

Digital Intimacy: How Technology Shapes Friendships and Romantic Relationships

Kamdin Parsakia¹ , Mehdi Rostami^{1*} 

¹ Department of Psychology and Counseling, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada

* Corresponding author email address: mehdirostami@kmanresce.ca

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to investigate the dynamics of digital intimacy, including how individuals use digital platforms to initiate, maintain, and navigate their personal relationships. It seeks to identify the main themes related to digital intimacy, the challenges and benefits associated with it, and the strategies individuals employ to manage their digital relationships. Employing a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 participants divided into two groups: individuals involved in digital relationships and professionals in the fields of psychology, sociology, and technology. The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and categories related to digital intimacy. The study identified seven main themes associated with digital intimacy: Formation of Digital Intimacy, Maintenance of Relationships, Challenges of Digital Intimacy, Benefits of Digital Intimacy, Navigating Digital and Offline Worlds, Evolution of Digital Intimacy, and Characteristics of Digital Intimacy. These themes encompass various aspects of digital relationships, including the initiation and maintenance processes, the role of digital platforms in facilitating emotional connections, and the challenges of privacy, security, and miscommunication. Digital intimacy plays a significant role in shaping modern friendships and romantic relationships, offering both opportunities and challenges. While digital platforms facilitate the formation and maintenance of connections across distances, they also introduce complexities in communication, privacy, and the integration of digital and offline lives. Understanding these dynamics is essential for individuals and professionals working to navigate the digital landscape of personal relationships.

Keywords: *Digital Intimacy, Personal Relationships, Online Communication, Social Media, Privacy.*

1. Introduction

The advent of the digital age has ushered in profound changes in the way individuals form, maintain, and understand relationships, giving rise to the concept of digital intimacy. This phenomenon has become a focal point for scholarly inquiry as technology increasingly

mediates personal interactions, reshaping the landscape of human connections in both visible and nuanced ways. Digital intimacy encapsulates the myriad ways in which individuals leverage digital media platforms to exchange personal details, thoughts, and emotions, fostering connections that transcend the limitations of physical proximity (Lupton, 2017). This evolution in relationship

dynamics prompts a reevaluation of intimacy in the digital era, questioning the depth and authenticity of connections formed and maintained through screens.

The scholarly debate surrounding digital intimacy is complex and multifaceted, touching on a variety of aspects from the transformation of social media platforms by personal relationships to their role in creating new forms of intimacy (Chambers, 2016). This discourse is not limited to romantic partnerships but extends to friendships and familial bonds, each affected differently by the digital revolution. The exploration of how LGBTQ+ youth utilize dating apps not just for romance but as a means of finding community and safety further illustrates the diverse applications of digital platforms in forming intimate connections (Byron et al., 2020). These digital intimate publics serve as battlegrounds where social and sexual communication practices intertwine, revealing the layered complexities of digital intimacy.

Another dimension of this discussion focuses on the role of algorithms and data analytics in shaping intimate relationships. The notion that intimacy can be engineered or enhanced through digital technologies highlights the intersection between human emotion and computational logic, offering insights into how personal connections evolve in an age of ubiquitous digital engagement (Wiehn, 2022). This interplay between technology and intimacy raises critical questions about the authenticity and depth of relationships fostered under the influence of algorithmic mediation.

The impact of digital technology extends beyond romantic and sexual relationships to influence the dynamics of friendship and familial bonds. The study of international students and transnational families has shed light on how digital media supports the maintenance of family relationships across distances. Yet, the emotional richness of friendships and the role of intimacy within support networks often remain underexplored, suggesting a gap in our understanding of digital intimacy from a culturally comparative perspective (Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). Furthermore, the educative potential of digital intimacies, particularly in the realm of sex education and the negotiation of relationships among young people, underscores the multifunctionality of digital platforms in facilitating learning and exploration in intimate domains (Scott et al., 2020).

As the digital realm becomes increasingly central to the formation and sustenance of relationships, the importance of face-to-face interactions in validating and deepening the

trust and intimacy developed through digital means has been emphasized (Lai & Fung, 2019). This highlights a paradox at the heart of digital intimacy: while technology enables connections that might otherwise be impossible, it also prompts a reconsideration of what constitutes genuine intimacy. The evolution of friendship quality within digital spaces, particularly among adolescents, further illustrates how digital interactions mirror offline dynamics, including validation, conflict resolution, and intimacy (Angelini et al., 2022). This reflection of offline relationships in digital contexts underscores the adaptability of human connections to technological advancements.

