



## Lived Experiences of Loneliness in Digital Connectivity among Young Adults

Atjih Sukaesih <sup>1\*</sup>, Nurul Zuriah <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UIN Suska Riau, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

[1asyahra1@gmail.com](mailto:1asyahra1@gmail.com)\*, [2zuriahmurul1@gmail.com](mailto:2zuriahmurul1@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Loneliness in the digital age has emerged as a critical area of study within the social sciences, particularly as online platforms increasingly shape patterns of interpersonal communication. Within this context, the paradox of being “connected but lonely” has drawn attention to the subjective meanings individuals attach to their digital interactions. What remains unclear is how individuals experience and interpret emotional isolation despite frequent online engagement, raising the central question of how loneliness is constructed in digitally mediated relationships. This study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of young adults and to reveal the essential meanings underlying their sense of connection and disconnection. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with purposively selected participants aged 18 to 30 who self-reported feelings of loneliness alongside active social media use. Transcripts were analyzed through iterative coding and thematic clustering, resulting in four central themes: the paradox of connectivity and isolation, performative interaction, silent comparisons, and the search for authentic spaces. These findings indicate that loneliness arises not from limited contact but from a lack of meaningful intimacy, as participants struggle to reconcile digital presence with emotional fulfillment. The study contributes a richer understanding of digital loneliness by emphasizing its experiential and interpretative dimensions, thereby addressing limitations in prior quantitative research. However, this study is limited by its small, purposively selected sample and its focus on self-reported experiences, which may not fully capture the diversity of digital loneliness across broader populations. Future research should therefore incorporate cross-cultural or longitudinal approaches to deepen generalizability. Practically, the findings suggest that digital well-being initiatives and social media design should prioritize fostering authentic interaction and emotional resonance rather than mere connectivity, offering guidance for educators, policymakers, and technology developers in promoting healthier online social environments.



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## INTRODUCTION

Loneliness in the context of social interaction has long been recognized as a fundamental human experience that carries significant psychological and social implications (Doménech-Abella et al., 2025). With the expansion of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, interpersonal connections are increasingly mediated through online spaces (Lamba, 2025). While these technologies are designed to enhance communication and create a sense of connectedness, emerging evidence suggests a paradoxical trend: individuals often report feelings of social isolation despite being highly connected in virtual networks.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond technological usage and into the lived realities of individuals navigating their social worlds (de Raeymaecker et al., 2025). Social media platforms, while facilitating access to broader networks, also introduce new forms of social comparison, performative interaction, and perceived superficiality in relationships (Mukhlis, 2025a). These experiences are not merely structural or behavioral but are deeply embedded in how individuals

interpret and make sense of their emotional lives (Hu et al., 2025). In this respect, the phenomenon of being “connected but lonely” underscores a tension between visibility and intimacy, presence and absence, as well as digital interaction and emotional fulfilment.

Given the increasing reliance on digital platforms for social interaction, the need to explore the subjective meanings attached to these experiences becomes particularly urgent (Joshnloo, 2025). A phenomenological perspective offers a pathway to understand not only the occurrence of loneliness but also its nuanced emotional dimensions as lived by individuals. Rather than reducing the phenomenon to usage patterns or demographic variables, phenomenology focuses on uncovering the essence of participants’ experiences their feelings, perceptions, and interpretations (Mukhlis, 2025b). This emphasis on lived experience is critical for illuminating how individuals negotiate the paradox of social connection in the digital age, where the boundaries between intimacy and isolation are often blurred.

Research on individuals’ experiences of loneliness within the digital age has become an increasingly important field of inquiry (Akhtar et al., 2025). Scholars have acknowledged that while social media platforms enable unprecedented levels of connectivity, they also create conditions where personal experiences of isolation and disconnection are intensified (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This paradox draws attention to the subjective dimensions of loneliness, which are not fully explained by behavioral patterns or frequency of online engagement. Instead, what matters most is how individuals make sense of their emotional worlds in relation to digital interactions.

A key challenge in advancing this field lies in the methodological limitations of previous studies (Friehe & Pfeifer, 2025). Much of the existing scholarship has relied on quantitative measures, such as frequency of social media use or survey-based assessments of loneliness, which tend to capture correlations without addressing the richness of lived experiences (Ojembe, 2025). While such approaches provide valuable general insights, they are less capable of uncovering the nuanced meanings, emotions, and interpretations through which loneliness is experienced (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Consequently, the deep and often contradictory emotional realities of being “connected but lonely” remain underexplored.

