



Exploring Existential Loneliness in the Digital Era among Philosophy Students

Mukhlis Lubis ^{1*}, Syamsiah Depalina Siregar ²

^{1,2}Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia

¹mukhliz@gmail.com, ²syamsiahdepalina@stain-madina.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness in the digital age has become a pressing concern across psychology, sociology, and philosophy. This study focuses on the existential aspects of loneliness among philosophy students, a group deeply engaged with questions of meaning and identity. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, it explores how students experience and interpret existential loneliness in a hyper-connected environment. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries with twelve participants and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four central themes emerged: the void in digital interactions, the paradox of hyper-connectivity, the pursuit of authenticity in digital identity, and loneliness as a source of reflection. Findings indicate that digital connections can intensify isolation while also fostering philosophical self-awareness. This study contributes to understanding loneliness as an existential experience and highlights phenomenology's value in examining subjective life in digital contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Loneliness has emerged as one of the defining experiences of the digital era, transcending cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Although digital technologies were initially expected to foster greater connectivity, they have paradoxically been associated with heightened feelings of isolation and disconnection (Andersson, 2025). Within academic and social contexts, the rapid expansion of online platforms has reshaped the ways individuals interact, communicate, and construct their sense of self (Saroja et al., 2025). For university students, whose lives are closely interwoven with digital networks, loneliness has become both a personal and generational concern.

The significance of loneliness extends beyond its psychological implications; it encompasses social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly highlighted loneliness not merely as an emotional deficit, but as an existential condition that touches upon human identity, meaning, and authenticity (Deng & Legge, 2025). In particular, students of philosophy engaged in questioning existence and meaning experience loneliness in ways that resonate deeply with the traditions of existential thought (Yang, 2025). Their narratives illustrate how digital hyper-connectivity can fail to address, and sometimes even intensify, the longing for genuine presence and recognition.

Exploring the lived meaning of loneliness among philosophy students thus responds to a pressing need for deeper understanding (Hohl, 2025). Rather than reducing the phenomenon to clinical or social explanations, a phenomenological approach allows attention to be given to the subjective textures of experience the felt sense of absence, estrangement, and reflection (Poje et al., 2025). Such exploration is essential for uncovering how loneliness shapes existential awareness in the digital context, and why it remains a critical issue for both personal and academic life. By foregrounding participants' voices, this study contributes to the broader discourse on how human beings experience and interpret the paradoxes of connection and solitude in the contemporary world.

Research on the lived experience of loneliness has become an increasingly significant field within phenomenology, as it seeks to uncover the subjective dimensions of human existence that are often overlooked in broader psychological or sociological accounts (Harris et al., 2025). Scholars have recognized that loneliness is not merely a transient emotional state but a complex, existential phenomenon that requires an approach attentive to meaning, presence, and the self in relation to others. Within this framework, phenomenology offers a unique pathway for exploring how individuals not only experience but also interpret and assign significance to their sense of being alone.

Despite the growing recognition of its importance, methodological challenges persist in investigating existential loneliness (Timsina, 2025). Many existing studies have employed predominantly quantitative designs, such as surveys or standardized scales, which can capture frequency or intensity but fail to illuminate the nuanced, subjective qualities of loneliness (Joshi, 2025). Such approaches risk reducing a deeply lived phenomenon into measurable categories, thereby overlooking the existential textures that are central to understanding how loneliness is actually lived and experienced. Even qualitative studies have often focused primarily on psychosocial aspects, paying insufficient attention to the existential and philosophical layers that shape the experience of loneliness in specific cultural or educational contexts, such as among philosophy students.

These limitations highlight the need for research methods capable of capturing the essence of loneliness as it is lived and reflected upon by individuals (Wolbers et al., 2025). Traditional approaches, while valuable in mapping general patterns, are less effective in revealing the inner dynamics of meaning-making and the existential depth of the phenomenon (Abramenka-Lachheb et al., 2025). A phenomenological approach, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis, is thus crucial for addressing these gaps by giving voice to participants' reflections and uncovering the existential structures underlying their experiences.

Current approaches to understanding loneliness in the digital era have often relied on practical solutions such as psychological counseling, social interventions, or the use of quantitative surveys to measure levels of isolation and their correlation with digital usage patterns (Boulahnane et al., 2025). While these strategies provide useful insights into behavioral and psychosocial dimensions, they remain limited in their ability to capture the existential depth of loneliness as it is subjectively lived and reflected upon by individuals. As a result, much of the existing knowledge presents only a surface-level understanding of the phenomenon, without addressing its underlying existential structures.