Moreover, the exploration of digital platforms in facilitating collaborative practices among employees and balancing work-family life dynamics illustrates the broader implications of digital intimacy beyond personal relationships (Leonardi et al., 2019). The orchestration of relationships in digital contexts reflects a broader societal shift towards integrating technology into the fabric of daily life, blurring the lines between personal and professional spheres.

In synthesizing these diverse perspectives, it becomes clear that digital intimacy is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of human experiences. From fostering new forms of connection to reshaping existing relationships, technology plays a pivotal role in defining the contours of intimacy in the 21st century. This study aims to delve deeper into these dynamics, exploring the complexities of digital intimacy through the lens of those who navigate its challenges and opportunities daily.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the nuances of digital intimacy and its impact on friendships and romantic relationships. Our aim was to understand the subjective experiences of individuals navigating their personal connections through digital platforms and to gather insights from professionals in the field of psychology, sociology, and technology. By focusing on qualitative data, we aimed to capture the depth and complexity of digital intimacy phenomena that quantitative methods might overlook.

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique to ensure a diverse representation of experiences with digital intimacy. The sample included individuals of varying ages, sexual orientations, relationship statuses, and

cultural backgrounds. Inclusion criteria required participants to have had experience with maintaining friendships or romantic relationships through digital means (e.g., social media, messaging apps, online dating platforms) for at least one year. Additionally, professionals working within the realms of psychology, sociology, or technology and specializing in digital communication or relationships were recruited to provide expert perspectives on the phenomena under study.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Prior to participation, all individuals were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and the measures taken to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Pseudonyms are used throughout the presentation of findings to maintain the anonymity of participants.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both guided questions and the flexibility for participants to share their experiences and insights freely. The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and preliminary consultations with experts in related fields. Key areas of inquiry included the role of technology in initiating and maintaining relationships, perceived benefits and challenges of digital intimacy, and strategies used to navigate digital and offline boundaries. Interviews with professionals focused on their observations of trends, psychological impacts, and the evolving nature of digital intimacy. All interviews were conducted virtually, using secure video conferencing tools, to accommodate the digital context of the study and the geographical diversity of the participants. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. For normal individuals the questions included:

"Can you describe how you first connected with your friend/partner through digital platforms? What role did these platforms play in the development of your relationship?"

"How do you build and maintain trust in a relationship that is primarily maintained through digital means? Can you share any specific practices or experiences?"

"Could you walk me through the types of digital interactions you engage in on a daily basis with your friend/partner? How do these interactions contribute to your sense of closeness?"

"What are some of the most significant challenges you've faced in maintaining your relationship digitally? How have you addressed these challenges?"

For professionals the questions were as follows:

"From your professional perspective, how has digital technology transformed the way individuals form and maintain intimate relationships?"

"In your experience, what are the most impactful digital communication tools or platforms for fostering intimacy? Can you provide examples?"

"What challenges have you observed individuals facing in their digital relationships, and what advice do you typically offer?"

"How do you see the role of digital technology in intimate relationships evolving in the future? Are there any emerging trends that concern or excite you?"

"Can you describe what privacy means to you in the context of social media? How do you define or understand privacy when using these platforms?"

"Could you share a specific experience where you felt your privacy was at risk due to the information you shared on social media? How did you respond to this situation?"

"How do you manage your privacy settings on social media platforms? Can you walk me through the steps you take to adjust these settings and what factors influence these decisions?"

"Have your concerns about privacy affected how you use social media? For example, have you changed the type of content you share, reduced your social media usage, or taken any other actions as a result of privacy concerns?"

"Looking forward, what changes or improvements would you like to see regarding privacy protection on social media platforms? Are there specific tools or policies you think would help users better manage their privacy?"

2.3. Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved a detailed coding process, where initial codes were generated and then collated into potential themes. These themes were reviewed and refined iteratively until a coherent pattern of findings emerged. The analysis aimed to reach theoretical saturation, where no new themes or insights were observed

in the data, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the topic.

3. Findings

The study comprised two distinct groups of participants, totaling 28 individuals. The first group included 18 participants who are actively involved in friendships or romantic relationships primarily maintained through digital platforms. This group was diverse, consisting of 10 females and 8 males, with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years, reflecting a wide spectrum of digital communication experiences. Participants in this group hailed from various

backgrounds, including students, professionals, and creatives, ensuring a rich diversity of perspectives on digital intimacy.

