A 34-year-old participant described its emotional sting: "My husband checks his phone even when I'm talking. It makes me feel invisible."

These findings underscore the paradoxical role of digital platforms: while they create avenues for constant connection, they also intensify loneliness, diminish empathy, and weaken social confidence. The result is a cycle where individuals feel superficially connected but remain emotionally unfulfilled, with interpersonal skills increasingly compromised by reliance on mediated communication.

Cultural and Social Shifts in Defining Intimacy and Connectedness in the Digital Era

The study revealed significant cultural and social shifts in how intimacy and connectedness are being redefined in the digital age. Patterns of disconnection were widespread, with 71% of participants reporting weekly experiences of Zoom fatigue. Family spaces, traditionally sites of bonding, were also disrupted—62% of respondents admitted to checking their phones during meals. The impact of such behaviors was evident, as phubbing demonstrated a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction ($r = –.42$). Among youth, 45% confessed that exposure to curated posts on social media often triggered feelings of envy and comparison, underscoring the emotional costs of digital comparison culture.

Table 4: Patterns of Digital Disconnection

Measure	**Youth (%)**	**Adults (%)**
Zoom fatigue (weekly)	71	71
Checking phones during meals	62	62
Envy/comparison from social media	45	45

Participants 'accounts vividly illustrated these patterns. One adult observed, "Even in church, people are on their phones—it's like phones come before people" (Adult, 29), while a 21-year-old reflected, "Scrolling Instagram makes me feel like everyone's life is better than mine." These testimonies underscore the shifting norms, where devices frequently intrude upon spaces once reserved for undistracted presence and connection. At the same time, the study also highlighted emerging adaptive practices aimed at restoring balance. Several participants described efforts to reclaim offline intimacy by setting boundaries around device use. An adult participant explained, "We started a rule: no phones at dinner. Now we actually talk as a family" (Adult, 35). Similarly, a young adult reported, "On Sundays I switch off my phone—it feels refreshing, like I can breathe again" (Youth, 24). Hybrid practices were also observed, particularly among youth who combine online and offline interactions: "Gaming with my friends online is fun, but we combine it with meeting up. That's when it feels real" (Youth, 17).

These findings illustrate the dual reality of cultural and social redefinition in the digital era. On the one hand, constant connectivity has blurred the boundaries between togetherness and distraction, fostering fatigue, comparison, and relational strain. On the other hand, intentional practices such as digital detoxes, phone-free

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zones, and hybrid engagements are reshaping intimacy by creating spaces where authentic, meaningful connection can thrive alongside technology.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the paradoxical nature of digital intimacy: individuals are increasingly engaged in virtual connections yet simultaneously experience heightened loneliness, reduced empathy, and weakened social skills. This aligns with earlier scholarship that cautions against the over-romanticization of digital connectivity (Turkle, 2017; Twenge, 2019). Participants 'accounts of digital communication as "convenient but shallow" support Turkle's (2017) thesis of being "alone together." Quantitative data showing that more than half of youth rely primarily on online communication resonates with Boyd's (2014) observation that digital culture prioritizes curated visibility over authentic vulnerability. Thus, digital connections may provide breadth but not depth, confirming that virtual intimacy often substitutes rather than complements face-to-face relationships.

The strong correlation between heavy digital engagement and loneliness reinforces Twenge et al.'s (2019) claim that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to digital disconnection. The higher loneliness scores in youth echo Klinenberg's (2018) idea of "social autarky," where individuals paradoxically feel isolated despite being hyper-connected. This suggests that digital engagement does not resolve the human need for deep emotional bonds. Lower empathy scores among heavy users support the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), which posits that anonymity and depersonalization in online spaces reduce authentic emotional engagement (Postmes et al., 2001). Reports of difficulties in maintaining eye contact and handling conflict also validate research by Uhls et al. (2014), who found that adolescents immersed in screens exhibit weaker nonverbal and conflict-resolution skills. These results underscore how digital intimacy reconfigures emotional and social competencies.

Phubbing emerged as a recurrent theme, eroding family and peer relationships. This finding corroborates Roberts and David (2016), who linked partner phubbing to lower relationship satisfaction. In the current study, phubbing correlated negatively with relationship quality ($r = –.42$), showing how device prioritization interrupts emotional presence. This supports Ecological Techno-Subsystem Theory, which explains how technologies infiltrate family systems and weaken emotional bonds (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

The high prevalence of "Zoom fatigue" echoes Bailenson's (2021) theory of nonverbal overload, where constant video-mediated communication strains cognitive and emotional resources. Participants 'reports of exhaustion from video calls confirm that digital communication cannot replicate the subtle richness of in-person interaction (Reis et al., 2018).

Despite risks, adaptive uses of technology emerged, such as digital detox practices, phone-free zones, and hybrid platforms (e.g., AR gaming). These strategies resonate with Baym's (2015) argument that digital tools can enhance relational life when consciously managed. They also align with Wellman and Rainie's (2012) concept of networked individualism, which highlights the empowering role of digital networks when integrated with offline connection.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the paradox of digital intimacy: while technology expands opportunities for connection, it simultaneously erodes the depth, quality, and authenticity of relationships. The findings showed that heavy reliance on digital communication is associated with increased loneliness, lower empathy, reduced social competence, and strained relationships—particularly through phenomena such as phubbing and Zoom fatigue. Yet, adaptive strategies like digital detox and hybrid engagements suggest that technology is not inherently alienating; rather, its impact depends on patterns of use, cultural contexts, and intentionality. Digital connections provide breadth but often lack the depth that sustains meaningful human bonds. The paradox lies in the fact that the very platforms designed to bring people closer may, when uncritically consumed, push them further apart.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study underscore the need for more intentional approaches to digital engagement in order

to preserve depth, empathy, and authenticity in human connections. For young people, educational institutions should integrate programs that enhance social skills, particularly in face-to-face communication, conflict resolution, and empathy building. This could take the form of workshops, mentorship programs, or curriculum enhancements that promote active listening and interpersonal confidence beyond the screen. Families, too, play a crucial role in moderating digital habits. Establishing device-free times—such as during meals or weekends—can restore opportunities for meaningful conversation and shared experiences. Parents and guardians are encouraged to model balanced technology use by practicing the very habits they wish their children to adopt.

Employers and organizations should acknowledge the toll of excessive digital engagement, especially in professional environments where virtual communication dominates. Introducing flexible communication policies, encouraging screen breaks, and offering hybrid opportunities for team interaction can help employees balance efficiency with psychological well-being. At the societal level, community initiatives that blend online and offline engagement can provide healthier models of connection. For example, digital platforms might be leveraged to organize in-person meetups, creative collaborations, or service activities that extend beyond the virtual space. Public campaigns can also raise awareness of the psychological implications of excessive digital dependence while promoting mindful and purposeful use of technology. Finally, individuals themselves must take ownership of their digital habits by cultivating self-regulation strategies such as digital detox periods, mindfulness practices, and conscious prioritization of in-person interaction. When embraced collectively—at the personal, familial, institutional, and societal levels—these practices have the potential to transform virtual connectivity from a source of disconnection into a tool for balanced, authentic, and enduring relationships.

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