DIGITAL LONELINESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract

The social life of university students is usually based on digital connectivity; nevertheless, additional online interaction does not often safeguard against loneliness. This study examines the experiences of active students in higher learning institutions on digital loneliness using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Semi-structured interviews of in-depth nature were deployed and a purposive sample consisting of fifteen undergraduate and graduate students who indicated high levels of social and digital engagement and continued experiencing loneliness was taken to interview. To answer the purpose of establishing how the participants made meaning to their emotional experiences in digitally mediated relationships, the data were analyzed by IPA guidelines.

The analysis showed that there were four superordinate themes, which include Paradox of digital connection, Emotional impact of digital loneliness, Social comparison and pressure and Coping and meaning- making. The participants reported a high level of social and online activity, but at the same time, the participants reported that they felt emotionally disconnected, socially isolated and disinterested in their relationships. Results emphasize the uniqueness of loneliness in the digital era and dispute the beliefs that social activity is equivalent to emotional bondage. The work is a positive addition to the qualitative knowledge on digital loneliness and emphasizes the importance of university-based interventions that will continue to foster meaningful interpersonal interaction and digital well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional definitions of loneliness have always been subjective in nature, i.e., an experience of social or emotional isolation, and not the objective lack of social relationships. Weiss (1975) has differentiated social and emotional types of loneliness by stating that social loneliness is due to a lack of a wider social network and emotional loneliness due to a lack of close and intimate relationships. These differences have become so complicated in the digital age, where people might seem socially connected using online communication and at the same time, they feel disconnected emotionally (Weiss, 1975). This paradox is especially relevant to socially active and university students who are subjected to the pressure of being viewed, being perceived, and being in constant contact, rather than being emotionally deep and authentic.

University students are a particularly vulnerable group of people who may suffer due to their experiences of digital loneliness. Emerging adulthood developmentally is typified by identity experimentation, increased sensitivity to peer appraisal and compelling belongingness. These developmental challenges may be enhanced in social media settings that are constructed on the basis of comparison, self-presentation and validation-seeking. Although the current qualitative studies on loneliness have focused on loneliness in the general population of students or even socially isolated students,

little has been done on the student population that is socially active but emotionally displaced. Furthermore, a significant portion of the available literature is based on descriptive or thematic qualitative approaches that might not be sufficient to embrace the subjective sense-making processes, where digital loneliness is experienced. The gap can be filled with an especially appropriate approach of the methodological framework, namely, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. IPA is concerned with the lived experiences of people and the sense-making they assign to them and both the sense-making of the participants and the sense-making of the researcher. The current research, by taking an IPA method, goes past describing loneliness in a superficial manner and delves deeper into the psychological and emotional mechanisms of how socially active students feel disconnected due to digital loneliness.

The proposed study explored the lived experiences of digital loneliness as experienced by socially active university students, how they perceive, interpret and emotionally manage online and offline social interactions. The focus of this study is to deepen the understanding of the loneliness paradox in light of the ubiquitous connection and influence of interventions that can promote meaningful connection and digital well-being in institutions of higher education through the connection to the subjective voices of students.

Literature Review

Loneliness is usually understood as a troubling and subjective phenomenon that comes as a result of a mismatch between the sought and available social affiliations (Kross et al., 2013). Weiss (1975) also further classified loneliness as social loneliness, the result of inadequate social networks, and emotional loneliness, which is the result of a lack of close, intimate relationships. These distinctions have been blurred in online communication. People can have vast Internet networks and feel distant and dissatisfied in their relationships at the same time (Weiss, 1975).

In this context, researchers have started to imagine digital loneliness as experiences of isolation, emptiness, or the lack of meaningful relationships despite an act of interacting with each other online. In contrast to the offline concept of loneliness, digital loneliness is not necessarily due to the lack of social interaction, but to the perceived emotional and relational lack of availability, lack of depth, and violation of relationship needs in digitally mediated relationships. This does not conform to the hypothesis that greater connectivity is actually associated with a positive social well-being.

