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Research Article

Beyond the Scroll: A Qualitative Exploration of Generation Z's Experiences of Digital Connection, Relationships, And Well-Being

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Abstract

Social media has become deeply embedded in the everyday social lives of Generation Z, functioning not only as a source of entertainment and information but also as an environment for friendship maintenance, identity expression, community participation, social support, learning, creativity, and professional opportunity. Although research has increasingly recognised the heterogeneous nature of young people's digital experiences, discussions of social media frequently remain dominated by problematic use, social comparison, loneliness, and other adverse outcomes. Such a deficit-orientated approach may obscure the meaningful forms of connection and opportunity that digital environments can provide while also underestimating the tensions that may coexist with these benefits. The present qualitative study explored how Generation Z experiences and interprets digital connectedness, with particular attention to friendship, belonging, social support, identity expression, online validation, and personal, academic, and professional opportunities, alongside experiences of comparison, fatigue, superficiality, and disconnection. An interpretivist-constructivist orientation and qualitative exploratory design were adopted. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 18 Generation Z participants aged 18–25 years and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Self-determination theory and Baumeister and Leary's need-to-belong framework provided complementary sensitising perspectives. Six interconnected themes were developed: (a) digital connection as continuity across distance, (b) meaningful connection requires relational depth, (c) social media as a gateway to communities, learning, and opportunity, (d) being seen: validation, visibility, and identity, (e) the cost of constant connection: fatigue, comparison, and superficiality, and (f) negotiating connection through agency and boundaries. Findings indicate that digital connectedness is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful. Rather, its meaning depends on the purpose and quality of engagement, relational context, reciprocity, perceived agency, and the extent to which digital interaction complements meaningful offline relationships. The study contributes a balanced, participant-centred account of Generation Z's digital sociality and suggests that digital well-being should focus not only on the amount of time spent online but also on the quality, purpose, and psychological meaning of digital engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Generation Z in a Digitally Mediated Social World

Digital platforms have become embedded within the everyday social environments of contemporary young people. For Generation Z, social media is rarely experienced as a discrete technological activity separated from “real life”. Instead, digital communication intersects with friendship, self-expression, information seeking, identity development, entertainment, community participation, education, creativity, and professional networking. The significance of social media therefore extends beyond the amount of time young people spend online. What individuals do within digital environments, whom they interact with, why they engage, and how they interpret these interactions are equally important for understanding contemporary youth sociality.

Research on adolescent peer relationships has conceptualised social media as an interpersonal context that can transform how young people initiate, maintain, and negotiate relationships rather than simply functioning as an additional communication channel (Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b). Similarly, boyd (2014) demonstrated through qualitative research that networked environments form part of young people's efforts to negotiate identity, friendship, privacy, visibility, and participation. More recent research has continued to identify potential benefits associated with social media, including social connection, identity development, mental health support, and access to information (Nagata et al., 2025). Social media may therefore be understood as part of the social environment within which contemporary young people construct, maintain, and interpret relationships.

This perspective is important because the same digital platform may perform different functions for different individuals or for the same individual at different times. A messaging application may sustain an intimate friendship, a group chat may provide community, a content-sharing platform may facilitate creativity and identity expression, and a professional platform may provide career opportunities. At the same time, digital environments may introduce expectations of constant availability, responsiveness, visibility, and social comparison.

Early research also demonstrated that online communication can complement rather than necessarily displace offline relationships. Valkenburg and Peter (2007), for example, found evidence consistent with a stimulation rather than displacement hypothesis, suggesting that online communication may strengthen existing friendships and contribute indirectly to well-being through increased interaction and friendship quality. Burke and Kraut (2016) similarly demonstrated that associations between Facebook use and well-being depend on the type of communication and strength of relationships involved. These findings indicate that the nature and meaning of digital interaction may be more informative than social media use considered in isolation.

1.2. From Social Media Use to Digital Connectedness

The present study uses the concept of digital connectedness to capture the perceived and experiential capacity of digitally

mediated environments to facilitate interpersonal contact, emotional support, belonging, community participation, self-expression, identity exploration, social participation, learning, and access to opportunities. This conceptualisation extends beyond conventional measures of frequency or duration of social-media use.

Two individuals may spend similar amounts of time online while experiencing substantially different forms of digital sociality. One may communicate primarily with close friends, participate in supportive communities, create content, or pursue academic and professional interests. Another may engage largely in passive consumption, comparison, or interactions perceived as superficial. Consequently, time alone cannot adequately represent the psychological or relational meaning of digital engagement.

Recent research similarly emphasises heterogeneity in young people's social-media experiences. Avci et al. (2025), in a systematic review of social media and adolescent identity development, highlighted the importance of examining different forms and qualities of engagement rather than treating social media use as a uniform exposure. This distinction is particularly relevant to the present study because being digitally connected does not necessarily mean experiencing meaningful connection. An individual may have numerous contacts yet feel that few relationships provide emotional intimacy, reciprocity, or genuine belonging. Conversely, a single online interaction may become highly meaningful when it provides support, recognition, shared identity, or community. Digital connectedness is therefore approached here as an experiential and relational phenomenon, rather than simply a behavioural or technological variable.

1.3. The Positive Social Affordances of Social Media

An important starting point for understanding Generation Z's digital experiences is to recognise the opportunities that social media can create. Social platforms can facilitate the maintenance of geographically dispersed friendships, enable rapid communication, provide access to communities organised around shared interests, and create spaces in which young people can express aspects of themselves that may be difficult to communicate in face-to-face settings.

The relational potential of social media is particularly significant during developmental periods in which peer relationships and belonging are important. Research has shown that young people use digital communication to maintain existing friendships, while online environments can also provide opportunities for developing new relationships and communities (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Recent research has further challenged an exclusively risk-orientated account of young people's social media experiences. Nagata et al. (2025) describe social connection, identity development, mental health support, and access to health information as important potential benefits of social media use among adolescents and young adults. Their review also notes that young people may use social platforms to maintain relationships, participate in group conversations, seek

emotional support, and connect with people who share aspects of their identities or interests. Social media may consequently contribute to belonging by allowing individuals to locate communities that might not be readily available within their immediate physical environment. This may be particularly relevant for young people whose interests, experiences, identities, or aspirations are not strongly represented within their offline social networks. Digital environments can also facilitate forms of participation that extend beyond interpersonal friendship, including educational engagement, creative expression, knowledge sharing, and professional networking. Such possibilities are important because Generation Z's relationship with social media cannot be adequately represented by a simple opposition between "online" and "offline" life. Digital spaces may complement existing relationships, extend social networks, and create new forms of participation. boyd (2014), based on qualitative research with networked teenagers, similarly demonstrated that young people's online practices are embedded within broader processes of identity, friendship, privacy, and social participation rather than being isolated technological behaviours.