The second group consisted of 10 professionals with expertise in the fields of psychology, sociology, and digital communication technologies, providing insightful professional perspectives on digital intimacy. This group included 6 females and 4 males, with a broader age range of 25 to 50 years, representing seasoned practitioners, researchers, and thought leaders deeply engaged in the exploration of digital relationship dynamics.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis through Coding Process

Main Themes	Categories	Concepts
1. Formation of Digital Intimacy	1.1 Initial Connection	Online dating platforms, Social media friendships
	1.2 Communication Patterns	Frequency of messaging, Types of platforms used, Emoji and GIFs communication, Privacy settings
	1.3 Building Trust	Sharing personal stories, Digital gifts, Security measures
2. Maintenance of Relationships	2.1 Daily Interactions	Digital routines, Emotional support, Sharing multimedia content
	2.2 Role of Digital Spaces	Shared online activities, Private vs. public interaction
3. Challenges of Digital Intimacy	3.1 Privacy and Security	Data sharing concerns, Stalking, Digital footprint management, Encryption use
	3.2 Emotional Disconnection	Over-reliance on digital communication, Lack of physical cues
	3.3 Boundary Management	Work-life balance, Digital detox
4. Benefits of Digital Intimacy	3.4 Miscommunication	Tone misinterpretations, Delayed responses
	4.1 Accessibility and Inclusivity	Long-distance connections, Disability access
	4.2 Enhancing Emotional Bonds	Instant support availability, Sharing digital content, Virtual companionship, Memory sharing
5. Navigating Digital and Offline Worlds	5.1 Blending Lives	Integrating digital and physical aspects, Creating traditions, Online and offline anniversary celebrations
	5.2 Managing Expectations	Reality vs. online persona, Transition challenges
6. Evolution of Digital Intimacy	6.1 Changing Norms	Shifts in communication etiquette, Evolving relationship definitions, Role of social media
	6.2 Technological Impact	Influence of new platforms, Enhanced communication tools, Privacy and security advancements
	6.3 Adaptation Strategies	Developing digital literacy, Setting boundaries, Cultivating resilience
	7.1 Depth and Breadth of Communication	Varied communication channels, Emotional expressiveness
7. Characteristics of Digital Intimacy	7.2 Flexibility and Convenience	Asynchronous communication, Ease of staying in touch
	7.3 Public vs. Private Interactions	Social media visibility, Private messaging dynamics
	7.4 Autonomy and Interdependence	Individual digital identities, Shared digital activities

Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with involved individuals and professionals in the field, we've identified seven main themes that encapsulate the essence of digital intimacy.

3.1. Formation of Digital Intimacy

The journey into digital intimacy often begins with an Initial Connection through online dating platforms or social

media friendships, where "the ease of initiating conversations online made me more confident," one participant noted. The Communication Patterns that develop subsequently are marked by diverse platforms usage, from texts to video calls, highlighting the role of "emojis and GIFs in expressing emotions we can't put into words," another interviewee shared. Building Trust in these nascent stages involves sharing personal stories and digital gifts, with one respondent emphasizing, "Security measures

on these platforms made me feel safer about who I was connecting with."

3.2. *Maintenance of Relationships*

As digital relationships evolve, Daily Interactions become a tapestry of digital routines and multimedia content sharing, where one partner mentioned, "Sharing the mundane aspects of our day brings us closer, despite the physical distance." The Role of Digital Spaces in maintaining these connections is also crucial, serving as venues for shared online activities and balancing private versus public interactions.

3.3. *Challenges of Digital Intimacy*

Participants reported several challenges, including concerns over Privacy and Security, where one lamented, "The fear of data breaches has made us cautious about what we share." Emotional Disconnection and Boundary Management were noted, with a participant stating, "It's hard to read emotions through text, and misunderstandings happen more often than we'd like." Miscommunication also emerged as a significant hurdle, with delayed responses or tone misinterpretations leading to conflicts.

3.4. *Benefits of Digital Intimacy*

Yet, the digital realm brings undeniable Benefits, offering Accessibility and Inclusivity for long-distance partners and those with disabilities. It also Enhances Emotional Bonds, as one interviewee put it, "The ability to send a message or share a photo instantly keeps our connection alive."

3.5. *Navigating Digital and Offline Worlds*

The blending of Digital and Offline Worlds requires managing expectations between online personas and reality, with couples finding ways to integrate their digital interactions with physical meetings.

