

EFFECT OF DIGITAL INTERACTION AND NETWORKING ON SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND COHESION

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ABSTRACT

Young people's participatory cultures and social networks have been profoundly impacted by the quick development and ongoing evolution of digital technology and social media platforms. Since digital technologies both improve social connection and create inequalities in access to participation, this junction of the social and digital spheres poses important problems regarding social cohesiveness. This research presents a qualitative study of 50 Pakistani tertiary students from ethnic minority backgrounds who actively utilize social media in order to investigate this interaction. The study uses interviews to look into how participants' practices of family and friendship are influenced by their digital possessions. By integrating these concepts, this paper reveals how young university students utilize social media and the extent to which digital interaction and networking affect social participation and cohesion. The conclusion highlights that while digital technologies can enhance feelings of belonging, they also create new expectations and obligations that may confine young people within limited online social networks. We conclude by identifying areas for future research to further enhance our understanding of belonging in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: Belonging, Digital interaction, Social media, Social cohesion.

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INTRODUCTION

Because of their physical infrastructure, capacity to link people and places, and the way digital information shapes social environments, technological innovations like the internet, mobile phones, and social media are not limited to a distinct "virtual" realm but rather are woven into the fabric of daily life. These technologies are essential to young people's everyday lives because they facilitate friendships and family

relationships, open up new avenues for community involvement, and help them feel like they belong in increasingly diverse cultures.

The impact of virtual settings on the sense of belonging, both locally and internationally, has not received much attention, despite the growing interest in more expansive conceptualizations of belonging [1-3]. Furthermore, we argue that

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there is still a lack of theoretical understanding of how these digital spaces affect people's sense of belonging, especially when it comes to intersectional analysis. Through messages, images, audio, and video information, social media provides a variety of synchronous and asynchronous communication options with friends and family who live abroad [4, 5]. These various social media-enabled communication channels are essential components of "polymedia," a sophisticated web of interrelated media platforms. Social media sites like Facebook, Skype, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Viber have emerged as crucial tools for promoting a sense of community and connection among a diverse spectrum of people. Members of migratory communities, whose lives frequently involve several relationships and identities, will find these tools extremely important. The growing accessibility and affordability of digital and mobile technologies, which influence how individuals engage on social media and other communication platforms, further expands the changing opportunities for social media communication.

Although social media and digital technologies are frequently linked to increased connectedness, especially in transnational and diasporic contexts, their widespread use also poses significant queries regarding the ways in which migrants interact with local social structures and the consequences for "social cohesion" [6]. Participation in social activities, public spaces, and community groups; acknowledgment of diverse identities; attachment to places; access to labor markets, income support, community resources, education, health, and housing; and the legitimacy derived from public institutions are some of the dimensions that make up social cohesion [7]. Even though these manifestations of social cohesion are

wide-ranging and diverse, they emphasize how crucial it is to build relationships between the various people, groups, and organizations that make up many modern civilizations.

It is also unclear if digital technologies can also promote relationships across a variety of differences—such as ethnicity, religion, class, sexual orientation, or age—and produce social formations that are both diverse and coherent, even though these tools are useful for social involvement. The constant drive to acquire and increase power and influence, from digital technologies and social networks, is one facet of this connected culture. This has led to the redefining and resettling of cultural, social, political, and personal borders between the private, corporate, and public spheres. These changing borders may have an impact on how people from immigrant backgrounds interact with friends and family in both domestic and international settings, which could have both beneficial and detrimental effects on their sense of belonging [8].

In particular, this essay looks at how digital media promotes social cohesiveness. Does a stronger sense of connection and belonging brought about by the increased usage of digital technology promote meaningful interactions across divides and improve social cohesion? Does it, on the other hand, undercut these chances by promoting social relationships within communities or across transnational areas, sometimes at the price of participation in a variety of local contexts and activities?

METHODOLOGY

This essay is based on research examining social media's function and effects on Pakistani university students' lives. 50 college students were chosen to take part in three different tasks designed to better understand how they use social media on a daily basis. Participants had to be between

the ages of 18 and 25 and use social media on a daily basis in order to be selected. In order to gauge their perceived usage of social media and the makeup of their social networks, they first filled out an online survey after being recruited. These interviews were done in order to delve deeper into the perspectives and deeper meanings of each participant's recent month's interactions and activities [9].