The positive affordances of social media therefore provide an essential starting point for the present study. The question is not whether social media is inherently beneficial, but what kinds of opportunities Generation Z perceives these platforms as creating and how those opportunities are experienced in everyday life.

1.4. The Tensions within Digital Connection

Although digital environments may facilitate connection, accessibility does not automatically produce relational satisfaction. The same features that make social media socially useful—visibility, immediacy, accessibility, continuous communication, and audience participation—may also introduce new interpersonal expectations and pressures. For example, the expectation of being continually reachable may alter conventional boundaries surrounding friendship and communication. Delayed responses can be interpreted socially; visible interactions can become markers of inclusion or exclusion; and public expressions of friendship can make relationships more observable and open to interpretation. The networked nature of social media also complicates conventional understandings of privacy and audience, requiring young people to negotiate who can see, interpret, and respond to their self-presentation (Marwick & boyd, 2014).

Social comparison and feedback seeking represent another important tension. Social media environments make social information unusually visible: achievements, relationships, appearances, experiences, and lifestyles may be continuously encountered through curated representations of other people's lives. Nesi and Prinstein (2015) found that social comparison and feedback-seeking through social media were associated with depressive symptoms in adolescents, with the strength of these associations varying according to individual and social factors. However, it would be inappropriate to interpret such

evidence as demonstrating that social media is inherently harmful. Instead, it suggests that the mode and meaning of engagement matter. The same platform can simultaneously offer recognition and comparison, friendship and pressure, self-expression and self-monitoring, and community and exclusion. This complexity is consistent with the broader literature. A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis examining social media use and wellbeing indicates that the relationship between social media engagement and well-being is more nuanced than a simple positive or negative association (Ansari et.al., 2024). Similarly, research on adolescent peer relations has emphasised that social media constitutes a distinctive interpersonal context whose characteristics can alter existing peer processes rather than producing uniformly positive or negative effects (Nesi et.al., 2018). Accordingly, the present study approaches digital connectedness as a dynamic and potentially ambivalent experience.

1.5. The Shadow Side of Connection

Experiences of loneliness, exclusion, relational uncertainty, emotional fatigue, and perceived superficiality remain important dimensions of digitally mediated social life. However, in this study they are conceptualised as the shadow side of digital connectedness, rather than its inevitable outcome. This distinction is important because claims that young people are "more connected than ever yet increasingly lonely" can become rhetorical unless supported by appropriate evidence. Recent systematic evidence indicates substantial heterogeneity in the relationship between social media use and loneliness. Feng et al. (2026), for example, found that problematic social media use demonstrated a stronger association with loneliness than simple time spent using social media. Such evidence supports distinguishing patterns and meanings of engagement from duration alone.

The relevant question is therefore not simply whether social media causes loneliness, but under what circumstances digital interaction becomes meaningful connection and under what circumstances it fails to provide the intimacy, reciprocity, recognition, or belonging that individuals seek.

1.6. Research Gap and Present Study

Existing research has generated substantial evidence concerning social media, peer relationships, identity, social comparison, well-being, and loneliness. However, three gaps remain relevant. First, much research has focused on frequency, duration, or problematic use. Such measures are useful but may not fully capture the subjective meaning of digital relationships and communities. Second, positive and negative consequences are often considered separately. This can obscure the possibility that the same digital environment may simultaneously provide belonging and pressure, support and fatigue, or self-expression and comparison. Third, there is a need for qualitative research that begins with young people's own interpretations of what it means to be connected. Rather than assuming that social media produces either connection or loneliness, it is important to understand how Generation Z defines meaningful connection,

how digital platforms shape friendship and belonging, what opportunities they create, and what tensions accompany those opportunities.

Accordingly, the present study qualitatively explores how Generation Z experiences and interprets digital connectedness, with particular attention to friendship, belonging, social support, identity expression, online validation, personal, academic, and professional opportunities, and the challenges that may emerge within digitally mediated relationships.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Generation Z and Digital Sociality

Generation Z has developed within an environment in which digital communication is deeply integrated into ordinary social life. Rather than treating technology as an external influence acting upon an otherwise stable social world, contemporary research increasingly conceptualises digital platforms as environments within which relationships and identities are enacted. Nesi et al. (2018a, 2018b) proposed that social media transforms peer processes by altering the accessibility, visibility, persistence, and quantifiability of social information. These changes can influence friendship, peer status, social comparison, and group processes. boyd (2014) similarly demonstrated that networked environments are embedded in young people's everyday negotiations of friendship, identity, privacy, and participation.

This perspective makes lived experience particularly important. Frequency of use can indicate exposure but cannot determine what digital participation means to an individual. A high-frequency user may primarily communicate with close relationships, while another may spend considerable time passively consuming content. Digital sociality must therefore be examined in relation to purpose, interaction type, relational context, and subjective meaning.

2.2. Social Media as a Space for Connection

Friendship is one of the most significant contexts in which digital connectedness is experienced. Social media enables messaging, sharing, commenting, group interaction, and visibility into aspects of friends' lives. These affordances can help sustain friendships when face-to-face contact is limited. However, digital friendship also introduces new expectations. Constant accessibility can generate assumptions concerning response time and availability. Visible interaction can also alter perceptions of friendship. A delayed message, an image involving another friend, or exclusion from a digital interaction can become socially meaningful.

Wuyts et al. (2024), in qualitative research with early adolescents, demonstrated that social media use could contribute to friendship jealousy and conflict when expectations concerning messages, posts, or other social information were not met. Digital friendship is therefore not simply a matter of whether platforms bring people closer. Platforms may alter the visibility and interpretation of relationships.

2.3. Belonging, Community, and Social Support

Beyond dyadic friendships, digital environments provide communities organised around shared interests, identities, hobbies, fandoms, educational interests, and social causes. Such communities can provide recognition, emotional support, information exchange, and participation. Baumeister and Leary (1995) conceptualised the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation involving the desire for frequent, positive, and relatively stable interpersonal interactions characterised by mutual concern. Digital environments provide additional contexts in which this need may be pursued. Oksanen et al. (2024) emphasised the increasing significance of online communities and their consequences across psychological and social domains. Digital communities may be particularly valuable when particular interests or identities are poorly represented in an individual's immediate offline environment.

Nevertheless, membership in an online group does not automatically constitute belonging. The relevant distinction is between social contact and psychologically meaningful belonging. Meaningful belonging may involve recognition, acceptance, reciprocity, trust, and a sense that one's participation matters.

2.4. Identity, Self-Expression, and Authenticity

Social media provides users with opportunities to select photographs, opinions, interests, achievements, and creative work through which aspects of identity are communicated. Such environments can facilitate identity exploration, creativity, experimentation, and connection with like-minded individuals. At the same time, online self-presentation involves audience awareness and impression management. Marwick and boyd (2014) showed how young people negotiate networked audiences and privacy. Users may present authentic aspects of themselves while also selectively curating what is visible.