University students belong to the most active group of digital technologies, social media users and they are at the center of academic cooperation, interactions with peers, and the construction of identity. Emerging adulthood is a period in which the developmental stage is characterized by increased sensitivity to peer acceptance, self-presentation and belongingness needs (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, online spaces can have an exceptionally high impact on the emotional and social experiences of students.

Studies show that excessive social media use in university students is linked with loneliness, anxiety and symptoms of depression especially when it includes passive usage and social comparison (Hunt et al., 2018, Kross et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the evidence is still inconclusive, with certain research stating that online communication can also give rise to social support and connectedness. Such discrepancies can indicate that the subjective interpretation of digital interactions by students can have a stronger role than the frequency of use itself.

A growing literature presents the conflictual experience of loneliness in socially active individuals. The socially active students of the university, who keep their social schedule busy, who are engaged with the groups, and who are very visible on the Internet are thought to be safe against loneliness. Nevertheless, as discoveries show, this assumption is not always true, meaning that social activity does not always mean a fulfillment of emotions or psychological well-being.

The media social networks provoke the audience to create and project idealized self-images. Although this can be helpful in terms of interaction and visibility, it can also cause emotional distance and relational insecurity. It has been revealed that constant interaction with the curated lives of other people increases social comparison, the decline of self-esteem, and

creates a sense of inadequacy and loneliness. In the case of socially active students, the execution of activities in the online environment can blur actual emotional demands. Monitoring likes, views and responses are some validation-seeking behaviors that can form a weak sense of belonging that is contingent on external approval. Inconsistent or no validation can also increase the loneliness of students who seem socially successful, which supports the paradox of digital loneliness.

Methodology
Research Design

The qualitative research design was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which was used in this study to examine the lived experience of digital loneliness in socially active university students. The reason why IPA was chosen is that it is a paradigm that is concerned with how people form a sense of their subjective experiences, focusing on the personal meaning-making of the participants, as well as the interpretative position of the researcher (Smith et al., 2021). The method is especially appropriate in the case of understanding the complex emotional phenomenon, including digital loneliness that is impossible to be completely quantified.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling served to select the members who fit the following criteria: University students who are currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs. Socially active online (e.g., use social media frequently) and offline (e.g., participates in academic or extra-curricular activities). Self-reported cases of feeling lonely or emotionally disconnected even following some social activity. The number of students involved in the study was 15, which gave enough detail to the idiographic emphasis of IPA. They included 10 females and 5 males between the ages of 21 and 27.The vast majority of the research participants were single (n = 13), and there were two married students.

Most of them lived in cities and all participants mentioned that they used social media actively and on a regular basis with between 2 and 7 hours a day. The popular platforms were WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. The sample population was all self-identified as socially active online and therefore, it was appropriate to explore the phenomenon of digital loneliness in a population that is academically.

Ethical Considerations

The participants will be informed to give informed consent and anonymity will be ensured by anonymizing the consent. Since loneliness is an emotionally charged issue, the participants will be informed of their withdrawal right and given support resources in case they become upset.

Table .1
Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age (Years)	Program	Semester	Marital Status	Residence	Average Daily Social Media Use
P1	Female	22	MS(Counseling Pychology)	2nd	Single	Urban	4–5 hours
P2	Male	24	MPhil Psychology	1st	Single	Urban	3–4 hours
P3	Female	21	BS(Computer Science)	1st	Single	Urban	5–6 hours
P4	Female	23	MBA (Marketing)	3rd	Single	Urban	4–5 hours
P5	Male	25	MPhil Psychology	2nd	Single	Semi-urban	3–4 hours
P6	Female	24	MS(Clinicle Psychology)	4th	Single	Urban	5–6 hours
P7	Male	26	Master(Mass Media)	3rd	Married	Urban	2–3 hours
P8	Female	22	BS (Agriculture)	2nd	Single	Urban	4–5 hours
P9	Male	23	BS(Computer Science)	1st	Single	Semi-urban	5–6 hours
P10	Female	25	MPhil Psychology	2nd	Single	Urban	3–4 hours
P11	Female	24	BS Psychology	3rd	Single	Urban	4–5 hours
P12	Male	27	MPhil Education	4th	Married	Urban	2–3 hours
P13	Female	22	MS(Islamiat)	1st	Single	Urban	5–6 hours
P14	Female	23	B.Com	2nd	Single	Semi-urban	6–7 hours
P15	Female	26	MPhil Psychology	3rd	Single	Urban	3–4 hours

