Dimensions of Communication Breakdown in Digitally Mediated Relationships

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the underlying dimensions, triggers, and relational consequences of communication breakdown in digitally mediated romantic relationships.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a qualitative, descriptive–interpretive design based on semi-structured interviews with 25 participants (aged 22–43) residing in Hungary, who were currently or recently engaged in digitally mediated romantic relationships. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in relationship status and digital communication usage. Data were collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews focusing on experiences of misunderstanding, conflict, and emotional distance in digital interactions. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Through an inductive coding process, emerging patterns were categorized into main themes and subthemes reflecting the nature and mechanisms of communication breakdown.

Findings: The thematic analysis yielded four core dimensions of communication breakdown: (1) message ambiguity and misinterpretation, characterized by unclear tone, emotional detachment, and misread digital cues; (2) conflict escalation and digital triggers, including public exposure, reactive messaging, and asynchronous argument cycles; (3) emotional disconnection and relationship drift, reflected in reduced intimacy, digital fatigue, and avoidance behaviors; and (4) technological mediation barriers, involving platform fragmentation, algorithmic interference, and privacy-related constraints. The results indicated that digital communication both enables and destabilizes intimacy by amplifying emotional uncertainty and reducing contextual understanding.

Conclusion: Findings highlight the paradoxical role of technology as both a facilitator and disruptor of intimacy in modern relationships. Effective digital communication requires emotional regulation, boundary awareness, and mindful technology use. Addressing the psychological and technical dimensions of digital interaction can enhance relational stability and prevent emotional estrangement among partners.

Keywords: *Digital intimacy; communication breakdown; relationship maintenance; emotional disconnection*

1. Introduction

The rise of digital technologies has profoundly transformed how individuals initiate, sustain, and end intimate relationships. Platforms such as instant messaging, video calls, and social media now play a central role in maintaining emotional bonds across both proximate and long-distance contexts (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). While these tools offer unprecedented access and immediacy, they also introduce novel complexities that can disrupt communication and intimacy. Research has shown that technologically mediated contact can foster closeness but simultaneously increase the risk of misunderstanding, over-interpretation, and relational dissatisfaction (Zhu, 2025). The paradox of digital intimacy lies in its ability to bridge physical separation while generating new forms of distance and vulnerability (Amber & Carole, 2009). In this evolving landscape, understanding how communication breakdown occurs within digitally mediated relationships is essential for advancing theory and practice in couple and family psychology.

Early scholarship on romantic closeness emphasized the importance of consistent and emotionally rich communication. However, the shift from physical to digital interaction has challenged these traditional relational models. For example, long-distance relationships—which once relied on infrequent letters or costly calls—are now sustained by multiple simultaneous channels such as voice, video, and text (Pazil, 2018). Yet despite enhanced contact, partners still report challenges interpreting tone, intent, and emotional nuance across digital interfaces (Pistole et al., 2010). Misinterpretations can accumulate over time, increasing perceived distance rather than reducing it. This dynamic is particularly relevant for couples whose primary mode of connection is virtual due to geographic mobility, career demands, or lifestyle choices (Pandya, 2025).

Migration and global labor mobility have intensified reliance on digital technologies to maintain intimate and family ties. Studies of transnational families show that although technology provides continuity of care and emotional presence, it also highlights and sometimes amplifies the burdens of separation (Parreñas, 2005). For couples divided by employment relocation, digital platforms become lifelines but also arenas of stress; sustained connectivity may lead to heightened monitoring and suspicion (Pisor et al., 2024). These concerns are echoed in the experiences of military and civilian women maintaining relationships across distance, who describe both empowerment and emotional strain when communication is primarily technology-mediated (Smith-Osborne & Jani, 2014). The dual nature of digital connection—its capacity to support and simultaneously destabilize relational bonds—is therefore a crucial focus for understanding communication breakdown.

Technological features themselves shape relationship dynamics. Emojis, typing indicators, message read receipts, and algorithm-driven suggestions create new symbolic layers in conversations. While these cues may supplement lost face-to-face elements, they can also produce anxiety and misreading of intent (Zhu, 2025). Public visibility—such as "last seen" statuses and social media activity—often triggers overinterpretation and relational tension (Timoshkin, 2023). Couples reported that an unexplained profile change or delayed response could escalate minor disagreements into persistent distrust (Amber & Carole, 2009). Moreover, the choice of digital channel (text versus video call) conveys relational meaning; frequent texting without richer media may signal disengagement or avoidance (Pazil, 2018). These patterns suggest that the affordances of digital communication not only mediate intimacy but also create new pathways for conflict escalation and emotional withdrawal.