Authenticity should therefore not be understood as the complete absence of curation. Rather, digital authenticity may involve negotiating self-expression, audience expectations, privacy, and desired identity presentation.

2.5. Personal, Academic, and Professional Opportunities

Social media increasingly functions beyond interpersonal communication. Users access educational content, peer-learning networks, creative resources, professional communities, career information, and opportunities for personal development. Cleofas et al. (2022) found that emerging adults used social media for education, intimacy, identity, autonomy, entertainment, and self-expression. Such findings support a broader understanding of digital connectedness in which platforms operate as social, educational, cultural, and professional infrastructures. This dimension is particularly important because a deficit-orientated approach can overlook how digital environments provide resources that expand young people's opportunities for learning and participation.

2.6. Online Validation and Social Comparison

Likes, comments, views, shares, and follower counts constitute visible forms of social feedback. For some users, these signals may be largely irrelevant; for others, they can provide recognition or become psychologically salient. The distinction between being seen and being valued is therefore important. Social feedback can provide temporary recognition but may also encourage comparison and self-monitoring. Nesi and Prinstein (2015) found that social comparison and feedback-seeking were associated with depressive symptoms, demonstrating the importance of examining the psychological processes surrounding digital feedback. Verduyn et al. (2015) further demonstrated differences between passive and active forms of social-media use. These findings reinforce the importance of examining what individuals do online rather than treating all social-media engagement as equivalent.

2.7. Digital Fatigue, Exclusion, and Relational Tensions

Digital connectedness can generate demands as well as opportunities. Notification overload, expectations of responsiveness, information saturation, social comparison, fear of missing out, interpersonal conflict, and pressure surrounding self-presentation can contribute to emotional or cognitive fatigue. Importantly, these experiences cannot be assumed to occur for every user. Their inclusion in the present study therefore remained exploratory. Participants were given opportunities to identify challenges in their own terms rather than being asked to confirm predetermined negative outcomes.

2.8. Loneliness as the Shadow Side of Digital Connectivity

Within this broader conceptualisation, loneliness can be understood as one possible “shadow side” of digitally mediated social life rather than as the defining experience of Generation Z. The distinction between social contact and meaningful connection is particularly important. Digital interaction may increase the frequency of communication without necessarily satisfying an individual’s expectations for intimacy, reciprocity, emotional understanding, or belonging. Conversely, a digitally mediated relationship may provide substantial emotional value even when face-to-face interaction is limited.

The empirical literature supports this complexity. Pezzi et al., (2024), reviewing research on young adults, found that problematic social media use was generally positively associated with loneliness, while also noting that the relationship varied according to dimensions of loneliness, other variables, and the types of social media involved. Importantly, the review identified a need for more multidimensional approaches to solitary experiences rather than treating loneliness as a single uniform construct.

Even more recent evidence reinforces the importance of distinguishing problematic use from social media use more generally. Feng et al., (2026), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of 59 studies involving 81,344 participants, found substantial heterogeneity across studies. Problematic social media use demonstrated a moderate association with loneliness ($r = .29$), whereas time spent on social media showed a

considerably smaller association ($r = .07$). The authors therefore emphasised the importance of distinguishing patterns of use when examining loneliness. These findings provide an important empirical basis for the revised conceptual orientation of the present study. They do not support a simplistic proposition that digital connectivity inevitably produces loneliness. Rather, they suggest that the relationship between digital engagement and loneliness depends upon how social media is used and experienced. Consequently, the present study asks a more nuanced question: what happens when digital connection does—or does not—translate into meaningful connection? This enables loneliness to remain an important analytical possibility while avoiding its treatment as the predetermined outcome of social media engagement.

2.10. RESEARCH GAP

Three gaps guide the present study. The first is conceptual: social media research often focuses on frequency, problematic use, or psychological outcomes rather than the broader lived meaning of digital connectedness. The second is experiential: there remains a need to understand how young people themselves define meaningful connection, belonging, support, authenticity, and relationship quality. The third is balanced: qualitative research can examine facilitative and challenging dimensions simultaneously without assuming that social media is inherently beneficial or harmful. The present study addresses these gaps by foregrounding participants’ interpretations of digital connection and examining both its “brighter side” and “shadow side.”

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study draws upon two complementary theoretical perspectives—Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) need-to-belong framework—to examine how Generation Z experiences and interprets digital connectedness. The selection of these perspectives is informed by the central concern of the study: understanding how digitally mediated social environments may facilitate autonomy, competence, relatedness, belonging, self-expression, validation pressure, exclusion, relational tension, fatigue, or perceived disconnection.

The theoretical framework is deliberately used as an interpretive and sensitising framework rather than a causal model. In accordance with the qualitative orientation of the study, the theories are not employed to predict predetermined outcomes. Instead, they provide conceptual lenses through which participants’ accounts can be examined while allowing unexpected meanings, contradictions, and experiences to emerge from the data.

3.1. Self-Determination Theory

The study draws first on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) and further developed by Ryan and Deci (2017). SDT proposes three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Satisfaction of these needs is associated with self-determined

motivation and well-being, whereas need frustration may contribute to less adaptive experiences.

3.1.1. Autonomy

Autonomy concerns experiencing one's behaviour as self-endorsed and volitional. In digital environments, autonomy may involve choosing what to share, which communities to join, whom to interact with, what content to consume, and how to present oneself. However, digital environments may also challenge autonomy through expectations of responsiveness, platform pressures, or perceived obligations to remain visible and available.

3.1.2. Competence

Competence concerns feeling capable and effective. Social media can support competence through learning, content creation, skill development, educational participation, feedback, and professional development.

Participants' accounts concerning learning, creativity, academic opportunities, and professional networking were therefore relevant to the competence dimension.

3.1.3. Relatedness

Relatedness refers to the need to experience meaningful connection and care. Digital environments can support relatedness through friendship, family communication, peer support, community, and emotional intimacy. At the same time, interactions that feel superficial, unequal, or exclusionary may frustrate experiences of relatedness.

