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CONNECTION WITHOUT CLOSENESS: A REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION, LONELINESS, AND EVERYDAY WELLBEING AMONG UNIVERSITY YOUTH IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The contemporary generation of Pakistani university youth has grown up under conditions of continuous digital connectivity, yet accounts of their everyday lives are increasingly marked by narratives of loneliness, comparison-driven strain and the thinning of face-to-face relationships. This qualitative study explores how young Pakistanis experience, narrate and negotiate the effects of digital engagement on their physical, mental and social wellbeing, with the paradox of being densely connected yet emotionally alone treated as the central analytic thread. Data were drawn from twelve focus group discussions conducted with a total of eighty-four Bachelor of Studies-level students at public-sector universities in Faisalabad, Lahore and Multan (seven participants per group; four groups per city). Recordings were transcribed verbatim from Urdu and Urdu–English mixed speech and translated into English, and the transcripts were analysed following the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke, supported by NVivo qualitative data-analysis software. Ten interrelated themes were developed, of which Theme 7 (Digital Relationships, Social Isolation and Loneliness) was identified as the cross-cutting theme through which the surrounding themes converged upon wellbeing. Supporting themes documented digital technology as an expanding but conditional educational resource, the reshaping of social support toward thinner and more performative forms, the mental health footprint of comparison and self-presentation, embodied physical strain operating through sleep displacement and reduced movement, and the layered inequality that structures who benefits from digital access. Interpretation through Social Determinants of Health, Digital Divide, and Social Capital and Postmodern Identity theories suggests that digital disruption reshapes wellbeing not directly but through the erosion of bonding relationships and the performative demands of curated identity. The paper contributes a Pakistani case to an international literature

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dominated by Western samples and specifies the experiential mechanisms through which digital connection can nonetheless produce loneliness.

1. Introduction

The generation of Pakistani young people that came of age with the smartphone has never been more continuously connected to information, relationships and opportunity, yet the same generation reports historically high levels of psychological distress, disrupted sleep, comparison-driven anxiety and pervasive loneliness (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Twenge, 2017; Cullen et al., 2024). This paradox — dense connectivity coexisting with felt aloneness — is not a Pakistani anomaly but a globally observed condition, structured by an information ecology in which more than five billion internet users participate and in which adolescents represent the most intensively connected demographic segment in nearly every region of the world (ITU, 2024; GSMA, 2023). What makes the Pakistani case worth serious sociological attention is the combination of a very large youth population, rapid but uneven digital adoption, strong collectivist family and gender norms and severely constrained public mental-health infrastructure (Khan et al., 2020; Qazi et al., 2021; Raza et al., 2022; Shafqat & Javed, 2024).

The importance of the topic follows from the demographic weight of Pakistani youth and from the character of the transformation they are living. With approximately sixty-four percent of the country's population under the age of thirty (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023), Pakistan is one of the youngest societies in the world, and the wellbeing trajectory of its youth will shape the country's social and economic future for a generation. Digital adoption among this cohort has expanded rapidly, mediating their relationships, entertainment, learning and increasingly their economic activity (Qazi et al., 2021; Shafqat & Javed, 2024). Yet, alongside these gains, the same technologies have exposed Pakistani youth to the now-familiar harms of intensive digital engagement, including heightened anxiety and depression, disrupted sleep, body-image distress, cyberbullying, exposure to misinformation and addictive engagement patterns (Zahid et al., 2022; Raza et al., 2022). These harms unfold within a mental-health system in which stigma, shortages of trained professionals and limited insurance coverage leave conditions widely underdiagnosed and undertreated (Khan et al., 2020).

The research gap addressed by this paper is threefold. First, the international qualitative literature on digital media and youth wellbeing has been produced largely in North American, Western European and East Asian settings; the voices, experiences and structural conditions of South Asian youth remain markedly underrepresented despite the demographic weight of these populations (Selwyn, 2012; Cullen et al., 2024). Second, quantitative work in the field has documented associations between digital engagement and wellbeing outcomes with comparatively less attention to the psychosocial mechanisms through which those associations are produced; where mechanisms have been specified, sleep disruption has received the most attention, while social isolation has remained an under-theorised pathway despite its theoretical centrality and empirical promise (Vernon et al., 2017; Primack et al., 2017). Third, theories developed in individualistic Western contexts may need to be adapted, qualified or extended to account for the centrality of family, kinship, religious community and gendered honour codes in the lives of Pakistani youth (Stewart et al., 2000; Awan, 2021).