Data Collection
Interview data were collected, audio-taped and transcribed verbatim to analyze. In-depth semi-structured, in-depth interviews that did not require a specific format, where participants had the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words and probing could also be used to explore certain important themes. The interview was 20-30 minutes long and held in a face-to-face or a secure online platform (e.g., Zoom), at the personal discretion of the respondents. The interview questions were to investigate the nature of the experience of digital loneliness, the emotional reaction to online communication, self-presentation, social comparison, and coping mechanisms.

Interview questions
● Describe your social life or activity online?
● What is one situation that you experienced when you were lonely even though you were online?
● What do you understand by the term digital loneliness?
● Do you think there is a discrepancy between your perceived level of connection online and your actual level of connection?
● What is the impact of digital loneliness on your day to day life, mood or relationships?

Thematic analysis

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Emergent Codes
Paradox of Digital Connection	Visible but Emotionally Isolated	Paradox of presence, emotional emptiness
	Compulsive Connectivity vs Unfulfillment	Habitual scrolling, compulsive checking
Emotional Impact of Digital Loneliness	Emotional Emptiness and Anxiety	Emotional distress, frustration
	Mood and Daily Life Disruption	Sleep disruption, distraction
Social Comparison and Pressure	Comparison Between Online and Offline Relationships	Authenticity gap, relational evaluation
	Cultural and Social Expectations	Peer pressure, constant online presence expectation
Coping and Meaning-Making	Selective Interaction and Offline Connection	Meaningful one-on-one interaction
	Reflection and Self-Awareness	Awareness of limitations, reflective thought
	Strategies for Reducing Loneliness	Limiting online activity, journaling, balancing life

Results

This section will introduce the primary experiences of digital loneliness among students who are socially active in universities (P1-P15). Four superordinate themes, including Paradox of Digital Connection, Emotional Impact of Digital Loneliness, Social Comparison and Pressure and Coping and Meaning-Making, were identified using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The superordinate themes have subordinate themes and each captures common experiences retaining the idiographic information.

Theme 1: Parados of Digital connection

The theme Paradox of Digital Connection indicates the paradoxical elements that participants reported and the various cases where they spent most of their time online and at the same time felt disconnected and lonely.

The participants mentioned that they are always busy on social media, responding to messages, sharing stories, and participating in groups online, but still feel a deep sense of not seen or heard.

For example, one participant noted:

"*Uhm... I can hardly go without the internet, practically all the time, responding to texts, reading news, people believe I am very outgoing, and the truth is I am not that at all, in fact... I feel disconnected. It is as though I am not noticed at all even when I am chatting. I feel... invisible.*" (P1)

This passage is an example of the fundamental conflict of the Paradox of Digital Connection. Despite the regular online presence of the participant in terms of messaging, perusing stories, and seeming socially active they will also feel disconnected and invisible. The hesitation in words (Uhm..." yeah...", honestly... etc.) shows the difficulty of the participant to describe their internal experience which depicts the uncertainty and ambiguous nature of their emotional state. The quote shows social activity is not equal to emotional recognition, and thus, the quality of connection, and not the amount of interaction, determines the lived experience of digital loneliness.

Another participant shared:

"*I chat with so many people... every day... but still I feel lonely sometimes. Last night... I posted stories, replied to messages... but no one really talked properly. I... I felt empty.*" (P3)

This passage shows the feeling of being lonely in a world of social life, which is one of the major themes of the Paradox of Digital Connection. In spite of the frequent messaging and posting activities online, the respondent is experiencing

emotional emptiness, indicating that communication with others is perceived as being low or depthless. The hesitations and pauses ("...every day...", I... The challenge of describing this inner emptiness (I was empty) is the expression of the fact that the participant is aware of the distance between his or her outer activity and the inner world of emotional satisfaction. It is a pointer of how the digital activity can give an illusion of connectedness but the subject will remain emotionally isolated subjectively.

