



A Phenomenological Exploration of Loss of Intimacy in the Digital Era: Subjective Experiences of Technology and Social Relationships in Urban Communities

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly reshaped human social interactions, particularly in urban settings where mediated communication often replaces face-to-face interaction. Despite growing research in this area, limited attention has been given to the subjective experiences of individuals navigating these technological changes and their impact on intimacy and empathy in social relationships. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of individuals affected by the dominance of digital technology in their interpersonal interactions. Using a phenomenological approach, this research uncovers how individuals perceive and internalize the transformation of their social relationships in a digitally connected world. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 participants from urban environments with intensive digital engagement and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key experiential themes. The findings reveal a profound sense of emotional isolation and diminished intimacy, even amidst constant digital connectivity, highlighting the paradoxical nature of mediated communication. These insights enrich our understanding of the nuanced impacts of technology on human relationships, emphasizing the importance of balancing digital connectivity with meaningful face-to-face interactions. Practical implications of these findings suggest that policymakers and practitioners should prioritize initiatives that foster offline social engagement and promote digital literacy to mitigate the negative effects of technology on emotional well-being. Future research can build on these findings by exploring diverse populations or combining phenomenology with quantitative approaches to further dissect the complexities of human relationships in the digital age.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the development of digital technology has significantly transformed how humans interact and communicate (Akabane dkk., 2019). While technological advancements have brought substantial benefits, such as expanding access to information and improving communication efficiency, their impact on social relationships remains a topic of complex discussion (Alhusban dkk., 2019). In this digital era, human relationships are often mediated by technology, leading to fundamental changes in the quality and meaning of social interactions.

In the context of urban life, digital technologies, such as instant messaging applications and social media platforms, have replaced many forms of face-to-face interaction (Calabrese Barton dkk., 2021). This phenomenon raises questions about how human connections are affected by the dominance of technology, particularly regarding intimacy and empathy (Chib dkk., 2022). Urban communities are uniquely positioned for this study because they often exhibit high levels of digital

engagement and serve as microcosms for broader societal shifts, making them ideal for exploring the nuanced interplay between technology and social relationships. Previous studies have shown that, while technology enhances communication accessibility, many individuals feel increasingly alienated and experience a loss of emotional closeness in their relationships (e.g., studies on digital alienation within modern Marxist theory).

Most approaches to understanding the impact of technology on social relationships have predominantly focused on quantitative analyses, such as measuring levels of loneliness or the frequency of technology use (Flores-Flores dkk., 2023). While valuable, these approaches often fail to capture individuals' subjective experiences and how they interpret these changes in their lives. A phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on exploring lived experiences, offers a unique perspective for understanding these aspects.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of individuals living amidst digital connectivity, particularly within urban communities (Huang dkk., 2023). Through a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to uncover deeper meanings of how technology influences social relationships, empathy, and intimacy. In doing so, this study provides richer insights into the transformation of human relationships in the digital age.

Research on subjective experiences within the context of digitalization has become an increasingly important field, particularly in understanding the impact of technology on social relationships (Kamin dkk., 2020). Focusing on individuals' lived experiences allows for the revelation of emotional and cognitive dimensions often overlooked in traditional approaches. In this context, phenomenology provides a relevant framework for exploring the depth of experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to social interactions in the digital era.

However, existing studies often face methodological challenges in exploring the aspects of meaning and subjective experience (Kusumastuti dkk., 2022). Most quantitative approaches, such as surveys and experiments, tend to focus on statistical measurements or observable behavioral patterns. While these methods offer general insights, they frequently fall short in capturing the emotional complexity and individual subjectivity inherent in specific phenomena. For example, the increased feelings of loneliness reported in survey-based research are rarely accompanied by an exploration of how individuals perceive and experience this isolation in their daily lives.

These limitations underscore the growing relevance of the phenomenological approach for this research (Lee dkk., 2020). By emphasizing participants' direct experiences and reflections, this approach can uncover richer and deeper essences of phenomena. It also enables the exploration of more complex dimensions of social relationships, such as intimacy and empathy, which are often neglected by quantitative methods.