The psychological and relational impact of digital communication is strongly linked to attachment and emotional regulation processes. Individuals with insecure attachment styles are more likely to misinterpret delayed responses or minimal digital affection as rejection, exacerbating conflict cycles (Pistole et al., 2010). Conversely, securely attached partners adapt more effectively by supplementing digital messages with clarifying cues or proactively shifting to voice or video when needed (Amber & Carole, 2009). Digital spaces also invite complex negotiations of boundaries. Couples must decide how public or private their exchanges should be and manage tensions between availability and autonomy (Zhu, 2025). Breaches such as sharing screenshots or involving third parties in digital disputes may erode trust and deepen breakdown (Regas, 2019).

At the same time, new research has begun exploring strategies for resilience in digitally mediated relationships. Mindfulness and intentional communication have been associated with higher satisfaction and emotional stability among long-distance couples (Pandya, 2025). Dedication, trust, and proactive relational work can mitigate the disorienting effects of technological mediation (Sawai et al., 2023). Importantly, scholars note that couples who frame

technology as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for intimacy often maintain greater relational health (Amber & Carole, 2009; Schafer et al., 2020). Furthermore, conceptual innovations from fields such as technology adoption and digital behavioral science suggest that conscious integration of new tools can enhance relational connection rather than undermine it (Seifi et al., 2024).

The cultural context also shapes how digital intimacy and communication breakdown are experienced. In rapidly globalizing societies, younger adults are more likely to normalize online emotional disclosure, while older or traditionally oriented individuals may see digital channels as insufficiently authentic (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023). National and socio-political factors influence digital relationship practices; for instance, in Russian digital media discourse, issues of nationalism and boundary maintenance affect perceptions of online intimacy (Timoshkin, 2023). Similarly, transnational family studies highlight how class and gender mediate the emotional burden of long-distance digital care (Parreñas, 2005). These findings emphasize that studying communication breakdown in digital relationships requires cultural sensitivity and a broad understanding of social forces shaping technology use.

Methodologically, the exploration of digital relationship dynamics benefits from qualitative approaches that capture lived experience and meaning-making. Rich narrative and thematic analysis allow researchers to go beyond frequency counts of technology use to reveal emotional undercurrents and interpretive struggles (Inman, 2023). Qualitative interviews and open-ended inquiry have uncovered how couples negotiate trust, intimacy, and conflict online while contending with shifting digital norms (Amber & Carole, 2009). Recent scholarship also advocates linking psychological theory with digital culture analysis to understand the symbolic and behavioral implications of technologically mediated love and friendship (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023; Zhu, 2025).

Despite growing interest, significant gaps remain in the literature. Much research to date has focused on long-distance partnerships generally, without examining the specific mechanisms of communication breakdown in digital contexts. Existing models of intimacy maintenance often predate or underrepresent the complexity of contemporary digital ecosystems (Schafer et al., 2020). There is also limited attention to how couples interpret and respond to the ambiguous signals created by technological mediation itself. Understanding these breakdowns is critical not only for couples' well-being but also for mental health practitioners and relationship counselors seeking to support partners who rely on technology for closeness (Regas, 2019).

Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by exploring the dimensions of communication breakdown in digitally mediated relationships.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research employed a qualitative design with an exploratory, descriptive–interpretive approach aimed at capturing the lived experiences and nuanced perspectives of individuals involved in digitally mediated romantic and close relationships. The study was grounded in a constructivist paradigm to allow participants' own meanings and interpretations to emerge naturally. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure maximum variation in age, gender, relationship status, and digital communication platform usage. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 20–45), currently or recently engaged in an intimate or emotionally significant relationship that was primarily or heavily mediated by digital channels (e.g., instant messaging, social media, video calls). Exclusion criteria included lack of experience with digital relationship maintenance or inability to communicate in English or Hungarian.