3.2. Baumeister and Leary's Need-to-Belong Framework

The second theoretical perspective is Baumeister and Leary's (1995) need-to-belong framework. The theory proposes that human beings possess a fundamental motivation to form and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships. This framework is particularly relevant because the present study

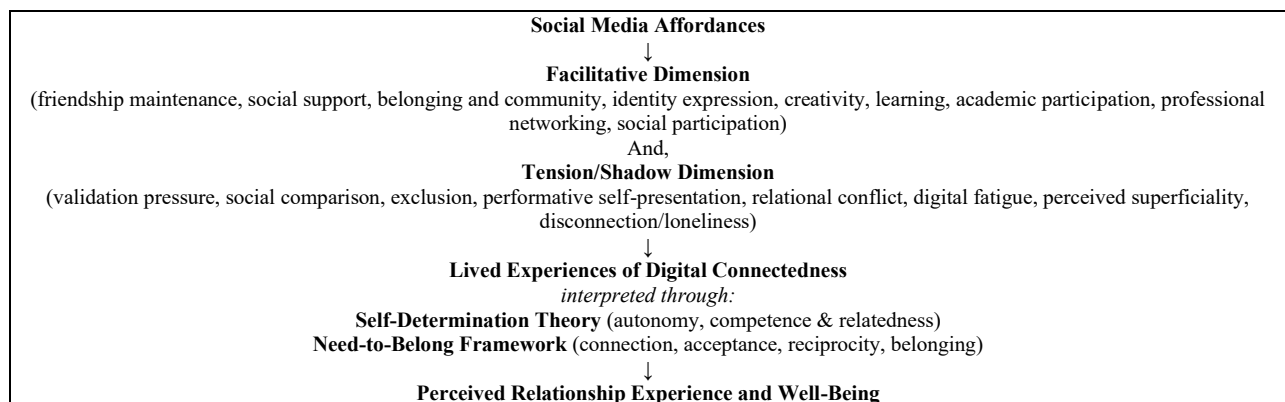
distinguishes between contact and connection. The presence of followers, messages, or group memberships does not necessarily mean that an individual experiences acceptance, reciprocity, or belonging. Digital communities, friendships, and support networks may satisfy belonging needs when interactions are meaningful and reciprocal. Conversely, exclusion, relational uncertainty, or perceived superficiality may occur when expected belonging is not achieved.

3.3. Complementarity of the Two Theoretical Perspectives

SDT and the need-to-belong framework illuminate different but complementary dimensions of digital sociality. SDT provides a broader psychological perspective on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, whereas Baumeister and Leary provide a more focused account of meaningful interpersonal belonging. A participant may, for example, experience autonomy through selective self-presentation, competence through learning or creative production, and relatedness through friendship. The same participant may simultaneously experience pressure concerning self-presentation or availability. Such apparently contradictory experiences are not treated as inconsistencies. Rather, they reflect the multidimensional character of digital sociality.

3.4. Integrative Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualises digital connectedness as emerging through the interaction between social-media affordances and individual experiences. The facilitative dimension includes, friendship maintenance; social support; belonging and community; identity expression; creativity; learning; academic participation; professional networking; and broader social participation. The tension/shadow dimension includes, validation pressure; social comparison; exclusion; performative self-presentation; relational conflict; digital fatigue; perceived superficiality; and disconnection or loneliness.



These dimensions are not mutually exclusive. A person may experience social media as simultaneously supportive and exhausting, empowering and pressuring, authentic and curated, or socially expansive and emotionally limited. The framework is conceptual rather than causal. The arrows connecting social-

media affordances, lived digital connectedness, and perceived relationship experience is intended to illustrate relationships guiding the inquiry rather than causal pathways. The theories function as sensitising frameworks rather than predictive models.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addressed five research questions:

RQ1. How do Generation Z individuals understand and describe the meaning of social connection in digitally mediated environments?

RQ2. How does social media shape Generation Z's experiences of friendship, belonging, social support, and interpersonal relationships?

RQ3. What personal, social, academic, and professional opportunities do Generation Z individuals associate with digital connectedness?

RQ4. What tensions or challenges, if any, do Generation Z individuals experience within digitally mediated social relationships, including validation pressure, social comparison, exclusion, relational pressure, and digital fatigue?

RQ5. How do Generation Z individuals negotiate experiences of connection and disconnection within their digital social lives?

The questions collectively move from the meaning of connection to its relational, developmental, challenging, and integrative dimensions. Importantly, the wording of RQ4 does not presuppose negative experiences.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1. Research Paradigm and Philosophical Orientation

The study adopted an interpretivist-constructivist orientation. Digital connectedness was treated as a socially and contextually situated experience rather than as a single objectively measurable phenomenon. An interpretivist orientation was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' subjective interpretations of connection, friendship, belonging, identity, validation, and well-being. The constructivist dimension acknowledged that meanings are produced through interactions among individuals, social contexts, cultural expectations, technological affordances, and the researcher.

The same digital practice may therefore carry different meanings for different people. A group chat may represent emotional security for one participant and social obligation for another. Similarly, public self-presentation may be experienced as creative expression by one participant and performative pressure by another.

5.2. Research Design

A qualitative exploratory design using individual semi-structured interviews was adopted. The design was appropriate because the research questions concerned meanings, interpretations, subjective experiences, relational contexts, and tensions rather than causal relationships. Semi-structured interviews provided consistency across participants while allowing participants to introduce experiences not anticipated by the researcher. The interview schedule was developed from the research questions and theoretical framework and used neutral, open-ended wording. The study was reported with reference to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007).

5.3. Participants

The final sample comprised 18 Generation Z participants aged 18–25 years. The age range was operationally defined to ensure clarity because definitions of Generation Z vary across sources. Participants were adults who used at least one social-media platform regularly and had sufficient experience with digitally mediated relationships to discuss their experiences. Daily social-media use varied considerably, ranging from less than 1 hour to more than 6 hours, demonstrating substantial variation in intensity of engagement.

5.4. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling with attention to variation in participant experiences was used. The objective was not statistical representativeness but the inclusion of participants with diverse experiences of digital sociality. The sampling approach considered variation in age, gender, educational or employment status, social-media intensity, dominant platform, and social context where feasible.

5.5. Data Collection

Data will be collected through individual semi-structured interviews, anticipated to last approximately 45–60 minutes each. The interview guide was developed directly from the research questions and theoretical framework. Questions addressed participants' understandings of digital connection; friendship and relationship maintenance; belonging and social support; self-expression and authenticity; personal, academic, and professional opportunities; online validation; social comparison; digital fatigue; exclusion; and experiences of connection and disconnection. The complete interview schedule is provided in Appendix A.

Importantly, the interview schedule used neutral and open-ended wording. For example, rather than asking participants whether social media makes them lonely, the interviewer asked: *"Can you describe a time when being online made you feel particularly connected to others? What about a time when being online did not give you the sense of connection you expected?"* Such wording reduced the risk of embedding the researcher's assumptions within the interview process.

The interview was conducted online on a secure videoconferencing platform, Google Meet, subject to the final ethics protocol and participants' preferences. With participants' explicit permission, interviews were audio-recorded for transcription. Where recording is not permitted, detailed notes are maintained in accordance with the approved protocol. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed or pseudonymised during transcription and other potentially identifying details were anonymised in the research dataset. The researcher maintained field and reflexive notes following interviews. These notes recorded contextual observations, initial analytical impressions, methodological decisions, and reflections concerning the researcher's assumptions and interaction with the participant.

5.6. Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) methodological approach.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data.

The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts and revisited recordings where necessary to develop familiarity with participants' accounts, tone, context, and content. Initial observations and reflexive notes were documented.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes.