These limitations highlight the insufficiency of traditional methods for comprehensively understanding the essence of the phenomenon (Hazan-Liran & Levkovich, 2025). Phenomenological inquiry, by contrast, provides a means of addressing this gap through its focus on lived experience and subjective interpretation (Potocar et al., 2025). By engaging directly with participants’ narratives, phenomenology captures the complexities of emotional isolation in digital contexts that are otherwise overlooked by conventional approaches (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Such an orientation positions phenomenological research as essential for generating a holistic understanding of how loneliness is constructed, experienced, and navigated in the contemporary digital landscape.

Most existing studies on loneliness in digital contexts have relied on practical approaches that measure social media use through surveys, frequency counts, or psychological scales (Byra & Ćwirynkało, 2025). These methods have provided useful statistical associations between online activity and reported loneliness, offering insights into patterns and general trends (Floyd et al., 2025). However, they remain limited in their capacity to capture the deeper emotional and interpretative dimensions of human experience (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). By focusing predominantly on observable behavior, such approaches often overlook how individuals construct personal meaning in navigating the paradox of being both connected and lonely.

The reliance on quantitative assessments produces a relatively narrow understanding of the phenomenon, one that fails to account for the richness, complexity, and contradictions embedded in lived experiences (Keleş et al., 2025). For instance, while a survey can indicate that higher social media use correlates with higher loneliness, it cannot reveal how individuals experience this loneliness in relation to digital interactions, or why certain forms of online engagement intensify rather than alleviate feelings of isolation.

This gap underscores the necessity of adopting an alternative approach phenomenology which emphasizes the exploration of subjective experiences and the meanings that participants assign to their

social realities (Winsky & Onusseit, 2025). Through in-depth engagement with narratives, phenomenology provides a holistic and contextually grounded account of the phenomenon, illuminating the essential structures of loneliness as lived by individuals in the digital age (Mukhlis et al., 2024). By addressing what remains underexplored, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced emotional and interpretative processes that conventional methods have not been able to adequately capture.

Previous research has highlighted the paradox of loneliness in the digital age, where individuals remain active on social media yet continue to experience emotional isolation. Studies have examined how online platforms shape perceptions of well-being, interpersonal trust, and social comparison (D'Anna-Hernandez et al., 2025). These works underscore the complexity of digital interaction, but they often fall short in explaining the deeper meanings individuals attach to such experiences. While existing scholarship provides valuable frameworks, the emotional and interpretative essence of loneliness remains insufficiently explored (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). This gap necessitates a methodological shift toward phenomenological inquiry.

In this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is employed to uncover the lived meanings of loneliness within digital contexts (Scheper et al., 2025). This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret their paradoxical experiences of being connected yet emotionally isolated. Unlike quantitative surveys, IPA captures subjective voices and highlights how participants construct meaning in their own terms (Parlikar et al., 2025). By addressing the limitations outlined in the knowledge gap, this method offers a richer understanding of the phenomenon (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). The study therefore seeks to provide nuanced insights into how loneliness is felt, described, and negotiated by young adults in their everyday digital lives.

The article is structured to guide readers through the phenomenon in a clear and systematic manner. It begins with the introduction, situating loneliness in the context of social networks and digital interactions (Tavares et al., 2025). The methodological framework is then presented, followed by an explanation of participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures (Florez-Jimenez et al., 2025). The results are organized thematically, presenting the essence of participants' lived experiences (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Finally, the discussion connects findings to existing literature and concludes with implications for both theory and practice.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the subjective experiences of individuals who reported feelings of loneliness despite being actively engaged on social media platforms. Phenomenology was selected as the guiding design because of its emphasis on lived experiences and its capacity to illuminate the meanings participants assign to particular phenomena. The interpretative orientation of IPA enabled the study to move beyond mere description, facilitating an in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret and make sense of their emotional realities in the context of digital connectivity. This design was particularly relevant for capturing the paradoxical experiences of being “connected but lonely,” where the focus lies not only on what participants experienced but also on how they constructed meaning from those experiences.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. Eligibility criteria included individuals aged 18 to 30 years, active users of social media platforms (daily use exceeding two hours), and self-reported experiences of social loneliness despite frequent online interaction. Exclusion criteria involved individuals with clinically diagnosed psychiatric disorders that could confound the interpretation of loneliness specifically associated with digital interactions. A total of 15 participants were included, comprising both male and female individuals, with an average age of 23 years. All participants were university students or young

professionals, representing a demographic in which social media engagement is both frequent and socially significant.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich narratives about participants' lived experiences. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a quiet, private setting or via secure online platforms when physical meetings were not feasible. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was guided by an interview protocol that covered topics such as perceptions of social connectedness, experiences of emotional isolation, and strategies for coping with loneliness. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to pursue emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Anonymity was preserved by assigning pseudonyms to each participant.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a systematic and iterative process. Initially, transcripts were read multiple times to achieve immersion in the data. Meaning units were identified and coded, capturing significant statements and expressions of lived experience. These units were clustered into emergent themes, which were subsequently examined across cases to identify convergences and divergences. Themes were then organized into higher-order categories that reflected the essential structures of the phenomenon. Throughout the process, reflective notes were maintained to preserve transparency and rigor. Data management was supported with qualitative analysis software, which facilitated systematic coding and retrieval without substituting the interpretative depth of manual engagement with the data.