The contribution of the present paper is a qualitative account of digital disruption as a lived condition in the Pakistani university context. Through the reflexive thematic analysis of twelve focus group discussions, the paper specifies the experiential mechanisms — comparison with idealised lifestyles, the performative labour of self-presentation and the substitution of face-to-face bonding by online exchange — through which digital connection can produce loneliness. It also documents the dual character of digital engagement, showing that the same young people, and often the same technologies, generate both real gains in education and connection and real losses in bonding depth and psychological ease. In

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doing so, the paper provides a Pakistani case that both confirms cross-cultural patterns and refines them for a strongly collectivist setting.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical resources needed to understand the qualitative material developed in this paper are drawn from a complementary set of frameworks. The Social Determinants of Health framework (WHO, 2008; Marmot, 2005) holds that health outcomes are produced not primarily through clinical care but through the social, economic and environmental conditions in which people live, learn, work and relate. For the present study the framework supplies the indispensable insight that digital disruption does not act on youth wellbeing as a freestanding cause; rather, it acts by modifying the social determinants — education, social support, information access, employment — through which wellbeing is socially produced. To study digital disruption sociologically is thus to study it as a contemporary modifier of social determinants rather than as a parallel and independent cause.

Digital Divide Theory, developed by van Dijk (2005, 2020) and Hargittai (2002, 2010) and extended by Ragnedda (2017), provides the apparatus for analysing the unequal distribution of digital access, skills and returns. The framework distinguishes three levels of divide: the first-level divide concerns material access to devices and connectivity; the second-level divide concerns the skills and competencies required to use digital tools effectively; and the third-level divide concerns the social, economic and cultural returns that engagement actually produces. The theory clarifies why the benefits and harms of digital disruption are unevenly distributed and why aggregate measures of connectivity can conceal radically unequal experiences. Its application to the Pakistani setting is particularly consequential because rural internet penetration lags urban penetration by approximately twenty-six percentage points and because gendered restrictions further structure women's digital participation (Raza et al., 2022).

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988) supplies the distinction between bonding and bridging capital that is central to the qualitative account developed in this paper. Bonding capital refers to the dense ties that reinforce close-knit groups and provide deep emotional support; bridging capital refers to the looser ties that connect across difference and provide reach and information. Ellison et al. (2007) have applied this distinction productively to social media, finding that platforms can enhance bridging capital while exerting more ambiguous effects on bonding capital. Valkenburg and Peter (2007) have documented that adolescent online communication is associated with closeness to friends when it enriches existing bonds but not when it substitutes for them. This distinction proves central to interpreting the loneliness paradox at the heart of the present paper.

Postmodern Identity Theory (Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1995) describes the contemporary self as curated, performed, fragmented and continuously negotiated across contexts. The theory illuminates the identity work described by participants as a form of presentational labour that expands the resources for self-expression while intensifying the performative demands placed upon it, with implications for the self-esteem and comparison dynamics documented in mental health research. boyd's (2014) analysis of networked publics complements this account by describing how visibility, persistence and searchability of digital content reshape the affordances of adolescent sociality.

Risk Society Theory (Beck, 1992) offers a further resource for interpreting the misinformation and credibility concerns that Pakistani youth described in the focus groups. In Beck's account, the proliferation of information and the manufacture of uncertainty generate new risks that individuals must navigate largely on their own; Hargittai (2002) has traced the second-level implications for online skills. Empirical work in the Pakistani setting has begun to document these dynamics: Malik et al. (2023) identify social media as an important channel for seeking and sharing health information among young Pakistanis and note the decisive role of digital health literacy; Niaz et al. (2024) document that social media has both beneficial and adverse implications for mental well-being, including social comparison, cyberbullying and sleep disturbance; Jamil (2021)

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documents the persistent socioeconomic, educational, gender and rural-urban gradients that shape effective digital use.