A total of 25 participants residing in Hungary were included in the study. Recruitment was conducted via online forums, relationship support groups, and social networks where calls for voluntary participation were posted. Sampling and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new conceptual categories emerged from the data.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews that explored participants' subjective experiences of communication breakdowns in their digitally mediated relationships. The interview guide was open-ended and flexible, with key prompts about situations where misunderstandings or conflicts emerged, perceived triggers of breakdown, emotional and relational consequences, and strategies attempted to repair or prevent such issues. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a quiet setting or via secure online video calls, depending on participants' preference and geographical accessibility. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-

recorded with informed consent. Field notes capturing nonverbal cues, contextual details, and researcher reflections were also maintained.

2.3.   Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim in their original language (Hungarian or English) and analyzed using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software. A thematic analysis approach guided the coding process. First, the research team immersed themselves in the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial open codes were inductively generated line by line to capture salient meanings. Codes were then clustered into higher-order categories, and axial coding was used to examine relationships among categories, focusing on patterns of communication breakdown, underlying triggers, and relational outcomes. The analysis was iterative, with constant comparison across interviews to refine and integrate emerging themes. Regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted to ensure analytic rigor and reduce subjective bias. Trustworthiness was further enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and conducting member checks with a subset of participants to confirm the interpretive accuracy of the findings.

3.   Findings and Results

The study included 25 individuals currently or recently involved in digitally mediated intimate relationships, all residing in Hungary. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 43 years (M = 31.4, SD = 5.6). The sample consisted of 14 women (56%) and 11 men (44%). In terms of relationship status, 16 participants (64%) were in a committed partnership or marriage, 7 (28%) were in long-term dating relationships, and 2 (8%) reported having recently ended their relationship but reflected on the digital communication breakdown that contributed to the separation. Regarding length of relationship, 9 participants (36%) had been together for less than three years, 10 (40%) for three to seven years, and 6 (24%) for more than seven years. Most participants reported daily reliance on multiple digital communication platforms, with WhatsApp (92%), Facebook Messenger (72%), and Instagram Direct (60%) being the most frequently used. Additionally, 15 participants (60%) indicated that their relationships were predominantly maintained through digital channels due to work or distance constraints, while 10 (40%) described using digital media alongside regular in-person interaction. These demographics reflect a varied and information-rich sample, enabling the study to capture diverse patterns of communication breakdown across different relationship stages and digital use contexts.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts

Main Theme (Category)	Subtheme (Subcategory)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Message Ambiguity and Misinterpretation	Unclear Textual Tone	sarcasm mistaken for seriousness; ambiguous emojis; missing punctuation; short abrupt replies; mixed use of humor; cultural nuance lost
	Delayed or Absent Responses	waiting anxiety; ghosting fears; double-checking "seen" status; overthinking silence; perceived disinterest
	Platform-Specific Limitations	auto-correct errors; predictive text distortions; translation inaccuracies; message trimming; reaction misfires
	Emotional Context Loss	missing nonverbal cues; tone not conveyed; feelings unexpressed; intention mismatch
	Overreliance on Written Channels	text dominating calls; reluctance to video chat; fear of voice calls; long text threads replacing talk
2. Conflict Escalation and Digital Triggers	Public Exposure and Privacy Breaches	sharing screenshots; posting grievances online; unapproved tagging; breach of private chat boundaries; digital shaming
	Passive-Aggressive Messaging	cold replies; emoji-only responses; cryptic status updates; subtle blocking/unfriending
	Overanalysis of Online Activity	checking last seen; story viewing interpretations; comparing response times; profile picture changes
	Instant Reactivity	heated impulsive replies; argument spirals; misclicked reactions; immediate retaliation
	Asynchronous Timing	arguments spanning hours/days; replaying old messages; mismatch in availability; night-time fights
	Escalation Through Group Chats	triangulation via friends; humiliation in group settings; peer commentary fueling tension
3. Emotional Disconnection and Relationship Drift	Reduced Intimacy Signals	fewer affectionate emojis; no check-ins; avoidance of video calls; dropping nicknames; neutral tone

	Routine but Shallow Exchanges	logistical talk only; transactional updates; loss of deep conversation; habitual "good morning/night" without warmth
	Avoidance and Withdrawal	muting notifications; dodging calls; prolonged response gaps; pretending busyness
	Feeling Ignored or Unprioritized	perceived devaluation; "seen-zoning"; parallel digital presence but no chat; postponed replies
	Fatigue with Digital Communication	screen burnout; emotional numbness; chat overload; preference for silence
4. Technological Mediation Barriers	Platform Overload and Fragmentation	juggling multiple apps; scattered conversations; losing context; switching fatigue
	Algorithmic Interference	suggested posts causing jealousy; algorithm-driven misunderstandings; intrusive ads changing mood
	Technical Failures	network dropouts; message unsent/delayed; call glitches; voice note issues
	Privacy and Security Concerns	reluctance to share personal details; encryption doubts; fear of hacking; deleted message suspicion
	Cross-Platform Boundary Confusion	unclear boundaries for sharing; multiple accounts; switching between personal/professional apps