3.6. *Evolution of Digital Intimacy*

As digital intimacy Evolves, changing norms and technological impacts influence how relationships are defined and experienced. Participants highlighted the need for Adaptation Strategies to navigate these changes, emphasizing digital literacy and setting boundaries.

3.7. *Characteristics of Digital Intimacy*

Our study elucidates specific Characteristics of Digital Intimacy, including the depth and breadth of communication facilitated by digital tools. Flexibility and Convenience stand out, allowing partners to stay connected asynchronously. Yet, navigating the dynamics of Public vs. Private Interactions and maintaining a balance between Autonomy and Interdependence presents ongoing challenges. As one participant reflected, "Our shared digital activities have become a cornerstone of our relationship, showcasing both our individuality and unity."

4. **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore the concept of digital intimacy, revealing how technology shapes and influences friendships and romantic relationships. Through qualitative analysis, we identified key themes including the formation and maintenance of relationships through digital platforms, the challenges and benefits of digital intimacy, and the nuanced characteristics of these digitally-mediated connections. Our findings highlight the complexity of navigating intimacy in the digital age, underscoring the importance of communication patterns, trust-building, privacy, and the balance between online and offline interactions.

In our qualitative exploration of digital intimacy and its impact on friendships and romantic relationships, we identified seven main themes through semi-structured interviews with participants. These themes encapsulate the multifaceted nature of digital intimacy, ranging from the formation and maintenance of relationships to the challenges and benefits that arise within digital contexts. The themes include Formation of Digital Intimacy, Maintenance of Relationships, Challenges of Digital Intimacy, Benefits of Digital Intimacy, Navigating Digital and Offline Worlds, Evolution of Digital Intimacy, and Characteristics of Digital Intimacy. Each theme is further divided into categories, providing a detailed framework for understanding the complexities of digital relationships.

The Formation of Digital Intimacy theme revealed how initial connections are fostered through digital platforms, with categories highlighting Initial Connection, Communication Patterns, and Building Trust. Participants described using online dating platforms and social media to meet new friends or romantic partners, emphasizing the importance of frequent messaging and the use of emojis and GIFs for emotional expression. Building trust in this

digital landscape often involved sharing personal stories and using digital gifts, underpinned by a reliance on platform security measures to safeguard these budding connections.

Under the Maintenance of Relationships theme, the categories of Daily Interactions and Role of Digital Spaces were prominent. Participants shared how digital routines and the sharing of multimedia content played a crucial role in their daily interactions, maintaining emotional bonds across distances. The Role of Digital Spaces category revealed how shared online activities and the careful management of private versus public interactions helped sustain these relationships.

The Challenges of Digital Intimacy theme encompassed categories such as Privacy and Security, Emotional Disconnection, Boundary Management, and Miscommunication. Concerns about data sharing and digital footprint management were common, as were challenges related to over-reliance on digital communication leading to emotional disconnection. Participants discussed the difficulty of managing boundaries between digital and offline lives and the frequent misinterpretations and misunderstandings that arose from digital communication.

In discussing the Benefits of Digital Intimacy, categories included Accessibility and Inclusivity, and Enhancing Emotional Bonds. Participants valued the ease of maintaining long-distance connections and the inclusivity for individuals with disabilities. They also noted how digital platforms facilitated instant support and companionship, enhancing the emotional quality of their relationships.

The Navigating Digital and Offline Worlds theme focused on Blending Lives and Managing Expectations, with participants sharing how they integrated digital interactions with physical meetings. The challenges of aligning online personas with offline realities were also discussed, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between digital and physical presence in sustaining relationships.

The Evolution of Digital Intimacy theme explored the Changing Norms, Technological Impact, and Adaptation Strategies categories. Participants reflected on how digital communication etiquette and relationship definitions have evolved, noting the significant influence of new platforms and technologies. Adaptation strategies, such as developing digital literacy and setting boundaries, were key to navigating these changes.

Lastly, the Characteristics of Digital Intimacy theme revealed the Depth and Breadth of Communication, Flexibility and Convenience, Public vs. Private Interactions, and Autonomy and Interdependence. These categories encapsulated the various ways digital platforms enable diverse and expressive communication, offer convenience in maintaining connections, navigate the dynamics between public and private spaces, and balance individual identity with shared digital activities.