International qualitative and mixed-method scholarship on youth digital experience provides three points of orientation for the present analysis. First, the association between social-media use and perceived social isolation among young adults has been documented in samples from high-income countries (Primack et al., 2017), providing a comparison case for the loneliness paradox surfaced in the present study. Second, Twenge and Campbell (2018) have identified associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents in population-based research, offering a quantitative counterpart to the qualitative themes on mental health developed here. Third, Bashshur et al. (2016) have summarised the conditional evidence base on telemedicine interventions in mental disorders, providing a reference point for the qualitative material on intervention potential. Together, these strands establish that the Pakistani case is not exceptional in kind but distinctive in the particular configuration of access, literacy and social condition through which global patterns are locally realised.

3. Research Objectives

The qualitative inquiry pursued in this paper is guided by four objectives. First, to explore how Pakistani university youth describe their everyday digital lives, including patterns of use across education, communication, entertainment, identity work and economic activity. Second, to identify the themes through which participants narrate the effects of digital engagement on their physical, mental and social wellbeing. Third, to specify the experiential mechanisms through which digital disruption is understood by participants to produce loneliness, comparison-driven strain and the thinning of face-to-face relationships. Fourth, to interpret these accounts through the theoretical resources of Social Determinants of Health, Digital Divide, Social Capital and Postmodern Identity theories in a way that respects both the cultural specificity of the Pakistani setting and the cross-cultural generality of the mechanisms identified.

4. Research Methodology

Research design. The study adopts an interpretive qualitative design nested within the broader thesis's mixed-methods convergent parallel architecture. Philosophically the study is situated within a pragmatist paradigm, following Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) and Morgan (2014) in taking the view that the research method must be selected according to its capacity to answer the research question rather than according to prior philosophical allegiance. This orientation licenses the interpretive engagement required for the surfacing of participant meaning while remaining open to dialogue with the structural findings of the parallel quantitative strand.

Qualitative approach. Focus group discussions were chosen as the primary data-generation technique because they combine methodological rigour with cultural appropriateness in a setting where group-based conversation, particularly among peers, provides a more natural conversational format than one-on-one interviews. The design also permits participants to develop and contest ideas in dialogue, a feature well suited to a topic on which everyday experience is often only partly articulated in advance.

Data source and sample. Twelve focus group discussions were conducted with Bachelor of Studies-level students recruited from public-sector universities in Faisalabad, Lahore and Multan. Four discussions were held in each city, providing balanced coverage across the three settings, with seven participants per group and a total of eighty-four participants (Table 1). Participants were active users of digital technologies, in line with the inclusion criteria specified in the broader thesis, and were selected purposively to secure disciplinary and gender diversity within each group.

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Table 1: *Distribution of focus group discussions by city*

City	Focus group codes	Number of FGDs	Participants per group	Total participants
Faisalabad	FGD-1, FGD-2, FGD-3, FGD-4	4	7	28
Lahore	FGD-5, FGD-6, FGD-7, FGD-8	4	7	28
Multan	FGD-9, FGD-10, FGD-11, FGD-12	4	7	28
Total	**FGD-1 to FGD-12**	**12**	**7**	**84**

Data collection procedure. Discussions were conducted in Urdu, the language in which most participants were most comfortable, with mixed Urdu–English speech accepted where participants chose it. Sessions were held in on-campus rooms during daytime hours to secure cultural appropriateness and participant comfort. With participant consent, all discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim; Urdu and Urdu–English extracts were translated into English for analysis with care to preserve idiom and meaning. Each participant was assigned an individual code within their group (for example, FGD-1/P1, FGD-1/P2), with the city recorded alongside the code, and identifying details were removed at the point of transcription.

Analysis technique. The analysis followed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021): familiarisation with the data through repeated reading; generation of initial codes; collation of codes into candidate themes; reviewing themes against the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole; defining and naming themes; and producing the analytic report that brings themes into dialogue with the conceptual framework. Coding proceeded inductively in the first instance, with codes labelling segments of data for their analytic content, followed by a deductive pass in which the emerging themes were examined for their fit with the study's conceptual framework, following the hybrid inductive–deductive approach of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). Coding was supported by NVivo qualitative data-analysis software, which enabled systematic organisation, retrieval and comparison of coded segments across the twelve groups.

Trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of the analysis was pursued through the criteria articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and elaborated by Nowell et al. (2017): credibility through prolonged engagement with the data and attention to disconfirming as well as confirming evidence; transferability through thick description of context and participants; dependability through documentation of analytic decisions in an audit trail; and confirmability through reflexive scrutiny of the researcher's assumptions and through peer debriefing with supervisory colleagues.

Ethical considerations. All participants provided voluntary informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, data-handling procedures and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were secured through the coding scheme described above and through the removal of identifying details at transcription. Cultural and gendered sensitivities were attended to in the composition of the groups, the choice of location and the framing of questions, following established guidance on social research with young people in the Pakistani setting.

5. Core Data Analysis

The reflexive thematic analysis produced ten interrelated themes that together describe how participants experience the digital condition. The themes overlap and feed into one another, and they are organised around the study's research questions. Theme 7, concerning digital relationships, social isolation and loneliness, is treated as the cross-cutting theme into which the other themes ultimately flow. This section presents the six themes most central to the paper's analytic focus, together with illustrative quotations drawn from the focus-group transcripts; the remaining themes are summarised more briefly in the results section.

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5.1 Theme 1: Digital Technology as an Expanding Educational Resource

Across the twelve discussions, participants consistently described digital technology first and foremost as an educational resource that had enlarged the boundaries of where, when and how learning takes place. Lectures, recorded tutorials, portable document files, search engines and short-form video had become routine instruments of study rather than occasional supplements. As one participant put it, "Ab lecture miss ho jaey to itna issue nae hota, kune k slides aur recordings whatsapp py mil jateen hain. Youtube se bhi difficult topic dobara samjh sakata hoon" (FGD-3/P-5, Urdu). At the same time, the accounts were not uniformly celebratory. A recurring pattern was the acknowledgement that the same devices that extend access also fragment attention: "Mobile sy parhae easy b ho gae hai or muskil bhi. Ek taraf material foran mil jata hai, lekin notifications aur social media ki waja sy focus nae rehta" (FGD-9/P-4, Urdu). Access was itself uneven: "Jis k pass acha internet aur fats internet hai us k ley online study easy hai, especially jb lectures ya files heavy hoon" (FGD-5/P-6, Urdu). The theme reflects the dual character that recurred throughout the analysis, in which digital disruption simultaneously enabled and constrained.

5.2 Theme 2: Digital Connectivity and Changing Social Support

Participants described digital platforms as the principal infrastructure through which they now maintain relationships, coordinate daily life and seek emotional support. Constant availability was a source of comfort — "kabi mood off ho to friends ko message kar deta hoon. Face to face baat na b ho, Whatsapp par baat karene se halka feel hota hai" (FGD-8/P-5, Urdu) — but participants also expressed ambivalence about its depth. "Online hum sab ek dusre ke sath connected lagte hain, lekin zarori nahi ke actual mein kisi ko pata ho ke doosra person kis situation se guzar raha hai" (FGD-4/P-2, Urdu). Several accounts associated heavy online interaction with a felt reduction in face-to-face bonding: "Pehly friends k sath beith k proper baat hoti thi, ab aksar sb apny apny fone main busy hoty hain" (FGD-6/P-7, Urdu). Analytically, the theme indicates that digital connectivity reshapes rather than simply increases social support, with a shift toward forms that are more immediate and frequent but also more fragile.

5.3 Theme 5: Social Media, Stress, Anxiety, Self-Esteem and Mental Health

Participants associated social media use with a range of mental-health pressures, of which social comparison was the most prominent. "Social media par sab ki life perfect lagti hai, phir apni life compare kar ke lagta hai ke hum kuch achieve nahi kar rahe" (FGD-3/P-4, Urdu). Related concerns clustered around body image — "Instagram par perfect body aur looks dekh kar kabhi kabhi apne appearance ke bare mein confidence kam ho jata hai" (FGD-8/P-3, Urdu) — anxiety provoked by negative comments — "Negative comments ko ignore karna easy nahi hota. Kabhi aik comment bhi mood kharab kar deta hai" (FGD-10/P-2, Urdu) — and academic distraction. Interpreted with appropriate caution, the theme indicates a meaningful perceived link between patterns of social-media engagement and emotional wellbeing operating through comparison, exposure to hostility and displacement of attention.

