



## **Exploring the Meaning of Emotional Intimacy and Authenticity in Digital Relationship Maintenance: A Phenomenological Study on Social Media Users**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The rapid growth of digital communication platforms has reshaped the way individuals maintain interpersonal relationships, raising questions about the emotional depth and authenticity of online connections. While extensive research has focused on the technical and social aspects of digital communication, the subjective experiences of individuals navigating these platforms remain underexplored. Specifically, it is unclear how individuals perceive and interpret the emotional and social dimensions of relationship mediated by digital technologies. This study aims to address this gap by employing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals maintaining relationships through social media. Using thematic analysis, we analyzed in-depth interviews with 15 participants to identify key themes related to emotional intimacy, trust, and authenticity in digital communication. The findings reveal that while digital platforms provide opportunities for connection, they often fail to replicate the emotional depth of in-person interactions, highlighting the challenges of building meaningful relationships online. These results suggest the need for a more nuanced understanding of digital communication, particularly in terms of emotional fulfillment and relational authenticity. Our study contributes to the field by offering insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating digital relationships, with implications for both future research and practical applications in digital communication strategies.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and the widespread use of social media platforms have significantly altered the ways in which individuals maintain interpersonal relationships. In recent years, virtual communication has become a prominent means of sustaining connections with friends, family, and colleagues, transcending geographical barriers and offering unprecedented opportunities for interaction (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). This shift from face-to-face to digital interactions has raised important questions about the quality, depth, and authenticity of relationships in the digital age. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become integral parts of daily life, shaping social dynamics in both personal and professional spheres. However, these digital spaces often present new challenges in terms of emotional intimacy, trust, and the maintenance of meaningful connections.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its profound impact on the social fabric of modern society. While social media has enhanced connectivity, it also introduces complexities related to the authenticity of online interactions and the preservation of genuine emotional bonds. As individuals increasingly turn to digital platforms to manage their relationships, understanding the subjective experiences of maintaining these connections becomes crucial. The human experience of digital communication encompasses a wide range of emotions and perceptions, from the excitement of reconnecting with distant friends to the frustration of feeling disconnected despite frequent online

interactions. This duality underscores the importance of exploring the lived experiences of individuals navigating relationships in the digital realm.

Phenomenological exploration is particularly suited to uncover the deeper meanings of these experiences, as it allows for a rich, first-person perspective on the nuances of digital relationship maintenance (Maltby dkk., 2024). By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, this study aims to provide insights into how people interpret and make sense of their interactions in digital environments. The need for this exploration arises from the fact that much of the current literature focuses on the technical aspects of social media usage rather than the subjective, emotional experiences of users. As such, there is a gap in understanding how digital communication influences the quality and dynamics of relationships at a personal and emotional level. Through a phenomenological lens, this research seeks to uncover the essential meaning of these experiences and their implications for social connections in the digital age.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a critical area of study, particularly in fields examining the dynamics of interpersonal relationships in the digital age. The subjective nature of these experiences makes them difficult to capture using traditional research methods (Johnson & Rogers, 2024). As individuals increasingly rely on digital platforms to navigate their social connections, it is essential to understand how these technologies shape the personal and emotional aspects of relationships. While quantitative approaches have been useful in measuring the frequency and scope of digital interactions, they fall short in capturing the depth of individual experiences, such as the emotional nuances, sense of intimacy, and challenges faced in maintaining relationships online.

The primary challenge in exploring such experiences lies in the inherent limitations of data collection methods that rely on numerical or surface-level analysis. Quantitative research, while effective in identifying patterns and trends, cannot adequately explore the meanings and emotions behind an individual's use of digital communication tools. These approaches often overlook the richness of personal perspectives, reducing complex, subjective experiences to mere statistics. In contrast, qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenology, offer a more suitable framework for capturing the essence of these experiences. By focusing on the individual's lived experiences, phenomenology allows researchers to delve into the emotional and psychological dimensions of digital communication, offering a deeper understanding of how people experience, interpret, and assign meaning to their interactions in virtual spaces.