Theme 2: Emotional Impact of Digital Loneliness

Superordinate theme Emotional Impact of Digital Loneliness indicates the extent of the psychological and emotional effects that the participants experience despite their active engagements with the virtual space of social relations. In the fifteenth interviews, the respondents all defined the phenomenon of digital loneliness as a highly emotional experience, which was defined by sadness, emptiness, frustration, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Although the participants turned out to be social online, the accounts revealed that the emotion deprivation and absence of unmet relational needs are felt in general.

Majority of the participants explained that they still felt sad and empty, particularly following a long time on the social media. Such sentiments would occur when online communication was not able to offer any significant positive feedback or emotional support. One participant explained:

"I laugh at reels and respond to messages and then I just feel empty..., as though something is missing." (P8)

This feeling of emptiness shows that digital interaction as stimulating as it was doing not meet the larger emotional needs of the respondents. The other common characteristic of this theme was the emotional invisibility and disregard which resulted in deprivation of self-worth and inner unease. The subjects cited occasions of having to wait to give an answer, checking to determine whether they had given an answer and feeling that there was no reply to indicate that they were being personally rejected. For example:

"Even when I'm chatting, I feel like I'm not really important to anyone." (P1)

This exacerbated the loneliness further and enhanced the sense of being an emotionally worthless person, despite the presence on the internet. The impact of digital loneliness on the mood and the everyday functioning of the study participants was also rather clear. A few of the respondents indicated that they felt lonely even when they were not on the Internet and that it affected their concentration, inspiration, and real-life communication. One participant shared:

"When I feel ignored online, it affects my mood the whole day." (P9)

This shows that the emotional impacts of digital loneliness are not limited to the digital space but spread to the psychological welfare of participants in general.

Theme 3: Social comparison and Social Pressure

The superordinate theme Social Comparison and Social Pressure indicates the experiences of the participants in terms of rating themselves against others on the Internet and the emotional stress linked to the necessity to maintain a socially acceptable digital presence. The interviewees in the fifteen interviews indicated that seeing what peers displayed, impressing others, and their presence in digital platforms could frequently cause feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and self-doubt, which demonstrated the psychological price of being perpetually compared in online environments.

Participants also often explained how they compared their social activity, appearance, and style of living with those of other people, which increased a sense of perceived shortcomings and accentuated the feeling of digital loneliness. Indicatively, one participant has mentioned:

"I see everyone posting about trips, parties and hanging out... I start thinking, why am I not doing as much?... I feel left out even though I'm online too." (P6)

This quote demonstrates the way in which digital spaces encourage ongoing social benchmarking, in which individuals compare their own social worth to the visible lives of others, negatively most of the time. Besides peer comparison participants also reported that they felt pressure to maintain a particular image

online, which also added to stress and anxiety. People were under pressure to always be on track, be fast responders and display sociability even when they were not emotionally attached. One participant explained:

"I feel like I have to reply to everyone, post regularly and stay active... if I don't, people might think I'm not social enough. It's exhausting." (P11)

This responsibility is a socialization of society regarding its expectations and expectations of online conduct that may lead to the development of loneliness in a condition where the party participants feel that they are failing to live up to their expectations. In addition to that, the participants of the study stated that the social comparison and the pressures online were likely to interact with their emotional conditions and sustain negative moods and self-concepts. For instance:

"I can see everybody happy and online and feel small like I do not belong. I am not seen, despite all my online activity." (P3)

These reflections demonstrate the ironic effect of social media: on one hand, it assists in forming relationships and presence, on the other hand, puts its users under complete observation and assessment, which adds to the sense of isolation.

Overall, the theme of Social Comparison and Social Pressure proves that digital loneliness is not a personal emotional phenomenon but a social and cultural need that exists in cyberspace. The narratives of the participants provide a slight sense of compulsion to act socially that is added with self-judging and comparison to enhance their sense of loneliness and emotional vulnerability.