5.4 Theme 6: Digital Identity, Self-Presentation and Lifestyle Transformation

Participants spoke at length about the work of self-presentation online. "Online hum apni woh side show karte hain jo achi lagti hai, real life mein situation different ho sakti hai" (FGD-5/P-5, Urdu). Presentational labour was described as both pleasurable and burdensome: "Kabhi lagta hai ke social media par successful aur fashionable nazar aana bhi zaroori hai" (FGD-7/P-3, Urdu). Platform cultures shaped everyday lifestyle: "TikTok aur Instagram ke trends se dressing, food aur lifestyle choices kaafi influence hoti hain" (FGD-1/P-5, Urdu). Participants described hybrid identity formation as fluidly moving between online and offline registers: "Online meri personality thori different hoti hai, aur friends ke saath real life mein thori different" (FGD-9/P-4, English). This pattern can be interpreted through Postmodern Identity Theory, which describes the contemporary self as fragmented, curated and continuously negotiated across contexts (Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1995).

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5.5 Theme 7: Digital Relationships, Social Isolation and Loneliness — the Central Theme

This theme occupies the conceptual centre of the analysis and was articulated with notable consistency across the groups. Participants described a paradox of connection without closeness: although they are continuously connected through digital platforms, many reported feeling emotionally alone. "Online friends bohat hain, lekin phir bhi kabhi kabhi akela feel hota hai" (FGD-4/P-6, Urdu). A recurring pattern was the substitution of in-person meeting by online exchange: "Ab friend's se milne ke bajaye WhatsApp par hi baat ho jati hai" (FGD-2/P-5, Urdu). Participants distinguished sharply between the depth of online and offline contact: "Online baat hoti rehti hai, lekin woh connection face-to-face jaisa strong nahi hota" (FGD-8/P-4, Urdu). Some described a tendency toward social withdrawal: "Kabhi gathering mein jane ke bajaye room mein reh kar phone use karna zyada easy lagta hai" (FGD-6/P-3, Urdu). Social isolation functions in the narratives as a mediating experience, with digital disruption shaping physical, mental and social health not only directly but also through the loneliness and withdrawal that intensive, substitutive digital interaction can produce.

5.6 Theme 4: Screen Time, Sleep Disturbance and Physical Health Behaviours

Participants described the physical consequences of intensive device use in strikingly consistent terms. "Raat ko bas thori dair phone use karne ke liye uthata hoon, phir reels aur videos dekhte dekhte pata hi nahi chalta ke do ya teen baj gaye hain" (FGD-3/P-7, Urdu). Beyond sleep, the accounts associated prolonged screen use with reduced physical activity — "Pehle free time mein friends ke saath cricket ya walk kar lete thay, ab free time mostly mobile par guzarta hai" (FGD-1/P-6, Urdu) and a cluster of bodily complaints including eye strain, headaches and neck and back discomfort: "Agar continuously laptop ya mobile use karun to eyes mein pain aur headache start ho jata hai" (FGD-10/P-3, Urdu). Analytically, this theme situates physical health as one of the three wellbeing outcomes specified in the study's conceptual model and indicates a plausible behavioural pathway — displaced sleep and reduced movement — through which digital disruption translates into physical symptoms.

6. Results

The reflexive thematic analysis identified ten interrelated themes; Table 2 consolidates the emergent themes together with the analytic meaning assigned to each. The four themes not treated in detail above concerned digital economic opportunity and its unequal preconditions (Theme 3), digital inequality and unequal access to health information (Theme 8), credibility and misinformation in online health advice (Theme 9) and the conditional potential of digital health and online learning interventions (Theme 10). These themes were coded moderately to strongly across the twelve discussions and are summarised in Table 2 for completeness.