Despite its advantages, phenomenological research itself presents challenges, particularly in terms of collecting and analyzing data. The subjective nature of individual experiences requires careful attention to the participant's personal narrative, which can be difficult to represent in a standardized format (Read dkk., 2022). Furthermore, the interpretation of these narratives involves overcoming researcher biases and ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the participant's experience, rather than imposing external theoretical frameworks. These methodological challenges highlight why previous research, particularly studies that rely on quantitative data or less nuanced qualitative methods, has been less effective in comprehensively capturing the complexities of relationship maintenance in digital environments.

By addressing these gaps, phenomenological approaches offer a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, enabling a richer exploration of how digital tools influence the emotional and relational dimensions of social interaction.

While current research on digital communication often employs practical, quantitative approaches to assess the frequency and scope of online interactions, these methods fail to capture the deeper, subjective experiences associated with maintaining relationships in virtual spaces. Existing studies predominantly focus on the observable outcomes of digital communication, such as the number of messages exchanged or the time spent on social media platforms (Dayal, 2023). However, such data offer only a limited understanding of the emotional and relational dynamics at play, leaving key aspects of the interpersonal experience unexplored. These quantitative methods, though valuable in providing a broad overview, cannot fully address the nuanced ways in which individuals interpret, experience, and attribute meaning to their online relationships.

In contrast, a phenomenological approach presents a promising alternative by offering a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of individuals. This approach allows researchers to move beyond surface-level data and uncover the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of maintaining relationships in the digital age. By focusing on the participants' subjective experiences, phenomenology provides a more holistic understanding of how digital interactions shape personal connections and emotional intimacy. The ability to capture and analyze the essence of these experiences in a nuanced and comprehensive manner offers valuable insights that are often missing in previous studies (Doroschuk & Staroverova, 2019). This research, by adopting this approach, aims to fill this gap by exploring how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their online relationships. Therefore, there is a clear need for research that adopts a phenomenological lens to explore the meanings individuals attach to their online interactions, particularly in relation to how these digital connections impact the quality and depth of their relationships.

This gap in the literature underscores the necessity of adopting phenomenology as the methodological approach for this study. By using this framework, the research can explore the underlying essence of the phenomenon, providing a richer and more holistic understanding of how individuals navigate the complexities of maintaining interpersonal relationships through digital platforms.

Previous research on digital communication has largely focused on quantitative measures, such as the frequency of interactions or the extent of online engagement. Studies have explored the effects of social media on social connections, often drawing from social network theory to understand how individuals maintain relationships in virtual spaces (Karrasch dkk., 2024). However, these studies tend to overlook the deeper, emotional, and subjective dimensions of these experiences. Limited research exists on the personal meanings individuals attribute to their digital interactions and how these relationships influence their emotional and social well-being. Thus, while valuable insights have been gained from these studies, they do not adequately address the lived experiences of users navigating relationships in the digital age.

In response to this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to delve deeper into the subjective experiences of individuals maintaining relationships through digital platforms. By focusing on the meanings participants attach to their online interactions, this research aims to provide a richer, more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Phenomenology is uniquely suited to this task, as it allows for the exploration of the lived experiences of individuals without imposing pre-existing theories or assumptions (Esnard dkk., 2024). This method provides an opportunity to uncover the essence of digital relationship maintenance, shedding light on the emotional and social dimensions that quantitative research cannot fully capture. The phenomenological approach is chosen to explore how individuals interpret and make sense of their relationships in digital spaces, addressing the limitations identified in previous studies.

The structure of this article is as follows: the introduction outlines the research context, providing an overview of the phenomenon and the existing gaps in understanding. Next, the phenomenological methodology used in the study is described, along with the data collection and analysis processes. The results section presents the themes identified through thematic analysis, followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting the implications of the study for both theory and practice, suggesting directions for future research in the field of digital communication and interpersonal relationships.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals maintaining interpersonal relationships in the digital age, particularly through social media. Phenomenology is chosen as the research design due to its ability to uncover and describe the essence of participants' subjective experiences (Khatri & Dutta, 2023). This approach is particularly relevant for investigating how individuals perceive and make sense of their interactions and

relationships in an increasingly digital environment. By focusing on subjective experiences, phenomenology allows for an in-depth understanding of the meanings and interpretations participants attach to their online social interactions, shedding light on the complexities of maintaining relationships in the digital realm.