Relevant transcript segments were coded to capture both explicit content and underlying meanings. Initial codes included maintaining geographically distant relationships, communicating with friends and family, finding communities, accessing academic and professional opportunities, creative expression, learning, recognition, self-presentation, and digital boundaries. Additional codes captured tensions including pressure to respond, excessive time use, message overload, social comparison, validation dependence, misunderstanding, superficiality, emotional fatigue, and the need to regulate social-media use. Coding remained sufficiently open to allow unexpected meanings to contribute to later theme development.

Phase 3: Constructing participant themes.

Related codes were examined for broader patterns of shared meaning. Six interconnected themes were developed.

Phase 4: Reviewing and developing themes.

Candidate themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the complete dataset to assess coherence, distinction, and relevance to the research questions.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.

The boundaries and central organising concepts of the themes were refined. Theme names were developed to communicate the analytical focus while retaining complexity.

Phase 6: Producing the analytical narrative.

Final themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Participant quotations were selected to demonstrate the evidential basis for interpretations while maintaining anonymity. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were not treated as objectively "discovered" categories. They were understood as interpretive constructions developed through engagement between researcher, data, theory, and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

5.7. Deductive and Inductive Sensitivity

Although theoretically informed, analysis combined theoretical sensitivity with inductive openness. Concepts such as autonomy, competence, relatedness, belonging, validation, social support, and relational connection sensitised the researcher to theoretically relevant material but did not determine the findings. For example, several participants described social media as an avenue for academic opportunities, scholarships, internships, creative communities, professional networks, and learning resources. Although such experiences could be interpreted through the competence dimension of SDT, participants' accounts extended beyond

competence and highlighted social media as an informal infrastructure for educational, creative, and professional participation. These accounts were therefore retained in their broader form and contributed to the theme concerning communities, learning, and opportunity. The theoretical framework consequently informed interpretation without forcing participants' experiences into predetermined categories.

5.8. Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity was treated as an integral component of the research process. The researcher recognised that assumptions, theoretical commitments, interviewing practices, coding decisions, and interpretations could influence the analytic account. Reflexive attention was directed toward questions such as whether social media was being interpreted too positively or negatively, whether the original interest in loneliness was influencing interpretation, and whether participants' experiences were being over-interpreted through SDT. Particular attention was given to avoiding the assumption that loneliness, comparison, digital fatigue, or disconnection were inevitable consequences of social-media use.

5.9. Trustworthiness and Quality

Quality was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the dataset, iterative theme development, detailed interviews, and use of participant quotations. Dependability was supported through documentation of recruitment, data collection, coding, methodological decisions, and theme refinement. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive documentation of the researcher's interpretive position and analytic decisions. Transferability was supported through contextual description of the sample, setting, methodology, and analytical process. Statistical generalisability was not claimed. The study also followed relevant principles of COREQ (Tong et al., 2007).

5.10. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee before recruitment. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed of their right to decline questions or withdraw in accordance with the approved protocol. Data were anonymised, securely stored, and used exclusively for research purposes. Participant codes rather than identifying information were used in reporting.

6. FINDINGS

Following reflexive thematic analysis, six interconnected themes were developed:

1. Digital Connection as Continuity Across Distance
2. Meaningful Connection Requires Relational Depth
3. Social Media as a Gateway to Communities, Learning, and Opportunity
4. Being Seen: Validation, Visibility, and Identity

5. The Cost of Constant Connection: Fatigue, Comparison, and Superficiality
 6. Negotiating Connection Through Agency and Boundaries
- The themes should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive. Together, they illustrate the multidimensional nature of participants' digital lives.

6.1. Theme 1: Digital Connection as Continuity Across Distance

A dominant pattern was the understanding of social media as a mechanism for maintaining relational continuity when physical proximity was unavailable. Participants generally described digital communication as complementing rather than replacing face-to-face relationships. P06 explained that social media became particularly significant after graduation: *"Especially after my graduation, as most of the people who I spent my last three years with have moved to different places."*

P10 similarly described the importance of digital communication while living away from home: *"Staying away from home in a foreign country, social media and WhatsApp is the only way I can still stay connected to my friends and family back home."* For P10, social media helped keep relationships "alive" when physical meetings were difficult. P07 also described maintaining contact with geographically distant family and friends.

The data suggest that digital connectedness was not necessarily experienced as continuous interaction. Instead, it often functioned as relational availability: the possibility of reaching someone, communicating with them, and maintaining continuity despite physical separation. This finding indicates that digital connection may be particularly valuable when geographical distance disrupts conventional forms of interaction.

6.2. Theme 2: Meaningful Connection Requires Relational Depth

Although participants recognised the practical value of digital communication, they frequently distinguished digital contact from meaningful connection. P02 noted that online relationships could feel different because: *"one doesn't really get a sense of the other behind the screen."* P08 similarly distinguished online contact from intimacy, observing that: *"The intimacy of knowing one is lost between the two forms."*

Although participants differed in how strongly they distinguished online and offline relationships, several regarded face-to-face communications as offering emotional information and relational depth that digital interaction could sometimes lack. However, P10 offered a more nuanced interpretation: *"For me, I think what makes the interaction meaningful is not so much about being online/offline, and more about the person on the other side."*

This suggests that meaningfulness was not determined exclusively by the medium. The person, relationship, trust, reciprocity, and quality of interaction were also important. The theme therefore demonstrates a central distinction of the study:

being connected is not synonymous with feeling meaningfully connected.

6.3. Theme 3: Social Media as a Gateway to Communities, Learning, and Opportunity

Participants described social media as more than a tool for maintaining interpersonal relationships. It also functioned as a gateway to communities, learning, creativity, and opportunities. Participants described finding people with shared interests and accessing perspectives beyond their immediate environments. Social media enabled participation in communities that might otherwise have been difficult to access. The educational and developmental dimension was also evident. P05 reported that an online friend had taught him how to draw, illustrating how digital relationships could facilitate skill development. P14 described social media as important for content creation and creativity. Participants also referred to academic and professional opportunities, including access to information, networks, and opportunities for development.

These experiences indicate that digital connectedness extended beyond emotional connection to include competence-building and opportunity structures. The theme consequently challenges the tendency to conceptualise social media only in terms of friendship or psychological risk. For participants, social platforms could function as informal educational, creative, social, cultural, and professional infrastructures.

6.4. Theme 4: Being Seen: Validation, Visibility, and Identity

Participants differed considerably in the importance they attached to likes, comments, views, and other forms of online engagement. For some, online reactions were experienced positively as recognition. P10 described receiving reactions to a WhatsApp status and subsequent personal messages as a positive experience of social recognition. P04 similarly described social-media engagement as making one feel: "seen by the people."