Message Ambiguity and Misinterpretation

Participants consistently described how digital communication lacked the richness of face-to-face cues, leading to frequent message ambiguity and misinterpretation. A recurring pattern was unclear textual tone, where sarcasm or humor was easily misunderstood. One participant explained, *"I just joked about being late with a laughing emoji, but my partner thought I was angry. It turned into a small fight for nothing."* Others highlighted the "trap of emojis" that failed to communicate subtle emotional nuance. Delays or total silence further fueled tension; as one respondent shared, *"When I saw the double blue ticks but no reply for hours, I spiraled, thinking he was mad at me."* Many spoke about platform-specific limitations such as autocorrect errors and predictive text distorting intended messages, with one noting, *"My phone changed 'I'm fine' to 'I'm fire'—it sounded aggressive."* Participants also described the loss of emotional context, especially in sensitive conversations where tone and facial expression were crucial but missing. Overreliance on texting worsened these issues, with several avoiding calls or video chats despite recognizing their value; *"We texted about serious things we should have talked about on a call, but neither of us dared to pick up the phone,"* said one. This theme underscores how the stripped-down nature of digital interaction often magnifies misunderstandings and emotional vulnerability.

Conflict Escalation and Digital Triggers

Another strong theme revolved around how the digital environment itself amplified and escalated conflicts. Public exposure and privacy breaches emerged as particularly painful; some partners shared screenshots of private messages or posted grievances online. A participant expressed deep hurt: *"He put part of our argument on his story. Even if no names were there, everyone knew."*

Passive-aggressive messaging was also frequent—short, cold replies or cryptic status updates signaling discontent without direct confrontation. Others described how overanalysis of online activity provoked unnecessary suspicion: *"When she stopped liking my photos, I thought she lost interest; but really, she was just busy."* Quick, impulsive replies often turned minor misunderstandings into heated arguments, with one saying, *"I texted something in anger within seconds, and the conversation blew up."* Timing mismatches worsened matters as asynchronous conversations stretched conflicts for days. Group chat dynamics added another layer, with some partners bringing friends into disputes or humiliating one another publicly; *"He brought up our private issue in a group chat with his friends. I felt betrayed."* These accounts reveal how digital platforms—designed for connection—can inadvertently act as accelerators of conflict when privacy boundaries and emotional regulation falter.

Emotional Disconnection and Relationship Drift

Participants described a gradual emotional disconnection and drift when digital contact became routine yet shallow. Many felt that intimacy signals faded over time, with fewer affectionate emojis, playful nicknames, or spontaneous check-ins. *"Before, he would send random hearts or silly selfies; now it's just 'ok' or 'see you.'"* Several noted that conversations devolved into logistics rather than meaningful dialogue: *"We mostly text about bills or groceries; the warmth is gone."* Avoidance and withdrawal were common; some muted notifications or delayed replies as a subtle escape from emotional closeness. One participant reflected, *"I stopped answering quickly because I didn't feel excited anymore. But that just made us drift further apart."* Feelings of being ignored or unprioritized surfaced when partners remained active online but disengaged in the relationship space: *"He was online, commenting on friends' posts but*

hadn't answered my message from yesterday." Over time, many experienced digital fatigue—a sense of burnout from constant online presence, preferring silence over superficial chatter. These narratives illustrate how technologically mediated contact, if left unbalanced, may shift from intimacy maintenance to emotional distance.

Technological Mediation Barriers

Finally, participants emphasized the barriers inherent in technological mediation itself, where the structure of platforms and devices complicated connection. Platform overload and fragmentation forced couples to juggle multiple apps, often losing conversational continuity; *"We started a chat on Instagram, continued on WhatsApp, and forgot half the things we said."* Algorithms also played an unexpected role, surfacing jealousy or insecurity; *"TikTok showed me her old likes with someone else, and it ruined my mood for hours."* Technical failures—such as poor internet, delayed messages, or glitchy calls—interrupted important conversations and created suspicion about avoidance: *"The call dropped three times during a serious talk; I felt like he didn't care enough to fix it."* Privacy and security concerns further shaped communication, with some withholding vulnerability due to fear of hacking or screenshots; *"I didn't dare say everything because chats can be saved forever."* Confusion about boundaries across platforms also emerged, especially in couples blending personal and professional apps. These reflections demonstrate how technological systems are not neutral backdrops but active contexts shaping how intimacy is negotiated and potentially obstructed.