In this study, a descriptive phenomenology approach is used to capture the participants' lived experiences without imposing preconceived frameworks or theories. This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of how participants experience and interpret their interactions in digital spaces, emphasizing the essence of those experiences as they are lived and understood by the individuals themselves. To ensure the credibility of the data, member checking was employed to verify the accuracy and consistency of the findings. After initial data analysis, selected participants were asked to review the interpretations and themes that emerged from their interviews. This process allowed participants to confirm or clarify the findings, which helped enhance the reliability of the data. Additionally, peer review was conducted with experts in the field of communication and phenomenological research to validate the research process and the interpretations of the data.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy. Individuals who are active users of social media and have substantial experience in maintaining relationships online were included (Abdigapbarova dkk., 2024). The criteria for inclusion required participants to be aged 18 and above, with at least one year of experience in managing interpersonal relationships via social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, or Twitter. Participants were chosen based on their ability to provide rich, meaningful insights into the phenomenon of interest.

A total of 15 participants were involved, with an equal distribution of genders (7 males and 8 females). The average age of participants was 29 years. All participants had diverse professional backgrounds, including students, professionals, and homemakers, ensuring a broad range of experiences regarding online relationship maintenance. The inclusion of participants from various demographic backgrounds was intended to enrich the data and provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of maintaining interpersonal relationships through digital means.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while maintaining a consistent focus on the research questions. Interviews were conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting, either in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences (Wu dkk., 2023). The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and were guided by a pre-established interview protocol that included open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences with maintaining relationships online. The questions were designed to explore themes related to the emotional and social aspects of online interactions, the challenges faced, and the perceived impact on relationship quality.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and detailed field notes were taken to complement the audio recordings. Data collection occurred over a period of three months, ensuring that a diverse set of experiences was captured. The interviews were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used technique in phenomenological studies to identify and interpret the core themes emerging from participants' narratives. The process began with the transcription of interview recordings, followed by a thorough reading of the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Thematic coding was then applied to identify key themes and patterns across the participants' responses.

Using NVivo software, the data were organized into meaningful units, and the themes were developed by identifying recurring phrases, words, and concepts. Each theme was refined through multiple readings and discussions of the data, ensuring that it accurately represented the participants' lived experiences (Leone & Mura, 2020). The analysis was iterative, with themes continuously

refined as new insights emerged. The final thematic structure was built around the central questions of the study, focusing on how individuals navigate, experience, and interpret the process of maintaining relationships in a digital context.

### **Ethics**

Ethical considerations were a fundamental aspect of this study. Prior to participation, all individuals provided written informed consent, ensuring their voluntary involvement and understanding of the study's objectives. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were removed from the data, and all audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the relevant ethical review committee and complied with both international and local ethical standards for research. The privacy and integrity of all participants were safeguarded, and the study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

### **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings of the phenomenological analysis on the experiences of individuals in maintaining interpersonal relationships in the digital era, with a particular focus on social media interactions. The data was derived from in-depth interviews with participants who actively engage in social networks, providing rich insights into the challenges and opportunities they encounter in preserving meaningful relationships online. Direct quotes and specific examples from participants are included to enhance the clarity and richness of the findings. The results are organized into the following main themes that emerged from the analysis:

#### **Navigating the Shift from Physical to Virtual Relationships**

One of the most significant themes that emerged was the shift from physical, face-to-face interactions to virtual connections. Participants shared their struggles in adapting to online platforms, which they felt were often inadequate substitutes for real-life interactions. As one participant, Sarah, described:

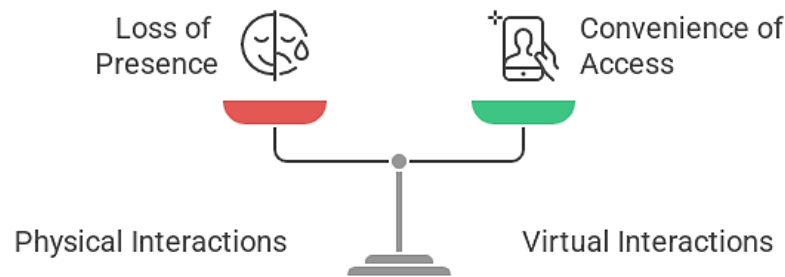
"It's different, you know? Even though we talk all the time on WhatsApp and Zoom, I still feel like something is missing. I can't feel their presence the way I used to when we met face-to-face."

