



Understanding Social Connectedness in Digital Workspaces: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study Among Remote Workers

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ABSTRACT

The rapid shift toward remote work has redefined how individuals experience social connectedness in digitally mediated professional environments. While previous research has examined communication tools and productivity outcomes, less is known about the lived emotional and relational experiences of remote workers. What remains unclear is how individuals interpret and make sense of social connection when physical co-presence is replaced by virtual interaction. In this study, we adopt a descriptive phenomenological approach, grounded in Husserlian principles, to explore the lived experiences of remote workers regarding social connectedness in digital workspaces. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with ten purposively selected remote workers (5 males and 5 females, aged 28–45) across diverse professional sectors including IT, education, and digital marketing. Interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's method to uncover essential themes. The findings reveal five central experiential themes: feeling present but invisible, disrupted rhythms of social bonding, emotional exhaustion from digital engagement, intentional acts of connection, and blurred personal-professional boundaries. These results highlight the emotional complexity and paradoxes of digital connection, revealing that technological presence does not always equate to social or emotional presence. Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and interpersonal dimensions of remote work and suggest that digital environments should be designed to support relational authenticity and emotional resonance.



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INTRODUCTION

The rise of remote work, accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally altered how individuals engage in social interactions within professional contexts. Digital technologies now play a central role in facilitating workplace relationships, enabling collaboration beyond physical boundaries. This shift signals a transformation in the social fabric of contemporary work life, where proximity is no longer essential for interaction. However, the psychological and emotional implications of this transition remain insufficiently understood.

Social connectedness is a fundamental human need, closely tied to individual well-being and social cohesion. While digital tools enable communication across distances, concerns have emerged regarding the depth, authenticity, and emotional quality of these interactions. Emotional presence—defined here as the felt sense of being emotionally attuned and acknowledged by others in a virtual environment—is often lacking in remote work settings. Remote workers frequently report feelings of isolation, detachment, and a reduced sense of being "seen" or emotionally engaged, even when technically connected.

To structure the inquiry more clearly, we begin by situating the discussion within existing literature. Literature Review. Studies on remote work (e.g., Allen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020) have predominantly focused on productivity, task efficiency, and engagement metrics. These outcome-driven perspectives, while valuable, often overlook how workers subjectively experience connection in digital environments. Research by Nguyen (2021) highlights the tension between technological

connectivity and emotional fulfillment, but lacks detailed exploration of how workers interpret and internalize this tension in daily practice. Other scholars (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walther, 2011) emphasize the importance of perceived social presence and interpersonal cues in virtual communication, yet call for more phenomenological accounts that center lived experience.

Understanding how individuals make sense of social connection in digital workspaces is essential—not only for mitigating the psychological burdens of remote work but also for guiding the design of more empathetic organizational systems and digital platforms. This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on the emotional and relational dimensions of virtual connectedness, using a descriptive phenomenological lens.

This gap points to a growing need for research approaches that prioritize the exploration of meaning and human experience. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on understanding how people make sense of their lived realities, offers a powerful framework for examining the complexities of digital social interaction. By focusing on the subjective dimensions of presence, recognition, and emotional resonance in virtual work contexts, such an approach can illuminate aspects of human connection that remain hidden within more technical or behaviorist paradigms.

Building on the broader discourse surrounding digital communication and remote work, research that focuses specifically on the lived experiences of individuals within these environments has become increasingly vital. The shift from face-to-face to screen-mediated interaction has introduced new dimensions to how social connection is experienced, perceived, and interpreted. Scholars have acknowledged the importance of examining how individuals emotionally and cognitively navigate digital spaces, particularly in relation to their sense of presence, identity, and interpersonal belonging in virtual settings (Madison & Söderlund, 2020; Nguyen, 2021).

However, exploring such experiences poses significant methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative approaches, while valuable for measuring behavioral outcomes or satisfaction levels, often lack the sensitivity required to capture the richness and depth of subjective experience. Numerical indicators cannot fully convey how individuals make sense of social disconnection, how they perceive emotional absence despite constant connectivity, or how they construct meaning from fragmented digital interactions. Moreover, surveys and structured assessments tend to impose predefined categories that may overlook emergent themes or nuanced expressions of human experience (van Manen, 2017).