4.   Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed four interrelated dimensions of communication breakdown in digitally mediated relationships: message ambiguity and misinterpretation, conflict escalation and digital triggers, emotional disconnection and relationship drift, and technological mediation barriers. Together, these themes illustrate how digital tools, while intended to facilitate closeness and continuous contact, can inadvertently destabilize romantic relationships when their use is unstructured or unreflective.

The first dimension, *message ambiguity and misinterpretation*, reflected the fragility of meaning when cues such as tone, facial expression, and body language are absent. Participants described misunderstandings arising from unclear textual tone, emojis, and delayed responses.

These results align with earlier work demonstrating that the absence of nonverbal cues in digital interactions fosters relational uncertainty and misreading of partner intentions (Amber & Carole, 2009; Pazil, 2018). The phenomenon of "overthinking silence," where delays are taken as signals of rejection or anger, echoes research showing how long-distance and technology-dependent couples are especially prone to anxiety over response latency (Pistole et al., 2010). Moreover, the challenges participants reported in balancing text with richer communication modes such as voice or video reinforce findings that diversified media use supports intimacy maintenance and reduces misunderstanding (Sawai et al., 2023). The data extend these prior observations by unpacking specific triggers—such as predictive text distortions and cultural nuance loss—that have not been thoroughly conceptualized in previous frameworks.

The second dimension, *conflict escalation and digital triggers*, highlighted the ways digital environments amplify tensions once a misunderstanding occurs. Public exposure of private exchanges through screenshots or social media posts was described as deeply hurtful and trust-eroding. Prior scholarship has similarly warned that blurred boundaries between private and public spheres increase the vulnerability of intimate exchanges to breach and humiliation (Regas, 2019; Zhu, 2025). Participants' accounts of passive-aggressive behaviors—cryptic statuses, cold replies, and selective blocking—mirror findings that technology can become an indirect battleground where dissatisfaction is signaled rather than addressed (Amber & Carole, 2009). In addition, the constant visibility of a partner's online activities provoked heightened suspicion and comparative evaluation, confirming studies showing that "last seen," "read receipts," and social media engagement cues generate anxiety and jealousy (Timoshkin, 2023). Our analysis refines these observations by demonstrating how asynchronous timing prolongs disputes, allowing arguments to stretch and intensify over hours or days, a process underexplored in earlier research on conflict cycles.

The third dimension, *emotional disconnection and relationship drift*, provides an important complement to previous intimacy and satisfaction studies. Participants frequently described a slow erosion of closeness as conversations became transactional and emotionally flat. This aligns with research indicating that satisfaction in romantic relationships depends on continuous investment in emotional depth and shared meaning (Inman, 2023; Schafer et al., 2020). A particularly noteworthy insight is how "digital fatigue" emerged as a silent driver of

disengagement, with partners preferring silence to the strain of constant online contact. While prior studies have focused on distance and attachment style (Pandya, 2025; Pistole et al., 2010), our findings underscore the role of technological overload itself in producing numbness and relational withdrawal. Additionally, perceptions of being deprioritized—such as when partners remain socially active online but ignore intimate messages—expand on prior work about monitoring and jealousy (Pisor et al., 2024; Smith-Osborne & Jani, 2014). This dynamic illustrates the psychological weight of digital comparison and the subtle yet powerful cues of neglect embedded in everyday platform use.

The fourth dimension, *technological mediation barriers*, sheds light on the systemic constraints and risks introduced by technology itself. Participants pointed to platform fragmentation, algorithmic intrusion, and technical failures as disruptors of intimacy. These observations resonate with research on how digital ecosystems shape—not merely host—relationship dynamics (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023; Zhu, 2025). The interplay between app overload and emotional strain also parallels Seifi's (Seifi et al., 2024) argument that poorly integrated technology use can reduce user well-being and generate cognitive fatigue. Algorithmic recommendations leading to jealousy and insecurity—such as resurfaced past posts or suggested content about former partners—corroborate findings on how unintended algorithmic curation influences emotional climates (Timoshkin, 2023). Additionally, privacy anxieties described by participants align with Parreñas's (Parreñas, 2005) observation that digital intimacy in transnational settings is tempered by fear of surveillance and permanent record-keeping. Our findings add nuance by showing how these anxieties contribute not only to self-censorship but also to reduced vulnerability, a key precursor to emotional connection.