Table 2: *Summary of ten emergent themes with analytic meaning*

Theme	Analytic Meaning
T1: Digital Technology as an Expanding Educational Resource	Digital tools widen the reach of learning, but their educational value is conditioned by access and self-regulation.
T2: Digital Connectivity and Changing Social Support	Digital networks broaden the channels of social support while raising questions about the depth and reliability of the support they carry.
T3: Digital Platforms, Economic Opportunity and New Inequalities	Digital platforms open new economic pathways while reproducing the social inequalities that govern who can walk them.
T4: Screen Time, Sleep Disturbance and Physical Health Behaviours	Intensive device use is experienced as a tangible physical-health burden operating through disrupted sleep and reduced movement.
T5: Social Media, Stress, Anxiety, Self-	Social media is perceived as a significant source of

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Esteem and Mental Health	comparison-driven stress and diminished self-esteem, with effects on mood and confidence.
T6: Digital Identity, Self-Presentation and Lifestyle Transformation	Youth identities are increasingly curated and performed across online and offline spaces, generating both creative self-expression and performative pressure.
T7: Digital Relationships, Social Isolation and Loneliness	Social isolation emerges as the cross-cutting experience that links digital disruption to physical, mental and social wellbeing.
T8: Digital Inequality and Unequal Access to Health Information	Unequal digital access becomes a new layer of health inequality by shaping who can reach and use reliable health information.
T9: Credibility, Misinformation and Online Health Advice	Access to online health information does not guarantee informed behaviour; digital literacy and the trustworthiness of sources are decisive.
T10: Potential of Digital Health and Online Learning Interventions	Participants see real promise in digital health and learning tools, tempered by uneven awareness, trust and access.

Two features of the results warrant emphasis. First, the ten themes are internally coherent and mutually reinforcing rather than independent. The educational reach of digital technology (T1) is conditioned by the same access and skills that structure the digital divide identified in T3, T8 and T9. The changing texture of social support (T2) is intimately connected to the loneliness paradox of T7, and the identity work of T6 supplies the comparison and self-evaluation dynamics that drive the mental-health strain of T5. This interconnectedness is a substantive analytic finding, not a methodological artefact: the digital condition is experienced by participants as a single interlocking terrain rather than as a set of discrete effects.

Second, the analysis produced a clear cross-city pattern. The ten themes appeared consistently across Faisalabad, Lahore and Multan, and the core experiences — expanded educational access, changing social support, screen-related health effects, comparison-driven stress, performative identity and, above all, the paradox of connection without closeness — recurred in all three settings. A tentative point of differentiation was that Lahore participants appeared, on balance, to be more deeply integrated into a wider range of digital technologies and platforms; this difference is best read as one of intensity and breadth of engagement rather than of kind, since the underlying themes were common across the three cities. Faisalabad and Multan participants did not, on the evidence available, report markedly different access barriers from one another. The tentative character of these cross-city observations is preserved in the analysis, which does not claim to establish the relative magnitude of city-level effects.

7. Discussion

The thematic account developed here can be brought into dialogue with the theoretical framework in five moves. Through the lens of the Social Determinants of Health framework (WHO, 2008; Marmot, 2005), the findings indicate that digital disruption acts on youth wellbeing by reconfiguring the determinants education, social support, access to information, employment through which wellbeing is socially produced, rather than as a freestanding external cause. The educational reach documented in Theme 1, the changing texture of support in Theme 2 and the inequality dynamics of Theme 8 all illustrate this reconfiguration.

Through the lens of Digital Divide Theory (van Dijk, 2020; Hargittai, 2002; Ragnedda, 2017), the findings on economic opportunity, health information access and credibility all express the layered character of the divide. Access alone is insufficient: without the skills, language competence and material resources to convert access into beneficial outcomes, the digital condition reproduces inequality. This layered account, developed initially for high-income

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settings, is confirmed here for Pakistan and extended into the health-information domain in ways consistent with Malik et al.'s (2023) Pakistani evidence base.

