

Digital Society and Changing Social Relationships

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www.ijarcse.org || Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): August Issue

Date of Submission: 01-07-2026

Date of Acceptance: 13-07-2026

Date of Publication: 01-08-2026

Abstract— The rapid diffusion of digital technologies, social networking platforms, and mobile communication devices has fundamentally reorganized the ways in which individuals form, sustain, and dissolve social relationships. This paper examines the transformation of interpersonal and community relationships within the emerging "digital society," drawing on established sociological and communication theory to interpret contemporary patterns of connection and disconnection. Using a qualitative literature-based approach, the study synthesizes research on social capital, networked individualism, and mediated intimacy to argue that digital technologies do not simply erode or replace traditional social bonds but reconfigure them along new lines of accessibility, visibility, and control. The paper discusses the benefits of digital connectivity, including expanded social capital and the maintenance of geographically dispersed ties, alongside emerging concerns such as social isolation, superficial engagement, algorithmic mediation, and the erosion of face-to-face intimacy. The paper concludes that digital society represents neither a wholesale loss of community nor an unqualified gain in connectivity, but a structural shift toward networked, individualized, and technologically mediated sociality that demands new theoretical and policy responses.

Keywords— digital society, social relationships, social media, networked individualism, social capital, interpersonal communication

Introduction

Human social life has always been shaped by the technologies available for communication, from oral tradition and written correspondence to the telephone and broadcast media. The emergence of the internet, and more recently of mobile and social media platforms, represents a discontinuity of a different order: it has compressed the time and space required to initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships, while simultaneously making social interaction persistent, searchable, and quantifiable. Scholars increasingly describe contemporary societies as "digital societies," in which digital infrastructures are not an addition to social life but a constitutive medium through which social life is organized (Castells, 1996). This shift has consequences for nearly every domain of relational life, including family communication, friendship formation, romantic partnering, workplace collaboration, civic participation, and the experience of community itself.

The question of whether digital technologies strengthen or weaken social bonds has occupied sociologists and communication scholars since the early years of mass internet adoption. Optimistic accounts emphasize that digital platforms lower the cost of maintaining weak ties, enable marginalized or geographically isolated individuals to find community, and provide new forms of social support unavailable through offline networks alone (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Pessimistic accounts, by contrast, warn that digital



communication substitutes shallow, asynchronous, and performative interaction for the depth for real face-to-face intimacy, producing a paradoxical state in which individuals are hyperconnected yet emotionally isolated (Turkle, 2011). Between these positions lies a growing body of research suggesting that the effects of digital technology on relationships are neither uniformly positive nor negative but are contingent on how, why, and with whom technology is used.



This paper contributes to that body of research by offering an integrative account of how digital society is reshaping social relationships. Rather than treating digital and face-to-face relationships as separate or competing domains, the paper adopts the view, associated with the concept of "networked individualism," that contemporary social life increasingly operates through personal networks that blend online and offline interaction into a single relational fabric (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the literature on digital communication and interpersonal relationships, drawing on foundational and recent scholarship. Second, it outlines the theoretical framework used to interpret these changes. Third, it discusses the methodology used to conduct this literature-based inquiry. Fourth, it presents a thematic discussion of how digital technologies are transforming family, friendship, community, and institutional relationships. Finally, it considers the challenges associated with digital sociality before concluding with implications for future research and practice.

Literature Review

Sociological interest in the relationship between technology and social bonds long predates the internet, but the scale and speed of digital adoption over the past two decades has generated a distinct and rapidly expanding research literature. Manuel Castells' influential account of the "network society" argued that the rise of information and communication technologies reorganized economic, political, and social life around flexible, decentralized networks rather than fixed hierarchies or bounded

communities (Castells, 1996). For Castells, this networked logic did not destroy social relationships but transformed their spatial and temporal organization, allowing social ties to be sustained across greater distances while making participation in networks increasingly central to social power and inclusion.

Robert Putnam's earlier work on social capital provided an important counterpoint to network-society optimism. Writing at the threshold of mass internet adoption, Putnam (2000) documented a long-term decline in American civic engagement and associational life, attributing part of this decline to the privatizing effects of electronic entertainment and communication technologies. Although Putnam's original analysis predated social media, his concept of social capital, referring to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and mutual support, has become a central lens through which later researchers have evaluated the social consequences of digital platforms.