Across these themes, attachment theory and intimacy maintenance models remain highly relevant but require refinement for the digital era. Secure partners appear better equipped to compensate for technological ambiguity by initiating clarifying conversations or shifting to richer channels (Amber & Carole, 2009; Sawai et al., 2023). In contrast, anxiously attached individuals interpret ambiguous cues as threats, consistent with Pistole's (Pistole et al., 2010) work on relational stress in long-distance contexts. However, this study suggests that beyond individual differences, the architecture of digital platforms itself acts as an "attachment amplifier," intensifying sensitivity to perceived distance and rejection. Integrating these findings with models of mindful relational maintenance (Pandya, 2025; Regas, 2019) could help update conceptual frameworks for modern couple dynamics.

Our data also confirm and expand on scholarship examining cultural and structural contexts. While previous studies have highlighted migration and geographic separation as risk factors for digital relationship strain (Parreñas, 2005; Pisor et al., 2024; Smith-Osborne & Jani, 2014), the Hungarian participants in this study reflected a broader global experience where even geographically close partners increasingly depend on digital contact. This suggests that "digital long distance" may now occur without physical separation—a phenomenon less addressed in earlier work. Furthermore, technological adaptation in higher education and professional spheres, as described by Seifi (Seifi et al., 2024), parallels couples' struggles to integrate multiple apps and manage communication boundaries. These cross-domain parallels emphasize that digital skillfulness and intentional design matter not just in workplaces but also in intimate life.

By identifying specific triggers—delayed replies, public exposure, algorithmic cues—and linking them to relational consequences such as mistrust, avoidance, and fatigue, this study advances the field from broad acknowledgment of "digital challenges" toward a more precise map of communication breakdown. It also confirms the dual-edged nature of technology: while enabling connection across space and time (Pandya, 2025; Sawai et al., 2023), it introduces vulnerabilities that couples must actively navigate. These insights are critical for clinicians, educators, and technologists aiming to support healthy digital relational patterns.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample size, while sufficient for thematic saturation, was relatively small and geographically concentrated in Hungary. Cultural norms about privacy, communication style, and technology use may have shaped participants' narratives, potentially limiting generalizability to other cultural or relational contexts. Second, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces recall bias and social desirability effects; participants may have emphasized or omitted details based on emotional salience or self-protection. Third, the study explored intimate relationships

without differentiating among various relational stages and types (dating vs. married, cohabiting vs. apart), which may influence the meaning and impact of digital communication breakdown. Finally, the study did not include direct observation of digital interactions; analyzing live message exchanges or multi-modal communication patterns could have enriched and validated self-reported accounts.

Future research should explore how these communication breakdown patterns manifest across diverse cultural and social groups, particularly in non-Western contexts and among populations with different digital literacy levels. Comparative studies could examine whether similar triggers and dynamics occur in cultures with varying privacy norms or technology adoption patterns. Longitudinal designs are recommended to understand how breakdowns and repairs evolve over time, particularly during major life transitions such as migration, parenthood, or career relocation. Incorporating digital trace data—such as anonymized chat records or platform analytics—could offer richer insights into the relationship between actual digital behaviors and subjective experiences. Additionally, integrating quantitative methods to measure the emotional and relational impact of specific triggers, such as delayed responses or algorithmic exposure, would allow for stronger generalizability and intervention design.

Practitioners working in couple and family therapy should consider integrating digital literacy and mindful technology use into their interventions. Helping partners recognize and manage the limitations of digital cues, intentionally diversify communication channels, and establish healthy privacy and responsiveness boundaries can reduce misinterpretation and conflict. Relationship education programs may incorporate training on algorithm awareness and social media boundary negotiation to prevent unintentional hurt or jealousy. Technology developers and platform designers can also benefit from these findings by creating features that promote clarity and emotional safety rather than anxiety—such as optional read receipts or contextual explanations of delays. Finally, counselors and educators can use these insights to normalize the challenges of digital love, reducing shame and opening space for intentional, adaptive relational practices in a digital age.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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