## **RESULTS**

### **The Paradox of Digital Connectivity and Emotional Isolation**

Participants consistently described a paradoxical experience of being digitally surrounded yet emotionally isolated. Despite constant notifications, messages, and online interactions, the sense of meaningful connection was often absent. One participant expressed:

“I scroll through my feed and see hundreds of updates, yet when the night comes, I feel as though no one is really there for me.” (P3)

This paradox illustrates that digital presence does not necessarily translate into emotional intimacy. Rather than a lack of contact, participants highlighted the absence of reciprocal emotional engagement, revealing that availability online is not equivalent to accessibility on a deeper, affective level. Social media provided a sense of availability but not the depth of connection participants were seeking.

### **Performative Interaction and the Burden of Superficiality**

To distinguish it from emotional isolation, this theme emphasizes how online behaviors create an illusion of connectedness through performance. Several participants emphasized the performative nature of online interactions, where likes, comments, and status updates became measures of presence rather than authentic communication. The pressure to maintain a socially desirable persona added to their sense of disconnection. One participant noted:

“I post happy photos and people react positively, but it doesn't mean they know what I am going through. It feels like I am acting in a play, not living my real life.” (P5)

Such performativity reinforced a superficial sense of being seen, creating a façade of belonging that concealed inner disconnection. This theme differs from emotional isolation by centering on self-presentation and social validation as mechanisms that sustain loneliness.

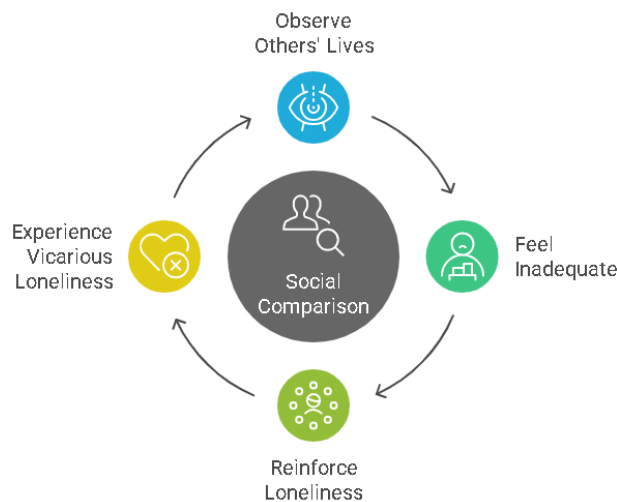
### **The Emotional Weight of Silent Comparisons**

Unlike performative engagement, which focuses on self-presentation, this theme captures how observing others' curated lives deepens self-perceived inadequacy and loneliness. The narratives also revealed the hidden impact of social comparison. Observing others' seemingly perfect lives online intensified feelings of inadequacy and reinforced loneliness. As one participant shared:

“Everyone seems to have someone, traveling together, celebrating together. I watch silently, and it makes me feel left out, even though I know some of them are probably lonely too.” (P2)

This process of comparison reinforced a vicarious loneliness—feeling disconnected not only from others but also from one's own authentic emotions when measured against idealized online portrayals.

### **The Cycle of Social Comparison and Loneliness**



### **Seeking Authentic Spaces Beyond Digital Boundaries**

Amid the paradoxes, participants also expressed a yearning for genuine connections and moments of authentic communication beyond digital boundaries. Some deliberately sought smaller, private interactions where they felt more validated. One participant explained:

“I feel closest to my friend when we have late-night voice calls. Not the messages, not the posts, but when we actually hear each other's voices.” (P7)

This theme represents an active coping and reconstructive phase—where participants consciously navigate beyond digital norms to reestablish intimacy. Unlike the previous themes, which highlight disconnection, this one foregrounds agency and resilience in seeking authentic communication.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study revealed the paradoxical experience of being digitally connected while simultaneously feeling emotionally isolated. The findings highlight how young adults construct meaning around loneliness in social media contexts, addressing the central research question posed in the Introduction.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The study provides a nuanced response to the guiding question: How do individuals experience social loneliness despite active engagement on social media? The themes identified digital connectivity coupled with emotional isolation, performative interaction, silent comparisons, and the search for authenticity demonstrate that loneliness is not a mere absence of contact but rather a profound sense of disconnection within the presence of superficial or performativities (Van Tilburg et al., 2025). This contribution expands existing knowledge by showing that loneliness emerges not from the lack of interaction but from the lack of meaningful interaction, where participants struggle to find

intimacy and authenticity in online spaces (Beuoy et al., 2025). By foregrounding participants' lived narratives, the study offers an interpretative account that enriches the theoretical understanding of loneliness as a socially constructed and emotionally layered phenomenon in the digital era.