A substantial line of empirical research has applied the social capital framework directly to social networking sites. In a widely cited study, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) examined Facebook use among American college students and found that intensive use of the platform was positively associated with the maintenance of "bridging" social capital, loose connections to acquaintances that provide access to diverse information and opportunities, as well as with the maintenance of existing offline relationships as students transitioned between social contexts. A follow-up longitudinal study by the same research team found that social network site use was associated with increases in bridging social capital and with psychological well-being indicators such as self-esteem and life satisfaction over time, particularly among students with lower self-esteem (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). These findings suggest that, contrary to fears of technologically induced isolation, social media use can support and extend existing social networks rather than substituting for them.

At the same time, qualitative and psychologically oriented research has raised concerns about the emotional quality of digitally mediated relationships. Sherry Turkle's (2011) ethnographic study of users' relationships with mobile devices, robots, and social media argued that constant connectivity can paradoxically produce a state of "alone together," in which individuals substitute the ease of controlled, edited online communication for the vulnerability and unpredictability of face-to-face intimacy. Turkle's subsequent research on conversation further argued that the mere presence of a phone during in-person interaction, even when not actively used, measurably reduces the perceived quality of conversation and empathic connection between participants. This body of work has been influential in framing public and scholarly debate around concepts such as "phubbing," the practice of snubbing a

companion in favor of a phone, which more recent anthropological and communication research has continued to examine as a marker of eroding face-to-face relational quality (see the discussion of hyperconnectivity and relational depth in recent anthropological work on the reconfiguration of social bonds in the digital age).

Danah boyd's ethnographic research on American teenagers offers a further corrective to both optimistic and pessimistic narratives. Boyd (2014) argued that teenagers use social media not to escape offline relationships but to sustain them under conditions of increasing adult supervision and restricted physical mobility; for many young people, "networked publics" function as a digital equivalent of the unsupervised public spaces, such as malls and street corners, that previous generations used to socialize. This reframes digital platforms not as a replacement for face-to-face community but as an adaptation to changing social and spatial constraints on young people's autonomy.

Research on social relationships across the life course further complicates any single narrative about digital technology's effects. Studies of older adults' technology adoption have shown that, although older populations use digital tools at lower rates than younger cohorts, internet and social media use among older adults is increasing and is associated with reduced risk of social isolation, particularly for those facing mobility limitations or geographically dispersed family networks. This suggests that digital technology can serve a compensatory function for populations at heightened risk of relational disconnection, even as overall adoption gaps between age groups persist.

More recent scholarship has extended these debates into the domains of trust, misinformation, and algorithmic mediation. Research on digital society and social trust has modeled how online communication dynamics, including exposure to misinformation and sentiment contagion on platforms, shape collective attitudes of trust and cooperation at a societal scale, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Other recent theoretical work has argued that digital platforms and algorithmic systems have not simply added a new venue for social interaction but have made visible long-standing tensions in sociological theory between interaction-level and society-level accounts of social order, suggesting that digital sociality requires reworked theoretical vocabularies rather than a simple extension of pre-digital concepts. Together, this literature indicates a field that has moved from asking whether digital technology helps or harms social relationships toward more nuanced questions about which forms of digital engagement, under which social and psychological conditions, support meaningful connection.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives to interpret the transformation of social relationships in digital society. The first is Castells' network society thesis, which frames digital technology as constitutive of a new social morphology organized around flexible, scalable networks rather than fixed places or institutions (Castells, 1996). This perspective directs attention to how digital infrastructures reorganize the spatial and temporal boundaries of relationships, allowing social ties to be maintained across distance while making inclusion in digital networks increasingly consequential for social participation.

The second perspective is the concept of networked individualism, developed by Rainie and Wellman (2012), which holds that the basic unit of contemporary social organization has shifted from the tightly bounded group, such as the extended family, the neighborhood, or the workplace community, to the individually centered personal network. Under networked individualism, each person operates as the hub of a loosely connected, technologically mediated network that they must actively manage, rather than relying on a small number of dense, geographically fixed communities. This perspective helps explain both the expanded reach of contemporary social ties and the increased burden of relational maintenance that digital society places on individuals.

