



Exploring Emotional Intimacy and Disconnection in Digital Social Relationships among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication has significantly transformed the landscape of interpersonal relationships, particularly in how emotional intimacy is experienced and expressed. Within this evolving context, limited attention has been given to the subjective experiences of individuals navigating emotional disconnection in digital environments. While previous studies have addressed behavioral patterns and psychological effects, little is known about how people interpret and assign meaning to emotional rupture and recovery in virtual spaces. This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how individuals reconstruct emotional intimacy following interpersonal disconnection through digital networks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants (6 women and 4 men) aged 20 to 35 years who had recently experienced relational loss while remaining active on social media platforms. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), revealing three key themes: (1) emotional fragmentation despite digital proximity (defined as the perceived dissonance between emotional need and online interaction), (2) selective engagement as a coping mechanism (intentional limitation of digital interaction to manage vulnerability), and (3) digital rituals as tools for healing (personalized online practices such as posting symbolic content or commemorative messages to process grief). These findings highlight how emotional intimacy in digital spaces is a dynamic, personalized process shaped by intentional practices and symbolic meaning. The study deepens our understanding of emotional resilience and identity reconstruction in virtual settings and suggests that future research should consider culturally diverse narratives and longitudinal perspectives on digital emotional coping.



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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly digitized world, the nature of interpersonal relationships has undergone a profound transformation. Digital platforms such as social media, messaging applications, and online communities have redefined how individuals connect, maintain, and dissolve emotional bonds. While these technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for communication and connectivity, they have also introduced new complexities into the emotional fabric of human interactions. The shift from face-to-face communication to virtual exchanges has altered the way emotional intimacy is initiated, nurtured, and experienced, particularly in times of relational disruption or loss.

This transformation holds significant relevance in contemporary society, where digital interactions often become the primary means through which people navigate personal relationships. Emotional experiences—such as attachment, trust, disconnection, and healing—are increasingly mediated through virtual channels. These experiences are not merely functional or behavioral; they are deeply embedded in personal meaning-making and shaped by the sociocultural context in which individuals live. In this regard, the digital realm becomes both a space for connection and a site of emotional negotiation, often blurring the boundaries between presence and absence, closeness and detachment.

Despite the ubiquity of digital communication, there remains a limited understanding of how individuals make sense of their emotional experiences within these virtual environments, especially following moments of interpersonal rupture. The subjective nature of such experiences calls for a methodological approach that prioritizes lived meaning and personal reflection. A phenomenological perspective is well-suited to this task, as it focuses on how people interpret and articulate their emotional realities.

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore the following research questions: (1) How do individuals perceive and reconstruct emotional intimacy after relational disruption in digital spaces? (2) What interpretive strategies do they use to navigate emotional disconnection and healing online? These questions guide the investigation toward a nuanced understanding of emotional experience in contemporary, digitally-mediated relationships.

The study of subjective emotional experiences within digital contexts has emerged as a vital area in the broader discourse on interpersonal relationships and mediated communication. Particularly, research has increasingly acknowledged the significance of exploring how individuals internally process and derive meaning from their interactions in virtual social spaces, especially during emotionally charged events such as relational dissolution or interpersonal disconnection. This focus on lived experience is essential for uncovering the nuanced emotional dimensions that often escape traditional relational theories grounded in observable behavior or structural dynamics.

However, methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and richness of such personal experiences. Much of the existing scholarship relies on quantitative methodologies, such as surveys and psychometric assessments, which tend to reduce complex emotional phenomena into measurable constructs. While valuable in certain respects, these approaches frequently overlook the interpretive and contextual layers that shape how emotional intimacy is experienced, particularly in environments where presence is mediated by technology. As a result, they often fall short in representing the emotional authenticity and inner conflicts reported by individuals navigating relational transitions in digital spaces.

These limitations have left a significant gap in understanding the essence of emotional experiences during interpersonal disconnection, especially as shaped by the affordances and constraints of digital platforms. Standard empirical approaches frequently neglect the lived, meaning-making processes that define emotional reality from the perspective of the person undergoing it. Consequently, there is a critical need for research methods that prioritize subjective insight and allow participants to articulate their emotional journeys in their own terms. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on first-person experience and contextual interpretation, offers a powerful framework for addressing this gap and uncovering the deeply personal meanings embedded in digitally mediated emotional intimacy.