### **Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives**

The findings resonate with earlier work suggesting that social media can intensify rather than alleviate loneliness (Jeong & Bae, 2025). The theme of performative interaction supports Berryman's (2018) observation that online presence often encourages impression management rather than genuine self-disclosure. Similarly, the participants' experiences of silent comparisons align with (Wang et al., 2025), who emphasized the detrimental impact of curated digital images on well-being. At the same time, the emphasis on seeking authentic spaces beyond digital interactions extends prior research by revealing how individuals actively negotiate strategies for reclaiming intimacy, echoing (Avetisyan et al., 2025) findings on the search for subjective authenticity in online contexts. Taken together, these interpretations highlight both continuity and extension of existing theories, demonstrating that loneliness in digital culture cannot be understood solely through behavioral metrics but must be situated in the meanings individuals assign to their experiences.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings carry significant implications for both scholarly and practical domains. From a social and cultural perspective, the paradox of being "connected but lonely" highlights the need to reconsider how digital environments shape interpersonal relationships. The narratives illustrate that the presence of numerous online interactions does not necessarily equate to meaningful connections, which calls for a more critical reflection on the design and use of social platforms (Torres et al., 2025). Practically, these insights are relevant for educators, counselors, and mental health professionals working with young adults, as they underscore the importance of fostering authentic, supportive spaces where individuals can engage beyond performative or superficial exchanges (Yu et al., 2025). The study also contributes to a broader cultural understanding of loneliness by demonstrating that it is not merely an individual deficit but a socially embedded experience shaped by digital practices.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the study provides rich interpretative insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size, though adequate for phenomenological inquiry, limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the studied population of young adults. The focus on individuals within a specific age group and sociocultural context also restricts the applicability of the results to other demographics, such as older adults or individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce subjectivity that cannot be independently verified (Shim & Go, 2025). These limitations, however, are inherent in phenomenological research and serve to emphasize depth of understanding rather than breadth. They also point to the necessity of further studies that can expand and diversify the contexts in which digital loneliness is explored.

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

The findings open pathways for future research that can extend the exploration of digital loneliness into new contexts and populations (Aslan & Kocak, 2025). Comparative studies across cultural settings may reveal how different social norms influence the experience of being simultaneously connected and isolated (Ventouris et al., 2025). Longitudinal designs could also provide deeper insights into how these experiences evolve over time, particularly as digital platforms continue to change. Moreover, integrating phenomenological inquiry with complementary approaches, such as ethnography or mixed methods, may enrich understanding of the social dynamics underlying digital interaction (Safaria et al., 2025). Future studies could also investigate intervention strategies that promote authenticity and reduce the performative pressures of online spaces, offering valuable contributions to both theoretical development and applied practice.

**CONCLUSION**

This study examined the paradoxical experience of loneliness among young adults who remain socially active on digital platforms. The findings revealed that despite constant online engagement, participants experienced emotional isolation, performative interactions, and silent comparisons, while simultaneously seeking authentic spaces of connection. These insights demonstrate that loneliness in the digital age is not simply a result of limited interaction but emerges from the lack of meaningful intimacy within online relationships. By applying an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study addressed limitations of prior quantitative research and offered a richer, more nuanced account of how individuals interpret their digital lives. The results provide both theoretical contributions to the understanding of digital loneliness and practical implications for promoting healthier online and offline interactions.

To enhance its applied value, the study suggests several recommendations. First, digital well-being programs—particularly in educational and workplace settings—should incorporate emotional literacy training that helps individuals recognize and articulate their experiences of online disconnection. Second, social media platforms could integrate design features that encourage deeper, dialogic exchanges rather than superficial metrics of validation, such as ‘likes’ or ‘views’. Third, mental health practitioners and counselors should consider addressing digital loneliness explicitly in therapy, helping clients differentiate between online presence and authentic emotional support. Furthermore, community-based initiatives that promote small-group interactions, hybrid social events, and digital detox practices can serve as preventive strategies against emotional isolation. Future research may expand this work across different cultural and generational groups, or integrate complementary approaches to deepen exploration of digital social experiences.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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

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