Young people negotiating challenging social circumstances make up the study's subjects. Our results corroborate this claim, but we also point out that this exploratory study had limitations because it only included a small and heterogeneous sample of tertiary students and that more research is necessary to fully address these intersections [10–12]. Two important facets of how social media affects participants' family and friendship interactions are covered in the content that follows. This first part looks at the many kinds of 'intimacies' that are available on various digital platforms and how they affect the way people manage these connections. Examining how participants saw their use of the digital world as both a choice and a limitation in their social connections, the second component goes over the culture of connectivity thesis once more.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social networks and digital intimacy. According to this study, migrant tertiary students' practices of friendship and family are changing as a result of digital platforms and technology. Numerous individuals mentioned how the digital world improves their in-person interactions and makes connections possible that would not otherwise be possible due to geographic distance. Digital tools like Viber actively support the upkeep of friendships and family ties across distances, as one participant pointed out. The claim that relationships are "purely based" on online

interactions draws attention to how digital technologies can promote social connections and, in some cases, a feeling of community among international groups. Even while not every participant had this opinion, these viewpoints show how digital technology have become commonplace in daily life, particularly for certain young people. For these individuals, online interactions not only serve practical purposes but also enhance feelings of meaning and attachment, allowing for expressions and actions that better reflect their individual desires. For young people who are ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities, these emotional benefits of digital interaction are perhaps understandable, given that they can self-select the terms of their social engagements in ways that may not be possible outside digital spaces [13].

It is important to acknowledge that other individuals also indicated a preference for in-person contact. The distinct intimacy provided by particular platforms—whether auditory, visual, asynchronous communication, or pictorial—influenced how participants engaged with both local and distant relatives and friends, despite the lack of agreement on the function of social media in creating meaningful connections. Thus, within participants' varied social networks, platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Viber, and Skype fulfilled distinct functions. These diverse manifestations of intimacy imply that social media is changing how migrant tertiary students interact with their families, especially those who reside abroad, for a large number of participants. Participants' usage of social media for friendship networks, on the other hand, functioned very differently—more as a means of improving local lives than as a transnational instrument. For instance, social media often served as a platform for vetting potential

friends, where existing online friends would conduct 'detective' work to determine if someone could be integrated into their social circles. In this context, individuals' self-presentation on social media platforms offered a self-aware method for others to understand them.

From this perspective, digital technologies not only facilitate connections with others but also require specific performances of self to establish and maintain relationship networks. In these spaces, individuals must carefully cultivate their online personas, as even seemingly innocuous 'likes' on Facebook can be seen as performances that are evaluated by current and potential future contacts [14]. Many participants said they were more conscious of the possibility that they would interact with profiles and status updates that were purposefully created for other people to view when they were social networking online. Because people typically only share the positive parts of their lives or upload photos that have been manipulated, there is constant debate regarding how social media influences people's self-confidence. When they see others on social media sites like Facebook who appear to be living ideal lives, many people get depressed. Posts about eating out, hanging out with pals, or taking road trips are more common than users sharing their difficulties.

Additionally, it was clear that social media had an impact on the frequency of encounters, increasing the prevalence and significance of transnational communication. Local family customs and friendships have increasingly moved online for certain individuals. According to one participant, social media helped them feel like they belonged and integrated a wider variety of everyday activities and social chances into their life as a less mobile student. By encouraging a sense of connection, joy, and belonging, these

technologies improve the quality of daily encounters. These accounts do, however, show that the digital environment is not a platform for connectivity that is available to everyone. Rather, it operates through particular connections, enhancing ties within particular social networks while simultaneously necessitating that people continuously act out their identities in online encounters. Social distinctions may occasionally be reinforced by this. We will examine how the normalizing of social media and other digital technologies shapes the intricate interaction between choice and constraint that gives rise to these unequal dynamics of digital sociality in the following section. Many individuals referred to their use of social media and their networks' use of it as a "addiction." Using various platforms was even compared by one person to a "religion." Although most participants were aware of the platforms they utilized and the persons they interacted with, there was a notable discrepancy between their perceived and actual time spent on social media, according to the pre-screening questionnaire and weekly diaries. Some said that as long as they had Wi-Fi, they were "available" online at all times.

Some people were motivated to consider how much time they were spending on social media and the possible harm to themselves or their relationships after taking part in a study regarding their usage. Through the diary exercise, they were shocked to learn how much time they actually spent on these websites. They also learned about their "lurking," content-posting, and replying behaviors, which they had been more conscious of over the study process. When asked if they made a conscious decision to interact online, many participants said they did so, but others said they hardly ever made themselves unavailable.