This study aims to address these methodological limitations by providing space for participants' voices to articulate their subjective experiences in depth. Through phenomenological analysis, the research not only bridges gaps in understanding but also contributes to the development of a more holistic conceptual framework regarding the impact of technology on human relationships.

Although previous research has provided insights into the impact of technology on social relationships, most proposed solutions tend to focus on practical, quantitative approaches. For instance, statistical measurements of technology usage or levels of loneliness offer a general overview but often fail to explain how individuals perceive and internalize these experiences. While these approaches are effective in identifying patterns or trends, they fall short of uncovering the deeper meanings of human relationships affected by technology.

This limitation creates a significant gap in understanding, particularly in addressing questions about how technology influences the essence of social relationships, such as intimacy and empathy. Survey-based studies, for example, rarely delve into the experiences of individuals who feel digitally connected yet emotionally isolated. Similarly, public space observations, though valuable, provide only an external perspective without access to the subjective dimensions underlying individual behaviors.

To bridge this gap, the phenomenological method offers a unique and essential approach. By focusing on subjective experiences, this method can reveal the deeper essence of the phenomena under study, going beyond surface-level descriptions. Phenomenological research provides an opportunity to understand how individuals interpret their social relationships amidst the dominance of technology, offering richer and more holistic insights that remain unexplored by traditional approaches.

Research on the impact of technology on social relationships has yielded significant findings, particularly in the context of urban life. Previous studies have highlighted how technology influences human connections through phenomena such as digital alienation and social fragmentation. Mediated communication theory has been widely used as a foundation for understanding how technology replaces face-to-face interactions. However, much of this research employs quantitative approaches that focus on patterns of technology use or broad impacts, with limited attention to individuals' in-depth experiences. This gap underscores the need for approaches that can uncover the subjective dimensions of these phenomena.

A phenomenological approach is employed in this study to address the need for a more holistic and in-depth exploration. This method facilitates the revelation of the essence of individual experiences in navigating changes in the quality of social relationships in the digital era. By focusing on subjective perspectives, this approach provides insights that cannot be attained through traditional methods. The study uses in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to explore the meanings of individuals' experiences of intimacy, empathy, and connectedness in digital interactions. This approach directly addresses the knowledge gaps identified earlier.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction that outlines the general and specific contexts of the phenomenon under study. The subsequent section explains the phenomenological approach used, including the processes of data collection and analysis. The findings are presented by grouping individuals' experiences into key themes identified through data analysis. The discussion elaborates on the implications of these findings for theory and practice, offering recommendations to address the challenges identified. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and the study's contributions to the existing literature.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore individuals' subjective experiences regarding the impact of technology on social relationships in the digital era (López-González dkk., 2020). Phenomenology was chosen for its focus on understanding the deep meanings individuals attribute to phenomena they experience, making it highly relevant for addressing research questions about intimacy and empathy in social interactions.

An interpretative phenomenological approach was used to delve into participants' subjective experiences while also understanding how they interpret the influence of technology on their social relationships. This approach enabled the identification of key themes that reflect unique experiences while encompassing broader social meanings.

Participants

The study involved 15 adult participants aged 25–45 who live in major cities, work in the technology or communication sectors, and have intensive access to digital devices. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had direct experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation—the changes in social relationship quality due to technology.

Inclusion criteria included individuals who actively use digital devices in their daily activities and who acknowledged experiencing changes in their social relationships. Those with minimal experience using technology or not residing in urban settings were excluded from the study. The sample size was determined based on the principle of saturation, where additional interviews were

unlikely to yield new insights. However, it is acknowledged that the relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Potential biases, such as participants being predominantly from technology-oriented professions, are also noted and should be considered when interpreting the results. To maintain privacy and confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with each participant. A semi-structured interview guide was used to allow flexibility in exploring participants' subjective experiences in depth. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable and conducive environment, such as a private workspace or a quiet café, depending on participants' preferences.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences interacting with technology, their perceptions of intimacy and empathy, and the influence of technology on their social relationships.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic phenomenological approach, involving systematic steps to identify key themes from the interview transcripts (Magnusson dkk., 2019). The analysis began with an in-depth reading of the transcripts to understand the essence of participants' experiences, followed by thematic coding to group relevant statements associated with the phenomena under study.