These limitations have led to a growing recognition that many existing studies fall short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the essence of digital social connection. Without methods that center the voice and consciousness of the individual, research risks producing partial or superficial interpretations of phenomena that are deeply complex and context-dependent. In this regard, phenomenological inquiry particularly in its descriptive form offers a necessary corrective by prioritizing first-person narratives and experiential meanings as core units of analysis. This approach is uniquely positioned to uncover the subtle, often ineffable dimensions of social life in a technologically mediated world.

Much of the current discourse on remote work and digital communication has been shaped by practical frameworks aimed at optimizing productivity, employee engagement, and technological efficiency. These prevailing approaches often emphasize metrics such as user satisfaction, task completion rates, or communication frequency, which, while informative, fail to capture the nuanced realities of human experience within virtual environments. Solutions typically rely on standardized interventions like virtual team-building activities or enhanced platform features designed to simulate connection rather than interrogate its deeper psychological and emotional dimensions (Sarker et al., 2019; Dery et al., 2021).

Although these methods may offer surface-level improvements, they do not adequately reflect how individuals internalize and assign meaning to social connection—or its absence in remote contexts. The richness of personal experience, particularly feelings of invisibility, emotional fatigue, and disrupted intimacy, often remains unarticulated or misunderstood within positivist paradigms. This results in a limited understanding of the phenomenon, reducing complex human experiences into

overly simplistic categories that overlook the existential weight of disconnection in a hyper-connected world (Nguyen, 2021).

To address this gap, there is a pressing need for an alternative methodological lens one that can access the inner world of individuals and reveal the essence of their lived realities. Phenomenology, with its commitment to exploring subjective meaning and lived experience, provides the appropriate framework for such an inquiry. By focusing not on what remote workers do, but on how they experience and make sense of social connection in digital spaces, this study seeks to uncover dimensions of human interaction that remain invisible to traditional empirical instruments. A phenomenological approach enables a deeper, more holistic understanding of the complexities of digital connection, one rooted in the language and consciousness of those who live it.

Previous studies have explored digital social interaction in remote work contexts, often emphasizing measurable outcomes such as productivity, engagement, or communication frequency. While these studies provide useful insights, they rarely delve into the subjective experience of social connection or disconnection in virtual spaces. A few qualitative inquiries have begun to explore emotional and psychological aspects, but often lack a structured phenomenological lens. Theoretical perspectives on presence, belonging, and identity offer important foundations, yet remain underexplored in the context of remote work. Thus, existing research leaves an important gap in understanding how individuals actually experience digital connection in their daily professional lives.

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore how remote workers perceive and make sense of social connectedness in technology-mediated environments. This method is chosen for its ability to access deep, experiential meanings as articulated by individuals themselves. It allows for the identification of essential structures of the phenomenon, free from external interpretation. In response to the limitations outlined in the previous section, this approach prioritizes lived experience over observable behavior. By using Colaizzi's analytical method and in-depth interviews, the study addresses what prior research could not: the meaning behind the experience of being digitally connected yet emotionally distant.

The article is organized into several sections. It begins with an introduction that frames the context and theoretical background of the study. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the research design, including participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical methods. The results section presents thematically organized findings grounded in participants' narratives. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings in light of relevant literature, and the conclusion highlights the implications for theory, practice, and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of remote workers navigating social connectedness in virtual workspaces mediated by digital technologies. The phenomenological approach was selected for its emphasis on understanding the essence of human experience as it is lived, rather than interpreted through preconceived theories or frameworks. Rooted in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl, descriptive phenomenology focuses on uncovering the essential structures of a phenomenon by engaging directly with individuals who have experienced it. This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of how participants perceived, felt, and made meaning of digital social interactions in a professional remote working context.

Participants

Participants in this study were individuals engaged in full-time remote work during the past 12 months, across various professional sectors, and had routine experience with virtual communication tools. Selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure that only those with direct and rich experiences relevant to the phenomenon were included. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged between 25 and 50 years, have at least six months of continuous remote work