The findings align with and are supported by a robust body of existing research, illuminating the complex dynamics of digital-mediated relationships. For example, Angelini et al. (2022) underscored the pivotal role of social media features, online social support, and e-motions in shaping the quality of friendships during adolescence. Our study echoes these findings, revealing how digital platforms serve as vital spaces for expressing and experiencing emotions, thus fostering deeper connections (Angelini et al., 2022). This resonates with participants' narratives about the importance of digital routines and multimedia content sharing in maintaining daily interactions, enhancing the emotional bonds that underpin digital intimacy.

Similarly, the exploration of LGBTQ+ young people's use of dating apps for friendship and safety by Byron et al. (2020) complements our insights into the formation of digital intimacy. Our findings highlight how digital platforms facilitate initial connections, offering unique opportunities for marginalized groups to form safe, supportive networks (Byron et al., 2020). This intersection of social and sexual communication practices in digital intimate publics suggests a broader reconfiguration of intimacy, aligning with Chambers' (2016) concept of networked intimacy and scalable sociality (Chambers, 2016).

The impact of technology on couple relationships, as explored by Campbell and Murray (2015), also finds echo in our study. The dual role of technology as both a facilitator and a barrier to intimacy reflects the nuanced ways in which digital tools influence the development and maintenance of romantic relationships. This duality is further exemplified by Garza et al. (2020), who examined the intersection of intimacy, technology, and health, revealing how technological interventions in health management could impact relationship dynamics (Garza et al., 2020).

The findings extends to the broader societal impacts of digital technology on relationships. For instance, the role of

technology in enhancing employee performance (Imran et al., 2014) and affecting customer satisfaction and business relationships (Ryding, 2010; Sanders, 2007) parallels our findings on the professional perspectives towards digital intimacy. The technological orchestration of relationships, whether in personal, professional, or commercial contexts, suggests a pervasive influence of digital tools across various spheres of life.

Furthermore, the exploration of privacy-enhancing technology (Hasani et al., 2023) and its implications for intimate relationships highlights a growing concern for security and trust in the digital age. This concern is mirrored in our study's emphasis on privacy, security, and trust-building in digital intimate relationships. The integration of technology in managing intimacy not only reshapes personal connections but also prompts critical reflections on privacy, consent, and ethical technology use.

The exploration of digital intimacy in this study illuminates the intricate ways in which individuals use technology to forge and foster personal connections. Digital platforms offer both opportunities and challenges, serving as tools for creating meaningful interactions while also introducing potential for miscommunication and privacy concerns. This dual nature of digital intimacy reflects the evolving landscape of personal relationships, wherein technology plays a pivotal role in shaping modern connections. The study underscores the significance of understanding these dynamics to better navigate the intersection of technology and intimacy in the digital era.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study, while providing important insights, is not without limitations. The sample size and demographic diversity may limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data might introduce bias in participants' responses about their privacy concerns and behaviors. These limitations underscore the need for cautious interpretation of the findings and their application.

Future research should consider expanding the sample size and including a broader demographic to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could also offer deeper insights into how privacy concerns and protective behaviors evolve over time. Additionally, exploring the impact of emerging social media platforms and technologies on privacy concerns could provide

valuable insights into the ever-changing landscape of online privacy.

The study's findings have important implications for social media platform developers and policymakers. There is a critical need for the development of more user-friendly privacy settings and tools that can help mitigate privacy fatigue and empower users to manage their privacy more effectively. Educating users about privacy risks and protective strategies is also essential. For policymakers, these findings highlight the importance of developing regulations that ensure social media platforms uphold high privacy standards, protecting users' personal information from misuse.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The qualitative approach, while offering in-depth insights, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the sample size and diversity, although purposive, may not fully capture the wide range of experiences and perspectives on digital intimacy. The rapidly evolving nature of digital technology also means that the findings may not encompass emerging trends or platforms that could influence digital intimacy in unforeseen ways.

Future research should aim to broaden the scope of inquiry into digital intimacy, incorporating larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how digital intimacy evolves over time, particularly in response to technological advancements. Furthermore, exploring the impact of emerging technologies, such as augmented reality and artificial intelligence, on intimate relationships could offer new perspectives on the future of digital connections.

For practitioners working in the fields of counseling, psychology, and relationship therapy, these findings underscore the importance of considering the role of digital technology in clients' relationships. Integrating discussions on digital intimacy into therapeutic practices could help individuals and couples navigate the complexities of their digital interactions more effectively. Moreover, this study highlights the need for digital literacy programs that educate individuals on managing privacy, security, and communication in online spaces, ultimately fostering healthier and more fulfilling digital relationships.

Authors' Contributions

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

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Declaration

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

Declaration of Interest

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Transparency Statement

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

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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