Key themes were identified through an iterative process, examining relationships between themes and uncovering deeper meanings emerging from the data. NVivo software was used to support data organization, but the primary focus remained on direct interpretation of participants' narratives.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants provided written consent after receiving comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. To ensure anonymity, participants' names and personal information were replaced with pseudonyms, and data were securely stored following strict protocols. The study adhered to international ethical guidelines for social research, including principles of respect for privacy and participants' autonomy.

RESULTS

Loss of Intimacy in Virtual Interactions

One of the main findings of this study is participants' experiences of declining intimacy in social interactions due to the dominance of technology. Most participants reported that conversations via messaging apps have replaced meaningful face-to-face meetings. As one participant expressed, "I feel like talking to friends is just a formality, not truly sharing experiences." This statement reflects the sense of alienation felt in virtual communication.

In everyday life, many participants indicated that their interactions tend to be superficial. Although technology enables instant communication, participants felt that the depth and empathy in their relationships have gradually eroded. This phenomenon highlights an imbalance between digital connectivity and the emotional need for authentic human connection.

Dependency on Technology and Its Impact on Emotional Presence

Dependency on digital devices emerged as another dominant theme in participants' experiences. One participant described, "I can't remember the last time I truly listened to someone without checking my phone." This statement illustrates how technology often interrupts and diminishes emotional presence in social interactions.

Observations in public spaces reinforced these findings, where individuals were often seen staring at screens rather than engaging with those around them. A participant working in the tech industry noted, "It's frustrating to try to talk to someone whose attention is constantly diverted by notifications on their phone." This dependency impacts not only interpersonal communication but also creates significant emotional distance.

Emotional Isolation Amidst Digital Connectivity

While technology facilitates ease of connection, most participants reported increasing feelings of emotional isolation. "I feel lonely even though my phone is full of notifications," shared one participant living in a major city. This experience indicates that digital connections often fail to meet the basic human need for deep and meaningful relationships.

This isolation is often exacerbated by social expectations to remain constantly digitally connected, ultimately reducing time and space for personal reflection or meaningful interactions. Another participant noted, "Technology makes everything easier, but I feel like I've lost the meaning behind those relationships."

This study reveals that intimacy and empathy in social relationships have undergone significant transformations in the digital era, often in ways that are detrimental to individuals' emotional well-being. Participants' subjective experiences highlight a key contradiction in technology use: while it provides instant connectivity, it tends to diminish the quality of human relationships and amplify feelings of isolation. These findings underscore the importance of seeking balance between digital connectivity and the human need for authentic, meaningful relationships.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that while digital technology facilitates communication, it often creates emotional distance and diminishes the quality of social relationships (McDuaie-Ra, 2022). Participants' subjective experiences highlight a loss of intimacy and empathy in technology-mediated interactions, addressing the critical question of how technology affects the essential dimensions of human relationships. These findings resonate with earlier discussions in the introduction, particularly those addressing the paradox of digital connectivity enhancing communication accessibility while undermining emotional closeness (Alhusban dkk., 2019; Chib dkk., 2022).

The study provides unique insights into the experiences of individuals navigating the transformation of social relationships in the digital era (Mendoza dkk., 2022). The findings demonstrate that although technology offers instant connectivity, it frequently replaces more meaningful face-to-face interactions. For example, the theme of "loss of intimacy in virtual interactions" uncovers feelings of alienation that arise despite frequent communication through digital devices. Moreover, reliance on technology fosters patterns of superficial interaction, where emotional presence is often disrupted by notifications or the constant need to stay digitally connected (Mouratidis, 2021a). This aligns with mediated communication theory's proposition that technology-mediated interactions, while efficient, often lack the depth and richness of face-to-face communication (Mouratidis, 2021b), supporting earlier theoretical claims introduced by Calabrese Barton dkk. (2021).