However, validation was not uniformly positive or irrelevant. P13 described a period when low engagement became psychologically salient: "There used to be plenty of times when I became addicted to posting every other day in the hopes of feeling seen or noticed."

The participant subsequently described developing a healthier relationship with online engagement, indicating that validation experiences could change over time. The theme also included identity and authenticity. Participants generally described their online and offline selves as related but acknowledged that online self-presentation is selective.

P02 described the online self as: "a curated fraction" of the whole self. P08 described being able to: "edit what I post online" while still regarding the resulting presentation as authentic. Authenticity therefore emerged not as the absence of curation but as an ongoing negotiation between self-expression, audience awareness, privacy, and impression management.

6.5. Theme 5: The Cost of Constant Connection: Fatigue, Comparison, and Superficiality

Alongside positive experiences, participants described challenges associated with continuous digital availability. Time consumption and difficulty establishing boundaries were recurring concerns. P06 described social media as consuming: *“a very large chunk”* of time. P11 described feeling overwhelmed by short-form content and expectations of availability. P10 explained: *“Sometimes it may feel overwhelming to try and stay in touch with everyone you know and constantly receiving and replying to messages.”*

The participant linked this pressure to the feeling that others might be waiting for a response, making disengagement difficult. Participants also described misunderstanding and superficiality. P04 observed that thoughts can be misunderstood through social media. P15 noted that online communication lacks some of the emotional information available through face-to-face interaction and characterised online connection as: *“way less dense, more superficial.”*

P07 similarly described the ease of online connection as potentially producing an illusion of closeness. Exposure to distressing content also appeared in some accounts. P08 described anger, fatigue, sadness, frustration, and helplessness following exposure to distressing news, while P09 reported anxiety after encountering excessive violent content.

Importantly, participants did not consequently reject social media. Rather, they described a tension between recognising its usefulness and resisting its capacity to consume attention and emotional energy.

6.6. Theme 6: Negotiating Connection Through Agency and Boundaries

The final theme concerned participants' active negotiation of digital engagement. Participants were not passive recipients of digital affordances. They described decisions about what to share, whom to interact with, which content to consume, which platforms to use, and when to withdraw. P06 described leaving some applications because of the amount of time they consumed. P10 described relatively limited use as helping her maintain a form of digital connection without experiencing all of its associated pressures. P02 summarised the importance of agency by stating that social media could be beneficial: *“as long as I am in control of my usage.”* P04 similarly described social media as something that could: *“make or break a person depending on how involved they are.”*

Together, these accounts suggest that participants understood digital connectedness as conditional rather than uniformly beneficial or harmful. Its value depended on purpose, relationship quality, reciprocity, personal agency, and the extent to which digital interaction complemented rather than displaced meaningful offline experiences.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings provide a nuanced account of Generation Z's digital connectedness and support the central conceptual argument of the study: digital connection is neither inherently

beneficial nor inherently harmful. Its meaning is shaped by purpose, relational context, quality of interaction, psychological needs, and users' ability to establish boundaries.

7.1. Digital Connectedness as a Relational Infrastructure

The strongest relational finding concerned the use of social media to maintain relationships across geographical distance. Participants described digital platforms as enabling continuity with friends and family when face-to-face contact was unavailable. This finding aligns with research on bonding and bridging social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Phua et al., 2017) and with the stimulation hypothesis proposed by Valkenburg and Peter (2007). Rather than replacing offline relationships, digital communication frequently extended them. The accounts of P06 and P10 demonstrate this particularly clearly. Their experiences suggest that digital communication can operate as relational infrastructure, maintaining access and continuity across physical separation. This challenges a simple online/offline dichotomy. For many participants, digital and physical relationships were interconnected rather than separate social worlds.

7.2. Connection is not equivalent to contact

The second major finding was the distinction between communication and meaningful connection. Participants recognised that online interaction can provide access and continuity while simultaneously lacking aspects of intimacy available through face-to-face interaction. P02's observation that one may not “get a sense of the other behind the screen” and P15's description of online interaction as “way less dense” illustrate this tension.

At the same time, P10's assertion that meaningfulness depends more on “the person on the other side” than on whether interaction occurs online or offline complicates a simple hierarchy in which face-to-face relationships are automatically considered superior. This finding is consistent with the broader literature showing that the consequences of social media use depend on the type and quality of interaction (Burke & Kraut, 2016; Valkenburg et al., 2022). The important distinction is therefore not necessarily online versus offline, but meaningful versus less meaningful forms of connection.

7.3. Belonging and Community

The findings concerning communities reinforce Baumeister and Leary's (1995) proposition that meaningful belonging involves more than social contact. Participants described discovering communities based on interests and experiences, indicating that digital environments can expand the boundaries of social participation. This is consistent with research identifying online communities as increasingly important social environments (Oksanen et al., 2024). However, the existence of a community does not guarantee belonging. Meaningful belonging depends upon recognition, reciprocity, acceptance, and perceived social significance. This distinction is particularly important for Generation Z because digital platforms provide access to

extensive networks while simultaneously increasing the visibility of social inclusion and exclusion.

7.4. The Brighter Side of Digital Sociality

One of the study's significant contributions is its evidence for the facilitative dimension of digital connectedness. Participants described social media as supporting creativity, learning, academic participation, community discovery, and professional opportunity. These findings align with Cleofas et al. (2022) and Nagata et al. (2025), who identified multiple developmental and social benefits associated with digital engagement. This finding is important because research and public discourse can sometimes frame young people's digital lives predominantly through risk. The present participants did not describe social media simply as a source of psychological harm. For many, it was a means of accessing people, information, skills, communities, and opportunities. The appropriate conclusion is not that social media is beneficial, but that a complete account of digital sociality must include its enabling functions.

7.5. The Shadow Side: Validation, Comparison, and Digital Fatigue

The findings concerning validation demonstrate substantial individual variation. For some participants, likes, comments, and views provided recognition. For others, these metrics had limited significance. P13's experience demonstrates that online validation can become psychologically salient, particularly when posting becomes motivated by the desire to feel "*seen or noticed*." This finding resonates with research on social comparison and feedback seeking (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015) and research distinguishing different forms of social-media engagement (Verduyn et al., 2015). The findings also complicate the idea of authenticity. Participants did not necessarily understand curation as dishonesty. Instead, authenticity involved negotiating what could be shared, with whom, and for what purpose. Thus, digital identity should be understood as a process of selective self-expression rather than a simple opposition between authentic and inauthentic selves. The positive affordances of digital connection existed alongside experiences of fatigue, pressure, comparison, and superficiality. Participants' accounts of unread messages and expectations of responsiveness illustrate how accessibility can become obligation. The very feature that allows relationships to remain continuously accessible can make disengagement difficult. Similarly, P15's characterisation of online interaction as "*way less dense, more superficial*" reflects concerns that high levels of contact do not necessarily correspond to emotional depth. These findings align with contemporary literature emphasising heterogeneity rather than uniform effects (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Sala et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2022). The present study therefore supports moving beyond exposure-based models. The relevant question is not simply how much social media someone uses but what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how that engagement is experienced.