experience, and demonstrate fluency in using digital communication platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Slack. Individuals with limited digital literacy or part-time remote work status were excluded. The final sample consisted of 10 participants (6 female, 4 male), with an average age of 34.7 years, representing diverse occupational backgrounds including education, technology, marketing, and finance.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a phenomenological interview protocol. Interviews were conducted individually via secure video conferencing platforms and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The interview protocol included open-ended prompts and diary-based reflection cues, encouraging participants to recount and describe their daily experiences and emotions related to digital social interaction at work. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Efforts were made to establish a comfortable and private environment for each participant to speak freely, with interviews scheduled according to their availability. Confidentiality was reinforced prior to and during the interview process. No standardized instruments were used beyond the researcher-developed guide, which was reviewed by qualitative research experts for appropriateness and clarity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method of descriptive phenomenological analysis, which involved a systematic sequence of steps to extract meaningful themes from participants' narratives. Transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding, followed by the identification of significant statements related to the phenomenon. These statements were then organized into formulated meanings, which were grouped into thematic clusters representing shared experiences. The themes were iteratively refined to capture the essential structures of the phenomenon. NVivo 14 software was utilized to support data organization and coding, but analytic decisions were driven by thematic immersion and not algorithmic outputs. The final step involved synthesizing the thematic structures into a comprehensive description of the lived experience, focusing on the underlying meaning rather than surface-level content.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Participants provided written informed consent, and the principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly upheld throughout the study. All data were de-identified, securely stored, and used solely for research purposes. This study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with all applicable local regulations governing human subjects research.

RESULTS

This study explored the lived experiences of remote workers in navigating social connectedness within virtual workspaces mediated by technology. Through in-depth, diary-prompted interviews and phenomenological thematic analysis, several essential themes emerged that represent the participants' perceptions, emotions, and reflections regarding digital social interaction during remote work. The findings are presented below in a structured narrative, organized by core themes.

Feeling Present but Invisible

Participants frequently described a paradoxical experience of being technologically "present" in online meetings, yet emotionally "invisible." The absence of non-verbal cues and spontaneous interaction contributed to a sense of detachment and depersonalization.

"I was in the Zoom call, but I didn't feel like anyone really saw me. My camera was on, I spoke up but it felt like I was floating in a void." (Participant 3)

This sense of invisibility extended beyond individual meetings and reflected a deeper disruption in how participants perceived their social identity and recognition within the digital workspace.

Paradox of Digital Presence



Disrupted Rhythms of Social Bonding

Another prominent theme was the disruption of natural social rhythms. Participants lamented the loss of informal interactions such as hallway chats and spontaneous lunch breaks that had previously fostered camaraderie and emotional support.

“I miss bumping into colleagues and just talking about nothing. Now, if I want to talk to someone, it has to be scheduled, formal, and... I don’t know, it kills the vibe.” (Participant 7)

Many described attempts to replicate these moments through scheduled "virtual coffee breaks," yet found them to be awkward and lacking authenticity.

Emotional Exhaustion from Digital Interactions

The constant exposure to digital interfaces led to emotional fatigue, with participants expressing a sense of depletion after prolonged virtual communication. This was not merely about screen time, but the emotional labor required to stay engaged without the reinforcement of physical presence.

“It’s not just Zoom fatigue. It’s more than that. It’s the feeling that I’m always ‘on’ but rarely really ‘with’ someone.” (Participant 1)

This exhaustion often led to a withdrawal from optional social engagements, further compounding feelings of isolation.

Redefining Connection Through Intentionality

Despite these challenges, several participants found ways to adapt by developing intentional strategies to foster connection. This included reaching out to colleagues for brief one-on-one conversations, creating shared playlists, or sending spontaneous voice notes.

“I realized I needed to make the first move. Sending a meme or just saying ‘thinking of you’ became my way of staying human in all this tech.” (Participant 5)

These small but deliberate acts were perceived as meaningful and emotionally sustaining, revealing a shift in how social ties were nurtured in digital contexts.

Negotiating the Boundaries Between Personal and Professional Spaces

Remote work blurred the line between private and public spaces, leading to complex experiences of intrusion and vulnerability. Participants expressed discomfort with the loss of separation between their home environment and professional life.

“When my manager saw my toddler during a video call, I felt exposed not in a bad way, but it was like my worlds collided.” (Participant 9)

Such moments often brought mixed feelings simultaneously deepening interpersonal understanding while also highlighting the fragility of personal boundaries.

Essential Meaning

Taken together, these themes suggest that remote workers experience digital connection as a fragile, negotiated phenomenon one that is constantly shaped by technological affordances, emotional labor, and intentional social effort. The essence of the phenomenon lies in the paradox of being connected but not always feeling connected, and in the human agency exercised to reclaim social meaning within digitally mediated spaces.