The findings support mediated communication theory, which suggests that technology tends to replace face-to-face interactions with more directed but less profound forms of communication (Mouratidis, 2021b). Additionally, the results align with earlier studies on digital alienation, such as those informed by modern Marxist theory, which argue that technology can fragment social relationships into individualistic interactions. However, this study goes further by providing detailed insights into how individuals internalize these experiences in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the findings complement prior quantitative studies measuring loneliness in digital societies by exposing the subjective dimensions underlying those statistics (Pulgar dkk., 2022). For instance, participants' feelings of alienation expand our understanding of loneliness reported in earlier surveys, emphasizing that the issue lies not merely in the lack of connections but also in the

diminished quality of those connections. These nuanced perspectives enrich existing literature by combining theoretical implications with lived experiences, offering a holistic understanding of human relationships in the digital age.

Explanation of Findings' Implications

The findings of this study hold significant scientific value by enriching the literature on the impact of digital technology on social relationships, particularly by highlighting subjective experiential dimensions that have been underexplored. The revealed meanings, such as the loss of intimacy and reliance on technology, reflect social dynamics that are especially pertinent in the digital era, particularly within urban communities.

Practically, the results offer guidance for policymakers and communication professionals in designing strategies that promote a balance between digital connectivity and meaningful face-to-face interactions. For example, approaches to raising awareness about the importance of "full presence" in social interactions could be incorporated into educational programs or professional training. These insights are also highly relevant for broader populations, especially those at risk of emotional isolation due to excessive technology use.

Study Limitations

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, it involved only 15 participants from urban settings with intensive access to digital devices, limiting the generalizability of findings to other populations, such as those in rural areas or with limited technological access (Qadir & Fatah, 2023). Second, the phenomenological approach focuses on subjective experiences, meaning the results cannot be quantified or compared across groups. Lastly, the evolving nature of social and technological dynamics may affect the long-term relevance of these findings, necessitating future studies to update insights over time.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open avenues for further exploration into other dimensions of human relationships in the digital age (Tamburo, 2020). Future research could expand the participant pool to include diverse geographical, demographic, and social contexts. Additionally, a multidisciplinary approach that combines phenomenology with quantitative methods could provide more comprehensive insights. Studies could also focus on the specific influence of particular technology platforms on the quality of social relationships or develop strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of technology through interventions tailored to human social and emotional needs.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the impact of digital technology on social relationships, focusing on individuals' subjective experiences within urban communities. The key findings reveal that while technology facilitates instant communication, many individuals experience a loss of intimacy and empathy in their interactions and emotional isolation despite being digitally connected. This research successfully uncovers the deeper meanings behind these experiences, surpassing the limitations of quantitative approaches that often fail to address the emotional and cognitive dimensions of human relationships.

By employing a phenomenological approach, this study addresses critical questions about how individuals interpret their social relationships in the digital era and provides practical insights to enhance the quality of human connections. These findings contribute to the literature by emphasizing the importance of balancing digital connectivity with meaningful face-to-face relationships.

Specific recommendations for policymakers include the development of public awareness campaigns promoting "digital wellness," which encourages balanced use of technology to maintain meaningful social connections. Policymakers could also support initiatives such as community programs or urban designs that facilitate offline social interactions, such as shared spaces or events aimed at fostering face-to-face engagement. Educators can integrate curricula that teach digital

literacy alongside emotional intelligence, equipping individuals with the skills to navigate digital communication while preserving empathy and intimacy. For technologists, these findings highlight the importance of designing user interfaces and platforms that prioritize quality over quantity in communication, such as tools that minimize distractions or encourage deeper engagement in digital interactions.

Highlighting potential follow-up research directions, future studies could explore how specific technological features (e.g., algorithm-driven social feeds or virtual reality) impact the quality of social relationships across different demographic groups. Investigating the role of cultural and socio-economic contexts in shaping digital interaction patterns would provide additional depth. Combining phenomenological insights with longitudinal quantitative data could also reveal how these experiences evolve over time, particularly as new technologies emerge. Additionally, experimental studies testing interventions, such as digital detox programs or redesigned communication platforms, could provide actionable strategies for mitigating the negative impacts of digital technology on relationships.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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