The central limitation of these approaches lies in their inability to access the lived meanings and interpretive processes that characterize existential loneliness (Agostinelli & Albert, 2025). Quantitative frameworks, by reducing complex experiences to measurable variables, fail to reveal how individuals understand the paradox of being hyper-connected yet profoundly alone (Alcock, 2025). Even qualitative studies that explore psychosocial aspects frequently overlook the unique existential and philosophical perspectives that shape the experiences of philosophy students, for whom questions of being, meaning, and authenticity are central to their intellectual and personal lives.

This gap underscores the need for an alternative approach one that is able to engage deeply with the subjective realities of participants and uncover the essential meanings of their experiences (Udah et al., 2025). Phenomenology, and specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis, provides such a pathway by allowing a systematic exploration of existential loneliness through the voices of those who live it. By adopting this method, the present study seeks to move beyond surface-level accounts and contribute a more holistic and profound understanding of how existential loneliness is experienced in the context of the digital era.

Previous studies have examined loneliness through psychological and social perspectives, often focusing on the effects of digital communication on human interaction. For example, (Murire & Gavaza, 2025) emphasized how technology fosters isolation despite increased connectivity, while (Koirala, 2025) explored loneliness as an existential condition grounded in philosophy. These works highlight the paradox of connection and separation, but they rarely address how philosophy students themselves articulate such experiences (Gabi & Chikwa, 2025). Existing methods have tended to emphasize patterns and outcomes rather than lived meaning, leaving a gap in understanding the

subjective voice of those immersed in existential inquiry. This context creates the foundation for a phenomenological investigation into the lived meaning of existential loneliness.

To address this gap, the study applies interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to capture how philosophy students experience and reflect on existential loneliness in the digital era. IPA is particularly relevant because it focuses on individual meaning-making and the interpretation of lived experience (Bygraves et al., 2025). This method moves beyond measurement and description, aiming instead to uncover the essential qualities of being alone in a hyper-connected environment. By grounding the study in phenomenology, the research seeks to reveal dimensions of meaning that previous approaches could not fully capture. In doing so, it responds directly to the limitations identified in earlier literature.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction provides a contextual overview of loneliness in the digital age and explains the relevance of phenomenology for exploring subjective experience. The methodology section describes the phenomenological design, participant selection, and procedures for data collection and analysis (Harb, 2025). The results present themes that emerged from interviews and reflective texts, illustrating how participants experience existential loneliness. The discussion situates these findings within broader philosophical and cultural frameworks, while the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and implications. This structure ensures a logical flow from background to meaning, from analysis to interpretation.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of philosophy students regarding existential loneliness in the digital era. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows for a rigorous exploration of subjective experiences, capturing the essence of how individuals perceive and interpret their world. This approach emphasizes the depth of meaning rather than quantifiable variables, making it particularly relevant for investigating existential conditions. Specifically, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was applied, as it facilitates the examination of participants' reflections on their experiences while acknowledging the interpretative dimension of meaning-making inherent in existential inquiry.

Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students of philosophy who had substantial engagement with digital platforms as part of their academic and social lives. Inclusion criteria required that participants were actively enrolled in philosophy programs, aged between 19 and 28 years, and had reported personal reflections related to loneliness in digital contexts. Exclusion criteria included students who were not engaged with digital media or who declined to provide informed reflections on their experiences. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon. A total of twelve participants (seven male and five female) were included, with an average age of 23.4 years. Their backgrounds varied across cultural and socioeconomic contexts, contributing to the diversity of perspectives on existential loneliness.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in a private and comfortable setting, either face-to-face or through secure online platforms when in-person meetings were not feasible. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency, yet flexibility was maintained to allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Participants were encouraged to share personal reflections, metaphors, or examples that illustrated their encounters with loneliness in digital life. In addition to interviews, participants were invited to provide short reflective diaries, which served to enrich the contextual understanding of their narratives. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The analytic process began with repeated readings of transcripts to gain immersion in the data. Significant statements and meaning units were identified and coded, followed by the clustering of codes into emerging themes. The process involved iterative comparisons across cases to identify patterns while remaining attentive to individual differences. NVivo software supported the organization of data, but the analytic focus remained on the interpretative engagement with participants’ narratives. Through these steps, essential themes capturing the lived meaning of existential loneliness in the digital era were developed.