7.6. Reconsidering Loneliness within Digital Connectedness

Participants did describe circumstances in which online interaction did not provide the expected sense of closeness. However, the findings do not support positioning loneliness as the defining experience of Generation Z. Some participants experienced digital communication as strongly connective, some as limited or superficial, and others as both supportive and demanding. This pattern is consistent with recent evidence demonstrating substantial heterogeneity in the relationship between social-media use and loneliness (Feng et al., 2026). The stronger association between problematic use and loneliness than between simple duration and loneliness further supports the distinction between quantity and quality of engagement.

The more productive question is therefore: *Under what circumstances does digital interaction become meaningful connection, and under what circumstances does it fail to satisfy expectations of intimacy, belonging, or reciprocity?*

7.7. Integrating the Findings with the Conceptual Framework

The findings provide useful illustrations of SDT. Autonomy was visible in participants' descriptions of choosing what to share, selecting communities, controlling online visibility, and limiting platform use. P02's emphasis on remaining "in control" particularly illustrates the importance of perceived agency. Competence was reflected in learning, creativity, content production, academic engagement, and professional development. P05's experience of learning to draw through an online friendship demonstrates how digital relationships can support skill development. Relatedness was evident in maintaining friendships, communicating with family, receiving support, and participating in communities. However, the same digital environment could support one need while frustrating another. For example, a platform may support relatedness through friendship while simultaneously frustrating autonomy through expectations of continuous availability. This complexity is consistent with SDT's broader recognition that psychological needs may be supported or frustrated depending upon environmental conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) framework provides a useful explanation of why meaningful digital connection matters. Participants did not equate the number of contacts with belonging. Meaningful relationships were associated with trust, reciprocity, emotional depth, and the identity of the person involved. Digital platforms can therefore create opportunities for belonging but cannot guarantee it. When communication is superficial, misunderstood, unequal, or exclusionary, the presence of interaction may not satisfy the need for meaningful interpersonal attachment. The framework consequently helps explain the distinction between digital contact and digital belonging.

Taken together, the findings support a conceptualisation of digital connectedness as conditional and relational. Participants did not position themselves as passive users simply affected by technology. They actively negotiated platforms, relationships,

audiences, content, and boundaries. This supports the study's integrative framework in which facilitative and shadow dimensions coexist. The same digital environment can support friendship while generating pressure, provide recognition while encouraging comparison, enable creativity while consuming time, and expand social opportunities while sometimes producing superficiality. Digital well-being should therefore not be reduced to the question of whether social media use is "good" or "bad." It should include the quality and meaning of digital engagement.

8. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The practical implications of the study arise from its central finding that digital connectedness can simultaneously facilitate friendship, belonging, social support, self-expression, learning, creativity, and opportunity while creating pressures involving comparison, validation, fatigue, and relational uncertainty.

8.1. Implications for Young People

The findings support a more reflective approach to digital sociality. Rather than treating social media as inherently beneficial or harmful, young people may benefit from considering what particular forms of digital engagement contribute to their relationships, development, and well-being. First, the findings highlight the potential value of intentional and self-regulated use. Participants described selecting platforms, controlling engagement, and limiting use when it became excessive. This relates to the autonomy component of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Second, young people may benefit from developing healthy digital boundaries around availability, notifications, response expectations, sharing, and periods of disengagement. Third, greater critical awareness of online validation may be useful. Likes, views, comments, and follower counts represent forms of engagement but should not automatically be interpreted as measures of personal worth or relationship quality. Fourth, young people may benefit from distinguishing quantitative connectivity from qualitative connection. A large online network does not necessarily provide emotional intimacy, while a small number of meaningful relationships may provide substantial support. Finally, digital well-being initiatives should preserve the positive possibilities identified by participants, including learning, creativity, community participation, identity exploration, and professional networking.

8.2. Implications for Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers may benefit from moving beyond purely restrictive approaches to digital use. Open conversations about young people's digital relationships can help caregivers understand which friendships, communities, opportunities, and activities are meaningful to them. Parents can combine reasonable boundaries with trust, discussion, and developmentally appropriate autonomy. Such an approach is preferable to assuming that reduced screen time automatically equates to improved well-being.

8.3. Implications for Educators, Counselors, and Psychologists

Digital well-being programmes could move beyond "reduce screen time" toward improving the quality and purpose of digital engagement. Educational and psychological interventions may include, awareness of social comparison; interpretation of online feedback; healthy digital boundaries; online communication and conflict management; relationship literacy; critical reflection on digital identity; meaningful community participation; and intentional use for learning and professional development.

Psychologists should also avoid assuming that extensive social media use automatically indicates social isolation. Assessment should consider the meaning and function of online relationships.

8.4. Implications for Social Media Platforms and Designers

The findings also have implications for platform design, although these should be interpreted cautiously because the study cannot establish causal effects of particular features. Greater user control over notifications, audience visibility, interaction settings, and periods of reduced availability could support autonomy. Platform design could also consider how engagement metrics influence comparison and validation. Design that facilitates meaningful community participation, user-defined boundaries, and richer interpersonal interaction may better support users' relational needs than an exclusive emphasis on measurable engagement.

9. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved 18 participants and therefore does not permit statistical generalisation to Generation Z as a whole. The purpose was experiential and interpretive depth rather than representativeness. Second, purposive sampling may have resulted in participation by individuals who were particularly willing or able to reflect on their digital lives. Third, the findings rely on self-reported experiences. Participants' accounts represent their interpretations and recollections and may therefore be influenced by memory, self-presentation, or the interview context. Fourth, the study is situated within a specific Indian socio-cultural context. Meanings attached to friendship, privacy, family expectations, identity, and communication may differ across cultures. Fifth, social media is not a homogeneous environment. Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and professional platforms differ in their affordances, audiences, norms, and interaction structures. The present findings therefore cannot be assumed to apply identically across platforms. Sixth, reflexive thematic analysis necessarily involves researcher interpretation. Although reflexive notes and transparent analytic procedures were used, researcher subjectivity cannot be eliminated. Seventh, the cross-sectional design captures experiences at one point in time. Digital relationships and meanings may change as individuals move through education, employment, relocation, and other developmental transitions. Finally, the

concept of digital connectedness itself encompasses a complex relationship between online and offline social life. In many cases, it is impossible to separate digital interaction neatly from broader interpersonal and developmental circumstances. The study therefore does not claim that social media causes either improved well-being or negative psychological outcomes.

10. FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings provide several directions for future research.

10.1. Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research

Comparative studies could examine digital connectedness across countries, cultures, socio-economic groups, and developmental stages. Such research could determine whether meanings of belonging, authenticity, responsiveness, and validation are culturally specific or more broadly shared. Comparisons across late adolescence, emerging adulthood, and later adulthood could also examine developmental changes in digital relationships.