This quote highlights the challenge of creating meaningful connections in a virtual space, where non-verbal cues and physical proximity are lost. Despite this, several participants also noted the convenience and accessibility that digital platforms provide, allowing them to maintain contact with friends and family across distances. James, another participant, remarked:

"Being able to chat with my friends anytime, no matter where they are, is something that I value. It keeps us connected, even when we're miles apart."

This indicates that while virtual communication presents challenges, it also offers opportunities to sustain relationships that might otherwise fade due to geographical distances.

#### **Balancing Presence and Convenience in Communication**



### **The Role of Social Media in Enhancing Social Connectivity**

Another prominent theme was the role of social media in enhancing social connectivity, particularly in maintaining relationships with individuals outside one's immediate social circle. Participants highlighted how platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serve as bridges to reconnect with long-lost friends, acquaintances, and distant relatives. Maria shared her experience:

"I found a high school friend on Facebook after years. We started chatting and reconnecting, and now we catch up regularly. I don't think I would have done that without social media."

This reflects how social media platforms offer avenues for rekindling old relationships and expanding one's social network. However, some participants also expressed concerns about the superficial nature of online relationships. Michael expressed:

"I have hundreds of friends on Facebook, but when I really think about it, I only interact meaningfully with a handful. Most of it feels like small talk, and it doesn't really fulfill me."

This suggests that while social media can help maintain connections, the depth and quality of those relationships are sometimes compromised by the nature of online interaction.

### **Maintaining Authenticity and Trust in Online Interactions**

The theme of authenticity and trust emerged as a significant issue when it came to digital relationships. Participants expressed concerns about how digital platforms, despite fostering communication, often blur the lines between genuine and inauthentic interactions. As Emily noted:

"You never know if what people post is real or just something they're showing off. It can be hard to trust what people say online."

This was echoed by other participants, who spoke about the difficulty of establishing genuine trust in an online environment where people can curate their personas. Nonetheless, some participants, like Mark, found ways to maintain authentic relationships through consistent and meaningful interactions:

"I make it a point to have real conversations with my friends, even if it's just a text. We talk about real issues, not just the surface stuff."

This highlights that while the online environment may complicate trust-building, intentional efforts to engage sincerely can preserve authenticity.

### **The Impact of Digital Communication on Relationship Intimacy**

Lastly, the theme of intimacy in digital relationships revealed contrasting views among participants. Some expressed that online communication lacked the intimacy and depth found in face-to-face interactions. Sarah shared:

"I can talk to my best friend all day online, but it just feels different when we're actually sitting together and talking about life."

This perspective reflects the limitations of digital platforms in conveying emotional intimacy. However, other participants noted that digital communication allowed them to maintain emotional closeness, particularly when face-to-face meetings were not possible. Michael explained:

"Even though I can't be with my family all the time, video calls help me feel close to them. It's not the same as being there, but it's the best we can do."

This indicates that while digital communication may fall short in certain aspects of intimacy, it can still play a crucial role in fostering emotional bonds, especially in the context of physical separation.

The analysis of these themes reveals that while social media and digital communication offer significant opportunities for maintaining relationships, they also present challenges related to the authenticity, depth, and emotional intimacy of those connections. Participants experienced both positive and negative aspects of their interactions in the digital realm, underscoring the complexity of maintaining meaningful relationships in the modern, digital age. These findings provide valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the ways in which technology reshapes how people connect and engage with one another.

## **DISCUSSION**

The main findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of maintaining interpersonal relationships in the digital age. Participants shared how digital communication, while providing new opportunities for connection, also presented significant challenges in terms of emotional intimacy, authenticity, and the overall quality of relationships (Dai dkk., 2023). These findings align with the overarching research question: How do individuals experience and make sense of maintaining relationships in a digital context? The study offers valuable insights into how digital interactions shape the relational dynamics of individuals, revealing both the advantages and limitations of maintaining online relationships.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by providing a nuanced perspective on how individuals navigate their emotional connections through digital platforms. Participants revealed that while social media enables easy and frequent contact, it often fails to replicate the emotional depth of face-to-face interactions. The challenge of creating meaningful relationships in a virtual environment was emphasized, as participants highlighted the emotional disconnection they felt despite frequent online communication. These findings suggest that, while digital platforms facilitate connectivity, they also introduce new complexities in relationship maintenance, particularly in terms of emotional fulfillment and intimacy. The study's contribution lies in its exploration of these nuanced experiences, which have often been overlooked in previous research focused primarily on the technical aspects of digital communication.