Theme 4: Coping and Meaning- Making

The theme of high-level Coping and Meaning-Making is an expression of the thought processes of the participants in coping with digital loneliness and attempting to get an explanation, meaning, or emotional support online and offline. Over the course of the fifteen interviews in which the participants demonstrated that despite digital loneliness leading to high levels of emotional response, they nevertheless engaged in the process of instrumentalizing the responses to manage mood, enable connection, and redefine experience, which indicated that

emotional distress and adaptive reflexivity are mutually dependent.

The respondents identified various coping strategies, which included seeking the assistance of close friends and family members, staying off social media, or engaging in offline activities to get over the sense of isolation. One participant shared:

"When I get lonely on the internet, I tend to drop my phone and see a friend... face-to-face conversations tend to lighten the load, and the feeling of loneliness also seems to lighten somehow." (P12)

The other participant perceived digital moderation as a coping mechanism:

"Sometimes, I unplug from social media for a few hours at a time, scrolling less makes me not feel like I compare to all other people." (P7)

The stories suggest that the participants were self-regulating, which was a deliberate process and it was carried out to seek a way of reducing the negative emotional effect of digital interaction. In addition to behavioural coping, the participants engaged in meaning-making, trying to make sense of their experience of being lonely on-line to comprehend their needs and realities in social world. For example:

"I now realize that just because one is online does not mean he/she is connected... I need a real talk to be truly close to individuals." (P10)

"Digital loneliness made me see that being digitally popular does not imply that people are personally connected with me... it made me realize that people who actually are there in my life." (P2)

These reflections demonstrate that the participants are capable of critically interpreting their experiences in order to make a narrative out of this loneliness as a simple negative state of being into a form of self-understanding, placing relationships on a priority and evolving emotionally. Another theme that is related to the Coping and Meaning-Making theme is the tension of the limitation of online communication and the demand to face a real-life communication. The participants realized that online communication would never be as rewarding as the offline one, and they needed to work on ensuring that the offline relationships were nurtured consciously, the limitations placed on the application of social media type, and meaningful communication taken place.

This observation implies an active and considerate response to digital loneliness, the

centrality of personal agency and meaning-making, which is adaptive.

Overall, this high-level theme underlines that, regardless of the emotional load of digital loneliness, the participants actively cope, process, and synthesize their experiences. Their stories show that coping is behavioral as well as cognitive as it involves definite actions to reduce distress and reflexive as it comes up with comprehension, insight, and personal development.

Trustworthiness

To guarantee the reliability of this qualitative research, the requirements set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1988) were adhered to, such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1988). These measures increased the strength of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and supported the trust in the results.

Credibility:

It has been developed by means of a long-term interaction with data, reading and re-reading interview transcripts in order to become immersed in the lives of people. The researcher was mindful of language, emotions, and the meaning of digital loneliness by the participants. The findings were presented in verbatim quotes in order to make the interpretations based on the accounts of the participants. Reflexive notes have also been used in the course of the analysis in order to recognize and bracket the preconceptions of the researcher.

Transferability

The level of transferability was evident in the process of presenting rich and thick descriptions of the experiences of the participants, social, and cultural contexts of online behavior. The descriptions of the research setting, the characteristics of the participants, and the process of analyzing those characteristics enable the reader to conclude about the possibility of applying the results in other settings or populations, especially the socially active students of the university who face the challenge of digital loneliness.

Dependability

The reliability was achieved by a systematic and clear analytic procedure in line with IPA guidelines. A case-to-case analysis was also conducted by analyzing each transcript separately and then identifying patterns. Audit trail was kept and recorded the choices made in the process of data collection, coding, theme development and interpretation. In this way, it is possible to review the study and interpret it concerning the way conclusions were made.

Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved through ensuring that the results were not affected by the bias of the researcher, but rather by the narratives of the participants. The interpretations and assumptions in the course of the research were critically analyzed and reflexively journaled. The research involved direct quotes, stepwise coding, and explicit theme development and this also contributed to the objectivity and impartiality of the results.