Whether they accept or attempt to control it, these extracts show how ubiquitous technology is in the lives of young people and the social pressure they face to fit in. They demonstrate how people can be pressured by social networks to participate more than they would like. Opting out of social media can be challenging and may limit one's capacity for social interaction, according to a number of participants. After finishing the weekly diary, one person chose to abstain from social media for three weeks, feeling pressured to return and even subjected to exclusion. Digital technology has become so intertwined with social interactions that participation, along with the associated norms of engagement and content creation, has become a requirement for belonging within certain social networks [15, 16].

Overall, the participant quotes show how digitally mediated communication is changing their relationships with friends and family, sometimes in significant ways. These new kinds of social interaction present significant issues about social cohesiveness and links to local communities since various social media platforms offer varying levels of closeness and manage distance.

This study shows that both facets of this dualism are strengthened and reinforced by digital connection. The majority of participants used social media to preserve and fortify ties among geographically scattered family networks. At the same time, local ties were developed or strengthened via a variety of social media channels, which sometimes supplanted in-person encounters[17]. Few participants critically assessed their social media use or its effects on in-person interactions since these digital platforms have become ingrained in their social practices. Some people found that social media strengthened their previous networks, yet relationships

may have changed from face-to-face to virtual exchanges. Participants discussed their experiences maintaining meaningful international relationships; many of them are migrants or the children of migrants. Different connective media platforms made it possible to connect in ways that would not be possible otherwise. Additionally, some individuals were exposed to new networks of belonging through social media activity, which resulted in connections they might not have otherwise sought in person. In particular, digital interactions develop a feeling of community that produces a deeper "situatedness" than is typically thought of in virtual social settings. The university setting has significantly leveled the playing field in terms of access because most students have free Wi-Fi, which enables them to stay in close contact with their numerous social media platforms and expand their online profile. The expense of data capacity presented difficulties for certain participants, but free Wi-Fi made sure they were included. As the research review points out, this capacity to traverse some components of the digital divide emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive societal analysis outside of the academic setting in order to address more general issues with social cohesiveness, participation, and digital belongings.

This study highlights the close relationship between social and technological processes in the digital lives of young people. The results presented here show that young people actively participate in the development of digital technologies and their impacts, in contrast to the idea of technologically determined social networking that is present in some social media literature. In order to demonstrate the interaction between social and technological factors, participants highlighted the importance of being online

at all times, the difficulties in managing disconnection, and the self-presentation on social media. Despite the fact that many participants indicated a preference for in-person contacts, the opportunities and responsibilities that come with online social involvement also have an impact on them. Many people find that social media's options and limitations give them a sense of social and digital belonging that they might not otherwise have [18]. But for other people, this sense of belonging is characterized by both inclusion and exclusion, which can have detrimental effects. We acknowledge that an overemphasis on cultural or ethnic differences may ignore the intricacies of belonging in digital environments, but we are careful about making assertions about how digital belonging affects other types of identification, such as ethnicity. These results highlight the need for more investigation into social media use, how social connections and personal identities are shaped, and the effects on societal and individual well-being.

We finish with thoughts on the need for more research in this area, even if this study provides important new insights into the digital/social nexus and its relationship to belonging. Despite the fact that this exploratory study focuses on a particular demographic, this report shows that social media has a substantial impact on how individuals socialize. To make more conclusive assertions regarding the effects on social cohesion within the digital/social nexus, a more comprehensive analysis across varied populations is necessary. For example, research shows that the date and context of a migrant's migration, together with the generational differences, have a substantial impact on their experiences of involvement, integration, and belonging in host society [19, 20].

Although it is evident that digital technologies have impacted these participants' social life, more comprehensive comparisons across various demographics are required to precisely determine the precise effects of digital participation. This theory also emphasizes how crucial it is to comprehend how different identities intersect with digital belonging, since some groups—especially hegemonic and ethnic majorities—have greater influence and power than others. Furthermore, it's critical to understand that, even with the development of digital technology, new tools don't always take the place of more traditional forms of communication [21, 22]. The users who engage with multiple types of digital technologies as employing 'layering connections,' where digital interaction is just one of many innovative ways people maintain connections, both near and far. Therefore, the role of digital technologies should be examined alongside other communication methods, including face-to-face interactions and phone calls.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how young college students use social media to develop friendships and familial bonds while redefining ideas of belonging. These interpersonal exchanges raise questions about the participation and social cohesiveness of small communities. But according to the analysis, participants are tech-savvy and frequently make calculated choices about whether or not to use particular online platforms. These decisions may be difficult, involuntary, or even inadvertent. The social-digital nexus highlights that the politics of belonging is a dynamic and disputed domain by showing how the culture of connectivity affects both individual lives and communal dynamics.

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