RESULTS

Loneliness as an Existential Void in Digital Interactions

Participants frequently described their sense of being surrounded by digital connections yet profoundly isolated in their inner life. Loneliness was not merely perceived as the absence of social contact but as an existential void that persisted despite the abundance of online interactions. One student shared:

“Even though I am constantly chatting or scrolling through social media, I feel as if I am speaking into a void. No one really listens, and I end up feeling more alone.” (P4)

This experience suggests that digital engagement, while providing superficial connectivity, fails to fulfill the deeper ontological need for genuine presence and recognition. The participants’ narratives point to a dissonance between digital communication and existential communion — the former enabling interaction, the latter requiring authentic encounter.

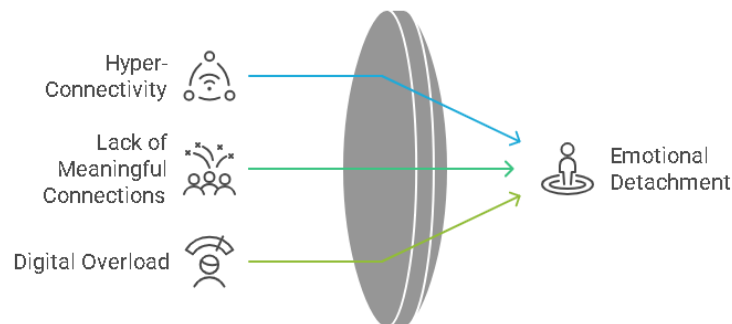
This theme reveals the inadequacy of digital communication to address the deeper existential need for presence, intimacy, and recognition.

The Paradox of Hyper-Connectivity and Inner Detachment

A recurring paradox identified by participants was the simultaneous experience of being hyper-connected and emotionally detached. Students articulated how the overwhelming flow of digital engagement often intensified rather than alleviated feelings of loneliness.

“I have hundreds of friends online, yet when I face difficulties, I realize I cannot reach out to anyone. It’s like drowning in a sea of voices without a single lifeline.” (P7)

The Digital Paradox



This paradox underscores the illusion of community in digital spaces, where connection is abundant but emotional depth is scarce. The findings indicate that digital hyper-connectivity amplifies performative interaction while eroding relational authenticity, reinforcing Heidegger’s notion of “idle talk” (Gerede) — communication devoid of genuine understanding.

This paradox highlights how digital hyper-connectivity may create an illusion of togetherness while reinforcing a deeper separation from one’s authentic self and others.

The Search for Meaning and Authenticity in the Digital Self

Students reflected on how existential loneliness compelled them to question the authenticity of their digital identities. They perceived a tension between their curated online persona and their lived, subjective self.

“Sometimes I wonder if the person I portray online is truly me. The gap between my digital self and my real self makes me feel estranged from myself.” (P2)

This reflection reveals an existential split between the ‘performed self’ and the ‘authentic self.’ Participants’ struggles to reconcile these selves reflect Sartrean themes of bad faith — the tendency to present an idealized version of the self while suppressing authentic emotions. Thus, existential loneliness becomes not only a psychological state but a philosophical confrontation with self-deception and meaning-making in digital existence.

This theme emphasizes how loneliness in the digital era is intertwined with identity crises, pushing students to navigate between authenticity and the performativity of digital existence.

Loneliness as a Catalyst for Philosophical Reflection

Interestingly, participants acknowledged that existential loneliness, though painful, often became a source of philosophical inquiry and self-reflection. Rather than viewing loneliness only as a deficit, they recognized its potential for deep existential awareness.

“Loneliness makes me reflect on life itself. It’s not just sadness; it’s a confrontation with the meaning of being.” (P9)

This interpretive insight highlights loneliness as a transformative condition — an opening toward philosophical self-examination. Participants’ reflections demonstrate that solitude fosters a deeper awareness of existence and finitude, aligning with Kierkegaard’s idea that despair can serve as a path toward self-realization.

This theme demonstrates that loneliness was not only a negative experience but also a generative space for questioning existence, morality, and authenticity core concerns within the philosophical frameworks shaping participants’ intellectual formation.