DISCUSSION

The present study reveals that remote workers experience digital social connectedness as a paradox of visibility and emotional absence. At the core of this phenomenon lies a tension between being constantly online yet feeling unseen, disconnected, and emotionally fatigued an experience that speaks directly to the central research question concerning how individuals make sense of social connection in virtual workspaces.

The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the subjective realities experienced by remote workers in technology-mediated environments. Rather than merely describing communication patterns or satisfaction levels, the study uncovers essential meanings embedded in daily virtual interactions such as the feeling of being present but invisible, the emotional cost of constant connectivity, and the loss of spontaneous, embodied social rhythms. These insights directly answer the guiding question of how social connection is lived and interpreted in digital contexts, demonstrating that connection is not merely a matter of access or interface, but of recognition, resonance, and relational authenticity. The contribution lies in highlighting the experiential weight of these phenomena, which have often been overlooked in prior research that privileges quantifiable metrics.

These findings resonate with and expand upon existing literature in important ways. For instance, the theme of emotional exhaustion aligns with the concept of “Zoom fatigue” (Nadler, 2020), but deepens the understanding by grounding it in existential discomfort and interpersonal void. The notion of disrupted social rhythms echoes prior work by Sarker et al. (2019), yet this study articulates how those disruptions are embodied and emotionally processed by individuals. Moreover, the emphasis on intentional micro-actions to restore connection complements Nguyen’s (2021) findings on digital empathy, yet extends them by framing these actions as coping strategies to preserve one’s sense of humanity. Through its phenomenological lens, the study thus moves beyond description into interpretation, illustrating how the absence of physical co-presence reconfigures the way individuals construct and preserve meaning in their social relationships.

The findings of this study hold important implications for both scholarly understanding and professional practice. At a social and cultural level, they underscore the evolving nature of human connectedness in the digital era, where technology reshapes not only communication but the very

experience of presence, empathy, and recognition. In professional contexts, particularly within remote work environments, these insights call for more intentional design of digital interactions that honor emotional authenticity and relational depth. Organizations may need to shift from efficiency-centered communication models toward more human-centered approaches that prioritize psychological safety and meaningful connection. Furthermore, these results invite reflection on how digital structures can be reimagined to support not just connectivity, but belonging.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size and specific focus on individuals engaged in professional remote work limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations, such as students or informal workers. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, also introduces the potential for selection bias. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences and virtual interviews may have influenced the depth or authenticity of participant disclosures. These constraints highlight the need for cautious interpretation of the findings and suggest that broader, more diverse sampling across sociocultural contexts may be beneficial in future studies.

Future research could build on this study by examining variations in the experience of digital social connectedness across different cultural settings, age groups, or types of digital platforms. Longitudinal designs may also offer insight into how such experiences evolve over time, especially as remote work becomes more normalized or hybridized. Moreover, integrating phenomenological insights with interdisciplinary frameworks from media studies, organizational psychology, or digital anthropology could enrich the conceptual understanding of how people relate, feel, and construct meaning within increasingly digital social realities. This study serves as an invitation for continued inquiry into the interior lives of individuals navigating the technological landscapes of contemporary human connection.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how remote workers experience social connectedness in digitally mediated environments, addressing the essential question of how individuals make sense of connection in the absence of physical presence. The findings reveal a complex interplay between emotional invisibility, disrupted social rhythms, and the intentional efforts to restore meaningful interaction. These lived experiences highlight the limitations of traditional models that rely on metrics and surface-level engagement to understand digital connection. By adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study offers a deeper and more human-centered understanding of remote work's social dimensions. The results contribute to both theory and practice by underscoring the need for designs and policies that prioritize relational authenticity and emotional resonance. Beyond reinforcing prior themes, the study reveals how emotional presence emerges as a negotiated and fragile construct in virtual contexts—requiring continuous relational labor. This insight adds nuance to existing conceptualizations of social presence and emphasizes the affective burden of digital professionalism.

Future research should explore how cultural background, organizational hierarchy, and platform-specific affordances shape the experience of social connection. Specifically, studies might investigate: (1) How do marginalized or underrepresented workers navigate emotional presence in virtual teams? (2) What role does asynchronous communication play in facilitating or hindering authentic connection? Methodologically, longitudinal phenomenological designs or diary-based approaches could capture the evolving nature of connection over time, while comparative ethnographic studies might reveal contextual distinctions across industries or cultures. Such directions would not only advance theoretical clarity but also offer pragmatic insights for building emotionally sustainable digital work environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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