Within the existing body of research on emotional intimacy in digital environments, prevailing solutions have predominantly emphasized practical interventions—such as communication training, digital literacy, or algorithm-based platform enhancements—to address the psychological impacts of relational disconnection. While such approaches offer valuable contributions in guiding behavior and informing digital design, they often rely on generalized frameworks that do not fully engage with the unique, personal experiences of those directly affected. These models tend to prioritize observable outcomes over internal processes, and thus frequently miss the emotional subtleties and interpretive meanings that emerge from the lived experience of emotional detachment in digital contexts.

Moreover, most empirical investigations to date have applied quantitative or behaviorist methodologies that, by design, limit their capacity to uncover deeper emotional narratives or existential reflections. As a result, they offer a fragmented understanding of the emotional reality that individuals experience during and after interpersonal disconnection. This lack of insight is particularly concerning in a social climate where digital interactions increasingly serve as substitutes for embodied, affective presence. The subjective complexities of navigating closeness, distance, vulnerability, and healing in these spaces remain insufficiently explored.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach offers a meaningful alternative by centering the study on individuals' own accounts of their emotional experiences. Rather than imposing predefined categories or measurements, phenomenology allows for the emergence of meaning through the participant's narrative, capturing the essence of how emotional intimacy is constructed, disrupted, and reconstructed within the lifeworld of digital communication. By focusing on first-person perspectives and the contextual interpretation of experience, this study seeks to enrich our understanding of digital emotional life in ways that existing methodologies have not adequately captured.

Prior studies have examined digital communication and emotional disconnection through the lenses of media psychology, behavioral analysis, and relationship dynamics. While these works provide useful insights into patterns of interaction, they often lack focus on the lived emotional experience of individuals. Some research has touched on user engagement and social support in digital contexts, but little attention has been paid to the subjective meaning-making that occurs during emotional rupture. Theoretical models, such as attachment theory or media richness theory, have informed our understanding of relational closeness, yet they remain limited in explaining personal interpretations of loss and healing. Therefore, a deeper exploration of the experiential dimensions of digital intimacy remains essential.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to address that need. The method allows individuals to express how they perceive and make sense of emotional closeness and disconnection in digital spaces. By emphasizing lived experience, this approach captures the nuanced meanings participants assign to moments of connection, silence, or separation. In doing so, the research offers a response to the knowledge gap by revealing how emotional intimacy is redefined and reconstructed through digital communication. This study highlights the richness and complexity of participants' internal narratives, moving beyond surface-level observations.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, the introduction outlines the social and theoretical context of emotional intimacy in digital relationships. Next, the methodology section details the phenomenological approach and explains the data collection and analysis procedures. The results section presents emergent themes supported by participants' quotes, offering insight into their lived experiences. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in light of existing literature and concludes with implications for future research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of individuals navigating emotional intimacy within digital social networks following interpersonal disconnection. The phenomenological framework was selected due to its capacity to capture rich, lived experiences and to reveal the meaning participants assign to complex emotional phenomena. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was utilized to emphasize how individuals make sense of their experiences within their social and relational contexts. This design allowed for a nuanced understanding of the emotional depth, relational tension, and coping mechanisms embedded in digital interactions during periods of emotional vulnerability.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals aged 20 to 35 who had recently experienced a significant interpersonal disconnection (such as a breakup or loss of a close relationship) and maintained active use of digital social platforms. Inclusion criteria included the ability to reflect deeply on their emotional experiences, fluency in the language of the interview, and willingness to share personal narratives. Individuals were excluded if they reported current psychiatric diagnoses requiring intensive clinical intervention. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. A total of 10 participants were included,

comprising 6 females and 4 males, with an average age of 27.6 years. All participants had experienced the interpersonal rupture within the last six months and actively engaged with platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, or Twitter during this period.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended protocol designed to elicit detailed personal narratives about emotional intimacy in digital settings. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private and quiet environment, or via secured video conferencing when in-person meetings were not feasible. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview environment was designed to foster comfort and psychological safety, encouraging participants to reflect openly. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guide was developed based on literature in relational psychology and digital communication studies and was refined through expert consultation to ensure contextual sensitivity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved multiple readings of each transcript to identify emergent meaning units. The analysis progressed through systematic stages: initial noting, development of emergent themes, clustering of themes across cases, and abstraction of higher-order conceptual categories. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing data and ensuring consistency in coding, though analytical insight remained grounded in the interpretive process. The analysis aimed to uncover essential structures of meaning and the contextual interpretation of emotional experiences in digitally mediated relationships. Themes were validated through cross-comparison and convergence across participant narratives, ensuring the integrity of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants received a detailed information sheet and provided written informed consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study by assigning pseudonyms and securing data in encrypted files. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for human subjects research, including respect for autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