DISCUSSION

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The results directly respond to the research question by showing that students interpret loneliness in ways that transcend conventional psychological or social explanations. Loneliness was experienced as an existential void, a paradox of connection and separation, and as a catalyst for philosophical reflection (Fraver, 2025). These findings contribute uniquely to the literature by demonstrating how philosophy students, given their intellectual engagement with existential thought, construct meaning from loneliness in a way that highlights its dual role as both isolating and generative (Baharuddin, 2025). This interpretation advances understanding of loneliness as more than an individual deficit, positioning it as a condition that shapes identity and reflective practice within the digital context.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The study’s findings resonate with and extend existing theories. The notion of loneliness as an existential void echoes (Qiu & Phokha, 2025) argument that loneliness is a universal structure of human existence, yet this study shows how such structures are refracted through the digital environment. The paradox of hyper-connectivity supports (Morgan et al., 2025) claim that technology fosters illusions of intimacy while deepening isolation, but the present research adds nuance by showing how philosophy students interpret this paradox in explicitly existential terms. Furthermore, the recognition of loneliness as a stimulus for reflection aligns with (Williams, 2025) philosophical framing of loneliness as ethically and ontologically significant. At the same time, the findings challenge the limits of psychosocial studies such as those by (Chang et al., 2025), which emphasize

behavioral correlates but underplay the lived experience of meaning-making. By situating loneliness within the existential awareness of philosophy students, this study contributes to a richer and more holistic account of the phenomenon.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry both scholarly and practical implications. By demonstrating that existential loneliness among philosophy students is not merely a psychological issue but a profound existential experience, the research highlights the need for academic institutions to consider the deeper meaning-making processes of students in digital contexts (García-Álvarez et al., 2025). On a cultural level, the study suggests that digital hyper-connectivity does not necessarily mitigate loneliness but can amplify it by creating an environment where authenticity and presence are difficult to sustain. These insights encourage educators and mental health practitioners to recognize the dual nature of loneliness as both a challenge and an opportunity for philosophical reflection and personal growth. In a broader sense, the findings underline the importance of developing educational and social spaces that honor reflective engagement rather than superficial connection.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused on a small group of philosophy students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to wider population (Sarifin & Zin, 2025)s. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, while powerful for capturing lived experiences, is inherently context-specific and shaped by interpretative processes that may vary across researchers (Jones et al., 2025). Additionally, the participants' backgrounds, largely rooted in academic philosophy, may not fully represent the experiences of students in other disciplines or cultural settings. These limitations highlight the need for caution in extending conclusions beyond the study sample, while also suggesting directions for further inquiry.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand the scope by including students from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds to examine whether existential loneliness is experienced similarly across contexts (Nilsson, 2025). Comparative studies might also explore differences between disciplines, particularly between fields with strong reflective traditions, such as philosophy, and those more practice-oriented. Moreover, integrating phenomenology with other qualitative approaches could provide richer insights into how loneliness intersects with identity, technology, and cultural narratives. By building on the existential dimensions revealed in this study, future work can contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of loneliness in the digital age, informing both theoretical debates and practical interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of philosophy students regarding existential loneliness in the digital era, addressing the problem of how loneliness is understood beyond psychological or social frameworks. The findings revealed that loneliness is experienced as an existential void, a paradox of hyper-connectivity and inner detachment, and as a catalyst for philosophical reflection. These insights extend prior research by highlighting the existential and philosophical dimensions of loneliness that remain underexplored in quantitative or psychosocial studies. The study contributes a richer understanding of how digital environments intersect with questions of authenticity, meaning, and identity. By situating loneliness within the reflective practices of philosophy students, the research demonstrates the value of phenomenology in uncovering nuanced meanings of lived experience.

Beyond these insights, the study advances theoretical understanding by framing digital loneliness as an ontological condition rather than merely a psychosocial symptom. This conceptual shift invites interdisciplinary dialogue between phenomenology, digital sociology, and philosophy of mind, emphasizing the importance of presence and authenticity in technologically mediated existence. Practically, the findings suggest that educational institutions and digital learning platforms could

integrate reflective practices—such as dialogical spaces, mindfulness programs, or phenomenological workshops—to help students confront and reinterpret experiences of isolation. Future research should further investigate how cultural, disciplinary, and generational differences shape existential loneliness in digital contexts, expanding both the theoretical framework and its real-world applications for well-being, pedagogy, and ethical technology design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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