Through the lens of Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986; Ellison et al., 2007), the ambivalence expressed in Themes 2 and 7 receives its most illuminating interpretation. Participants use digital platforms effectively for bridging and weak-tie connection but describe their bonding relationships as sustained through face-to-face contact whose displacement by online exchange is the specific mechanism through which loneliness is experienced. The distinction between bonding and bridging capital is not a residual theoretical embellishment; it is the analytic tool that makes the connection-without-closeness paradox intelligible, and its confirmation in a Pakistani setting extends its cross-cultural applicability. Valkenburg and Peter's (2007) finding that adolescent online communication supports closeness when it complements existing bonds but not when it substitutes for them provides a specific correlate.

Through the lens of Postmodern Identity Theory (Gergen, 1991; Turkle, 1995) and boyd's (2014) account of networked publics, Themes 5 and 6 acquire their meaning. Participants' descriptions of the gap between online and offline selves, the performative labour of self-presentation and the comparison dynamics of curated content express precisely the condition these theorists describe. The theme's implications for mental health are consistent with Twenge and Campbell's (2018) evidence base and with Primack et al.'s (2017) documentation of social-media use and perceived social isolation among young adults.

Through the lens of Risk Society Theory (Beck, 1992), Themes 8 and 9 acquire additional depth. Participants are increasingly required to act as their own risk managers, assessing the trustworthiness of health information and the safety of online interaction with limited institutional support. The theme resonates with Niaz et al.'s (2024) documentation of both beneficial and adverse implications of social media for Pakistani youth mental wellbeing.

The theoretical implication of these five readings is that the digital condition is best understood not as a single scalar exposure with uniform effects but as a differentiated condition whose effects depend on the specific mechanisms it activates within the participant's ecology. The practical implication is that interventions targeting the experiential mechanisms of comparison, self-presentation and substitution are likely to be more effective than blanket restrictions on digital use, particularly given the educational and connective benefits participants attribute to the same tools.

8. Conclusion

The thematic analysis presented in this paper has argued that Pakistani university youth experience the digital condition as neither simply beneficial nor simply harmful but as dual in character and conditional in its effects. Digital technology has enlarged educational access, multiplied the channels of communication and support, opened new economic possibilities and brought health information within reach. At the same time, the same processes have deepened inequality, fragmented attention, fostered comparison-driven anxiety and diminished self-esteem, exposed youth to misinformation, displaced physical activity and sleep and produced a distinctive form of social isolation in which young people are densely connected yet emotionally alone. The central finding is that this connected loneliness is not a peripheral consequence of the digital condition but its most consequential experiential feature, functioning as the cross-cutting thread through which the surrounding themes converge upon wellbeing. Interpreted through the theoretical frameworks assembled in Section 2, the account suggests that digital disruption acts on wellbeing by reconfiguring the social determinants of health, layering the digital divide with new inequalities and displacing the bonding relationships that underwrite emotional wellbeing.

9. Suggestions and Recommendations

For educational institutions, the analysis supports the continued and deepened use of digital tools for teaching and learning, complemented by

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explicit training in self-regulation and critical evaluation of online material. For mental-health practitioners and university counselling services, the analysis identifies two specific mechanistic targets: critical media literacy addressing the comparison and self-presentation dynamics documented in Themes 5 and 6, and peer connection programmes supporting the maintenance of face-to-face bonding alongside online communication. For families and community organisations, the analysis supports adult support that scaffolds bonding relationships rather than restricting digital access as such, with the collectivist family structure characteristic of Pakistani society treated as a resource for such scaffolding. For policy makers, the analysis supports the shift in digital-inclusion policy from access-focused to capability-focused frameworks, incorporating digital skills training, and language support and credibility-assessment education alongside continued expansion of connectivity.

10. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study has three principal limitations. First, focus-group data do not support claims about the prevalence of any particular perception in the wider youth population, and the tentative city-wise comparisons should be read accordingly. Second, the sample is restricted to Bachelor of Studies-level students at public-sector universities and thus excludes out-of-school youth, private-sector university students and youth working outside the formal educational system. Third, the interpretive character of thematic analysis relies on the researcher's engagement with the data; while the trustworthiness procedures described above mitigate this concern, they do not eliminate it. Future research would benefit from sample expansion to less-connected populations, comparative work across South Asian societies to test the cross-cultural generality of the mechanisms identified, and longitudinal designs that trace the development of the connection-without-closeness paradox over time.

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