10.2. Platform-Specific Research

Future studies should avoid treating “social media” as a single category. Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and professional networking platforms provide different affordances. Platform-specific research could examine whether autonomy, competence, relatedness, belonging, validation, and fatigue differ across these environments.

10.3. Longitudinal Research

Longitudinal qualitative studies could investigate how digital connectedness changes across transitions such as university entry, employment, relocation, changing friendships, or intimate relationships. Such research could examine how online relationships develop, strengthen, weaken, or transition into offline relationships over time.

10.4. Mixed-Methods Research

The themes generated by the present study could inform larger quantitative studies examining digital connectedness, social support, belonging, friendship quality, well-being, social comparison, digital fatigue, and loneliness. A particularly valuable direction would be to distinguish, active communication; passive consumption; community participation; creative production; educational engagement; and professional networking. This would help determine whether different forms of engagement are associated with different experiences of connection.

10.5. Experience-Sampling and Digital Diary Research

Experience-sampling and digital diary methods could capture experiences closer to the time they occur and reduce some limitations of retrospective interviews. Future research could examine whether perceptions of connectedness differ following active communication with a close friend compared with passive scrolling.

10.6. Intervention Research

Intervention research could evaluate programmes focused on, digital self-awareness; healthy online relationships; social-comparison awareness; online validation; communication skills; digital boundaries; intentional platform use; and meaningful community participation. Importantly, such interventions should not necessarily aim simply to reduce screen time. They could instead focus on helping young people develop more intentional and psychologically supportive forms of digital engagement.

10.7. Further Theoretical Development

Future theoretical work could investigate how autonomy, competence, relatedness, and belonging interact within digitally mediated relationships. For example, a platform may simultaneously support relatedness through friendship while undermining autonomy through expectations of continuous availability. Content creation may strengthen competence while also increasing dependence on external validation. Further theoretical development could therefore conceptualise digital connectedness as a multidimensional relational experience rather than a simple measure of online contact.

11. CONCLUSION

The present study explored how Generation Z experiences and interprets digital connectedness within contemporary social media environments, focusing on friendship, belonging, social support, identity expression, validation, opportunities, and tensions associated with digitally mediated relationships. The findings demonstrate that digital connectedness cannot be adequately understood through a binary of connection versus disconnection or benefit versus harm. Participants' experiences were dynamic and context-dependent. The same digital environment could facilitate meaningful relationships while also generating pressure, comparison, fatigue, or superficiality. A central finding was that digital connection and meaningful connection are related but not synonymous. Participants valued social media for maintaining geographically distant friendships, communicating with family and peers, finding communities, and remaining socially accessible. Digital platforms also extended opportunities for learning, creativity, academic participation, and professional development. At the same time, greater accessibility did not necessarily produce greater intimacy. Participants distinguished between being able to communicate and experiencing communication as emotionally meaningful. Issues such as misunderstanding, responsiveness, comparison, validation, and digital fatigue demonstrated the tensions embedded within digitally mediated sociality.

The findings can be understood through Self-Determination Theory and the need-to-belong framework. Digital environments can support autonomy through choice and self-presentation, competence through learning and creativity, relatedness through interpersonal communication, and belonging through meaningful communities. Yet the same environments can also frustrate these needs when they generate pressure, comparison, exclusion, or excessive demands for

availability. The study therefore supports a more nuanced conceptualisation of digital well-being. Time spent online alone is insufficient for understanding whether digital engagement is meaningful or problematic. Greater attention should be given to what young people do online, why they engage, with whom they interact, what psychological and relational functions those interactions serve, and whether digital engagement complements or constrains meaningful relationships. Experiences of loneliness, superficiality, exclusion, and emotional fatigue should consequently be understood as possible dimensions of digital sociality rather than as inevitable consequences of social-media use. The participants did not describe themselves simply as either connected or disconnected. Instead, they negotiated a hybrid social world in which online and offline relationships intersect and sometimes reinforce one another. The contribution of the study therefore lies not in determining whether Generation Z is “more connected” or “lonelier,” but in showing how connection itself is experienced, interpreted, valued, and negotiated. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the important question is not whether young people should be connected digitally, but what makes digital connection meaningful. Social media can extend the boundaries of friendship, belonging, learning, creativity, identity exploration, and opportunity. Its value, however, depends on the quality and meaning of the relationships and activities it facilitates. A balanced understanding of contemporary digital sociality must therefore recognise both its considerable possibilities and its accompanying tensions.

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APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The interview guide was used to explore participants' experiences of digitally mediated connection, relationships, belonging, self-expression, online validation, and the opportunities and challenges associated with social-media use. The questions were organised thematically while allowing follow-up prompts where participants introduced relevant experiences.

Section A: Let's Break the Ice

1. Could you tell me a little about yourself and what a typical day looks like for you?
2. Which social media platforms do you use most frequently, and what do you actually use them for?
3. What role does social media play in your everyday life?

Section B: Connected...But What Does That Actually Mean?

1. When you hear the word *connection*, what does it mean to you?
2. What does be connected online mean to you personally?
3. Can you describe a time when social media made you feel genuinely connected to someone?
4. What makes an online interaction feel meaningful rather than just another interaction?

Section C: Friends, Followers & Everything in Between

1. How has social media influenced the way you form or maintain friendships?
2. What do you value most about maintaining friendships through social media?
3. How do online and face-to-face friendships complement or differ from one another?
4. Can you describe an online friendship or relationship that has been particularly meaningful to you?

Section D: The Brighter Side of Being Connected

1. What positive experiences has social media brought into your life?
2. Has social media ever helped you find a community, opportunity, or group of people with whom you identify?
3. In what ways has social media helped you express yourself or explore your identity?
4. Has social media ever helped you professionally, academically, creatively, or personally? Could you describe how?

Section E: The Tiny Red Heart

1. What do likes, comments, views, or other forms of online engagement mean to you?
2. Can you describe a time when something you shared online made you feel particularly seen, appreciated, or supported?
3. Have there also been times when online engagement or the lack of it affected how you felt about yourself or your relationships?

Section F: Real Me vs. Digital Me

1. How would you describe the relationship between who you are offline and how you present yourself online?
2. What influences what you choose to share or not share on social media?
3. Do you think social media gives young people opportunities to explore different aspects of their identity? Why or why not?

Section G: The Shadow Side

1. What challenges, if any, come with being socially connected online?
2. Have you ever experienced social media use as emotionally tiring, overwhelming, or demanding? Could you describe that experience?
3. Have there been times when being connected online did not provide the sense of closeness or belonging you expected?

Section H: One Last Scroll

1. Looking at your overall experience, would you say social media has mainly strengthened your sense of connection, created challenges, or done both? What makes you say that?

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