When comparing the findings with existing literature, this study aligns with earlier research that has highlighted the duality of digital communication. Previous studies (Prikkhidko dkk., 2020) also point to the paradoxical nature of social media, where increased connectivity often comes at the expense of deeper, more meaningful interactions. Similar to these studies, participants in this research expressed concerns about the superficiality of online relationships and the difficulty in establishing trust and intimacy through digital means. However, unlike some studies that focus solely on the negative aspects of digital communication, this study also acknowledges the positive role of digital platforms in maintaining connections over long distances and reconnecting individuals with friends and family. The findings contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of technology in shaping human relationships, reinforcing the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding the emotional and social impacts of digital communication.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have significant implications, both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of digital communication and relationship maintenance. The

insights into emotional intimacy, trust, and authenticity in online interactions offer a new lens through which the impact of technology on human relationships can be analyzed. Practically, these findings highlight the importance of recognizing the limitations of digital platforms in fostering meaningful relationships. Social media can be a valuable tool for staying connected, but it is not a substitute for face-to-face interactions when it comes to building emotional intimacy. For individuals and organizations promoting digital communication, the findings suggest the need for strategies that encourage more authentic and emotionally fulfilling exchanges. The study underscores the importance of balancing digital connectivity with the preservation of deeper, more meaningful interpersonal connections in both social and professional contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 15 participants involved in the study, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused primarily on individuals with active engagement in social media, which means that the experiences of individuals with less frequent use of digital platforms were not captured (Kodak, 2022). The data collection was also limited to self-reported experiences, which could be influenced by the participants' perceptions and biases. Moreover, the subjective nature of phenomenological research means that the interpretation of the data was inevitably influenced by both the participants' personal narratives and the researcher's own perspectives, potentially introducing bias in the analysis. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a specific cultural context, which may affect the applicability of the findings to other cultural settings. These limitations suggest that future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample, as well as explore the experiences of individuals from various cultural backgrounds and with varying levels of engagement with digital communication.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Building upon the findings of this study, future research could explore several avenues to expand our understanding of digital relationship maintenance. One potential direction is to investigate how different digital platforms (e.g., text-based communication vs. video calls) influence relationship dynamics, particularly in terms of emotional intimacy and trust. Additionally, research could examine how different demographic factors, such as age, gender, or cultural background, shape individuals' experiences and perceptions of online relationships. Longitudinal studies could also provide insight into how relationships evolve over time with sustained digital communication. Furthermore, future studies might explore the role of digital communication in specific populations, such as individuals in long-distance relationships or professionals in remote work environments. These avenues offer potential for deepening our understanding of the evolving dynamics of human relationships in the digital age, further contributing to the broader field of digital communication studies.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the experiences of individuals maintaining interpersonal relationships in the digital age, focusing on the challenges and opportunities presented by social media platforms. The findings revealed that while digital communication facilitates connection, it often lacks the emotional depth and intimacy of face-to-face interactions. Participants highlighted the difficulty of building trust and authenticity online, as well as the role of digital platforms in bridging geographical distances. Based on these findings, it is recommended that digital communication strategies prioritize fostering deeper emotional connections by encouraging more personalized, sincere, and meaningful interactions. For example, encouraging video calls rather than text-based communication could help replicate the emotional depth of face-to-face conversations. These insights contribute to the existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of maintaining relationships in digital spaces, addressing the limitations of previous research that focused on quantitative measures. Future research could further investigate the long-term impact of digital communication on relationship quality, exploring how different platforms and cultural contexts influence relational dynamics. Additionally, studies could examine ways to enhance the emotional

and social benefits of digital interactions, offering practical strategies for individuals and organizations to foster more meaningful connections in an increasingly digital world.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted with full academic integrity, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the results or conclusions presented in this study.

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