RESULTS

Emotional Fragmentation Amid Digital Closeness

Participants frequently described a paradoxical experience of being digitally surrounded yet emotionally isolated. Despite having constant access to friends and online communities, they reported a sense of disconnection that intensified during moments of personal distress or interpersonal loss.

"I have hundreds of friends on Instagram, but when I cried alone after the breakup, none of them felt real. They were just... avatars. I felt utterly alone." (P4)

This theme captures the dissonance between perceived digital proximity and emotional reality. Digital platforms enabled continued interaction, but the lack of physical presence and authentic emotional engagement often led to feelings of emptiness.

"We were chatting daily, but it felt more like typing into a void. He was there, but not there for me." (P7)

The data reveals that the absence of tangible support during emotional upheaval exacerbated feelings of isolation, especially when participants expected emotional reciprocity through digital means.

Reconstructing Intimacy Through Selective Digital Presence

Several participants narrated their efforts to regain emotional closeness by curating their digital interactions. This selective presence involved muting, unfollowing, or reducing engagement with individuals who were sources of emotional pain, while deepening connections with trusted others.

"I stopped posting for a while. Then I created a private story where only five people could see what I was going through. I needed intimacy, not exposure." (P2)

This theme reflects the adaptive strategies employed by individuals in navigating vulnerability. The choice to limit one's digital visibility was not about withdrawal, but about reclaiming control over emotional narratives.

"There's too much noise online. I wanted to talk, but only to people who genuinely cared." (P6)

Participants highlighted how digital boundaries allowed them to engage in meaningful conversations, fostering micro-communities of trust even within broader, often superficial, networks.

Digital Rituals as Coping Mechanisms

In the aftermath of interpersonal disconnection, participants described the emergence of small digital routines that helped them process emotions—such as revisiting old chat logs, posting symbolic content, or listening to specific playlists tied to memories.

"I'd read our old messages at night. It hurt, but it was part of saying goodbye." (P9)

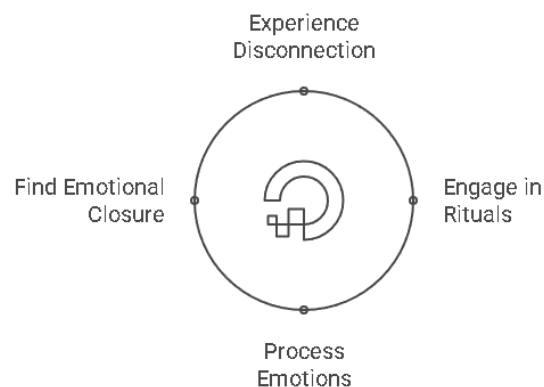
These rituals functioned as private acts of grief and healing. Even though not shared publicly, these behaviors provided participants with a structured space to navigate emotional closure.

"There's this one song—we used to play it together. Now I listen to it alone, but it helps. It brings back the pain and then slowly fades it." (P1)

The findings suggest that digital artifacts—texts, photos, music—serve as emotional anchors, enabling individuals to ritualize their experiences in ways that are deeply personal yet shaped by digital affordances.

Across all themes, the lived experience of participants demonstrates a nuanced interplay between emotional presence and digital connection. While online platforms offer channels for interaction, they do not inherently guarantee emotional intimacy. Participants navigated this complexity by reconstructing meaning, setting boundaries, and engaging in symbolic rituals, ultimately revealing that emotional closeness in digital spaces is an active, effortful, and highly personalized process.

Cycle of Digital Rituals for Emotional Healing



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the deeply personal and complex ways individuals experience emotional intimacy and disconnection within digital social networks. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, participants' narratives disclosed how digital proximity often conceals emotional fragmentation, how selective digital engagement becomes a tool for emotional survival, and how personal digital rituals aid in processing interpersonal loss—addressing the central research question on how emotional intimacy is subjectively navigated after relational rupture in virtual spaces.