Discussion

In the present study, the authors talked of lived experiences of digital loneliness in socially active university students through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. There is a major paradox in the results as the participants were highly engaged and present in an online space, yet experienced the feeling of emotional alienation and isolation. This is supported by the fact that growing body of empirical data is indicating that the quantity of socializing is not causing loneliness but it is rather the quality and emotional significance of the process (Perlman and Peplau, 1981, Weiss, 1975).

The reactions of the participants showed that frequent online activities such as sending messages, sharing stories, and appearing to be not protective of loneliness. Instead, the students said that they did not feel connected and their feelings were not recognized even in the process of active communication. This observation is consistent with empirical research that high social media use levels may be accompanied by a high level of loneliness, especially when interpersonal communication is shallow or the other party is not emotionally responsive (Kross et al., 2013, Hunt et al., 2018). In line with the idea of emotional loneliness as

postulated by Weiss (1973), the respondents do not have a deficit of social contacts but significant emotional attachment.

The indicated feeling of emptiness and invisibility is connected to the studies according to which digital communication tends to focus more on speed and presentation rather than the nuances. (Verduyn et al., 2017) discovered that passive and superficial online communication is linked to a decrease in well-being and an increase in loneliness, which is, in fact, the experience of participants who chat a lot but do not feel emotionally satisfied.

Another salient observation was that the participants felt that they were emotionally invisible because they would get likes, replies, or views even though they were not actually seen or heard. This coincides with the studies that show that engagement measures are not congruent with perceived social support (Burke and Kraut, 2016). The responses of the participants indicate that they felt that digital feedback was not emotional, which only supported feelings of isolation and did not erase them.

Empirical research has also indicated that online validation has the potential to form a false sense of belonging, which relies on external validation (Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). In case of the inconsistency of such validation or its lack, the loneliness can be aggravated, especially in the case of socially active individuals interested in sustaining a visible online presence.

Social comparison and curated self-presentation also increased the emotional distance of the participants. The perfection of the online lives of other people caused the participants to doubt their social and emotional competence. This observation is highly corroborated by the studies that show social comparison on social media upward is related to elevated loneliness, depressive mood, and diminished self-esteem (Appel et al., 2016, Vogel et al., 2014).

Besides, participants reported refraining from expressing emotions to preserve a socially desirable image that is indicative of the performative quality of online communication. The idea of impression management expressed by Goffman (1959) is applicable in the digital environment, where users shape their personalities to be socially acceptable (Goffman, 1959). Empirical studies indicate that these types of performative interaction might repress the expression of authentic emotions and thus deny a chance at a real connection (Reinecke and Trepte, 2014).

Combining these results, the existing literature is broadened as the authors show that digital loneliness among socially active students is based on emotional disconnection, but not on social absence. The findings illustrate the significance of loneliness being interpreted and being an experience, which is influenced by the perception and emotional attachment of the users to the digital interactions. Through IPA, the paper adds an illuminating dimension to the understanding of how students interpret the concept of loneliness in settings that are defined by the incessant connection.

The results indicate that digital loneliness interventions that focus on curtailing screen time must be substituted with promoting emotional authenticity, meaningful interaction and digital emotional literacy among university students.

Limitations

- Small, intentional sample restricts external validity to the non-population.
- Since the data is based on self-reported experiences, it can cause a recall bias or social desirability bias.
- IPA can involve subjectivity in interpretation by the researcher though reflexivity and audit trails.
- The results apply to one sociocultural setting and might not apply to other settings or populations.

Conclusion

This study investigated the lived experiences of digital loneliness in socially active people. It was observed that there was a gap between online activities and real-life emotional bonding because the participants stated that they felt invisible, socially compared and empty. They were compounded by cultural and social pressures and coping styles such as limiting internet access or purposeful offline communication partially helped. Overall, digital loneliness is a subjective and interpretation phenomenon predetermined by the perceptions, socialization and the quality of online relationships. The study identifies the need to take into consideration the emotional

and experiential elements of digital life in research and practice.

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