These insights directly respond to the core research question by illuminating the internal, meaning-making processes that individuals undergo in the absence of physical relational support. The themes uncovered show that emotional intimacy in digital environments is not passively experienced but actively constructed and redefined through selective presence, memory, and digital interaction. Unlike traditional frameworks that treat digital communication as either enriching or diminishing social connection, the present study offers a more layered understanding—highlighting that emotional connection in digital spaces is fluid, situational, and deeply tied to the individual's psychological context. This contribution expands current discourse by validating personal digital practices as meaningful acts of emotional coping, thus bridging a critical gap in the literature on post-relational experiences in online environments.

In comparison with prior studies, these findings both affirm and extend existing theories. For instance, while research by Fox and Moreland (2015) has shown how digital networks provide continued contact after romantic breakups, the current study nuances this by demonstrating that such contact often results in emotional ambiguity rather than closure. Similarly, Litt and Hargittai (2016) identified the role of audience management in social media, but this research deepens that insight by showing how intentional digital silencing becomes a means of psychological preservation. Furthermore, these results support the phenomenological claim that experience is not merely about what happens but how it is lived through and given meaning by the subject (van Manen, 1990). Thus, this study provides a phenomenologically grounded expansion to theories of mediated intimacy, emphasizing the existential and interpretive dimensions of emotional life in digital settings).

The findings carry significant implications for understanding emotional resilience and digital relationality in contemporary social contexts. From a sociocultural perspective, the participants' use of selective digital engagement and symbolic rituals highlights how emotional boundaries and coping mechanisms are constructed in response to the psychological demands of persistent connectivity. These behaviors are not merely digital habits but reflect deeper efforts to restore personal agency and meaning after emotional disruption. For professionals in psychology, digital communication, or relational counseling, these insights may inform more culturally and emotionally attuned approaches to supporting individuals navigating loss in virtual environments. Furthermore, the nuanced strategies uncovered—such as curating emotional exposure and engaging in digital memory rituals—may offer a foundation for developing interventions that honor the emotional complexity of digital disconnection, especially among younger populations whose social identities are deeply embedded in digital life.

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. The use of purposive sampling and a relatively small participant group limits the transferability of findings beyond the specific demographic explored. Additionally, the subjective nature of phenomenological analysis relies heavily on participants' ability and willingness to articulate complex emotional experiences, which may not be uniform across different cultural or psychological profiles. The digital platforms discussed were primarily social media networks, which may not encompass other forms of digital intimacy such as gaming communities or professional networks. These contextual constraints should be considered when applying the findings to broader populations or designing related interventions.

Future research could extend this study by exploring similar emotional phenomena across different digital environments or cultural contexts. Longitudinal designs may reveal how digital intimacy evolves over time, especially in relation to significant life events such as migration, illness, or bereavement. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could illuminate how digital emotional expression and coping vary depending on cultural norms around grief, privacy, and

vulnerability. By continuing to explore how individuals give meaning to emotional connection and disconnection in virtual contexts, future research can contribute to a more holistic and person-centered understanding of mediated human relationships in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how individuals experience emotional intimacy and disconnection within digital social networks following relational rupture. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed that digital proximity does not guarantee emotional closeness, and participants actively reconstruct intimacy through selective engagement and personal rituals. These findings offer new insights into the emotional complexity of digital communication and address gaps in previous studies that overlooked the subjective meaning of post-relationship experiences. By centering the participants' lived experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how emotional coping unfolds in virtual spaces.

The results have implications for designing more empathetic digital platforms and developing support strategies for emotionally vulnerable users. Moreover, the findings speak to broader theoretical frameworks in digital sociology and psychosocial development, emphasizing how digital disconnection may shape long-term emotional resilience, identity formation, and relational expectations in an increasingly mediated society. As digital environments continue to evolve as primary spaces for emotional exchange, understanding these dynamics becomes crucial not only for communication studies but also for mental health, education, and public policy. Future research could build on these insights by exploring cross-cultural perspectives or longitudinal changes in digital emotional practices, particularly how individuals adapt and redefine intimacy and self-concept over time in response to persistent digital disconnection.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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