The third perspective draws on the social capital tradition associated with Putnam (2000) and operationalized in digital contexts by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), which distinguishes between "bonding" social capital, the strong, emotionally supportive ties found within close-knit groups such as family, and "bridging" social capital, the weaker, more diverse ties that provide access to new information, opportunities, and perspectives. This distinction is useful for evaluating digital platforms because different technologies and use patterns appear to support these two forms of capital differently, with implications for both individual well-being and broader social cohesion. Taken together, these three frameworks allow the analysis to move beyond simple binary judgments about whether digital society is good or bad for relationships, toward a structural account of how digital technology reorganizes the scale, form, and maintenance requirements of social bonds.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology consistent with an integrative narrative review. Rather than collecting new primary data, the study synthesizes peer-reviewed and scholarly sources addressing the intersection of digital technology, social media, and interpersonal or

community relationships. Sources were selected on the basis of three criteria: theoretical significance within sociology and communication studies, direct empirical relevance to the question of how digital platforms affect relationship formation and maintenance, and verifiability through established academic publishers, peer-reviewed journals, or university presses. Foundational works, including Castells' network society trilogy, Putnam's research on social capital, Turkle's research on technology and intimacy, boyd's ethnographic research on teenagers, and Rainie and Wellman's account of networked individualism, were combined with empirical studies published in peer-reviewed communication journals, including the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication and the Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, as well as recent theoretical and empirical contributions addressing digital trust, older adults' technology adoption, and the reconfiguration of intimacy under conditions of hyperconnectivity. This approach allows the paper to triangulate across theoretical, quantitative, and qualitative traditions, producing an interpretive synthesis rather than a statistical meta-analysis. As with all narrative reviews, the approach is limited by the availability and selection of sources and does not permit causal inference; its purpose is instead to organize and interpret an already substantial body of research into a coherent account of relational change in digital society.

Digital Transformation of Interpersonal and Family Relationships

Family relationships have been reorganized by digital technology in ways that combine increased contact with new forms of tension. Mobile messaging and video calling allow geographically dispersed family members, including migrant workers, adult children living abroad, and extended kin networks, to maintain frequent, low-cost contact that would have been prohibitively expensive or logistically difficult in earlier eras. At the same time, research on device use within households has documented concerns about the intrusion of screens into shared family time, with parents and children alike reporting that phone use during meals, conversations, and leisure time can produce feelings of being ignored or devalued, a phenomenon closely related to what Turkle (2011) describes as being "alone together." Family communication research suggests that the effects of digital technology on family cohesion depend heavily on norms of use, including whether devices are used to coordinate and support family activities or to withdraw from them.

Friendship has undergone a related transformation. Social network sites make it possible to maintain large, loosely connected friendship networks that would be difficult to sustain through offline contact alone, converting what Ellison,

Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) describe as "latent ties," relationships that exist in principle but are not actively maintained, into active, low-effort connections. This expands access to bridging social capital, particularly for individuals transitioning between life stages or locations, such as students moving to a new city or recent graduates entering the workforce. However, research on relationship quality suggests that these expanded networks do not necessarily translate into deeper emotional intimacy; the number of online contacts an individual maintains has been shown to correlate only weakly, if at all, with the size of an individual's core network of emotionally supportive relationships, indicating that digital platforms are more effective at maintaining breadth than at generating depth.

Romantic relationships have similarly been reshaped by digital platforms, from the rise of dedicated matchmaking applications to the routine use of messaging for the initiation and maintenance of intimacy. These platforms have expanded the pool of potential partners beyond pre-existing social and geographic networks, but they have also introduced new relational risks, including deception, "catfishing," and mismatches between online self-presentation and offline reality, concerns documented in recent research on digitally mediated romantic relationships in diverse cultural contexts. Such findings underscore that the effects of digital mediation on intimacy are not culturally uniform but are shaped by local norms around courtship, family involvement, and trust.

Community, Social Capital, and Trust in the Digital Age

Beyond the family and friendship group, digital technology has reorganized the character of community and civic life. Traditional accounts of community emphasized geographically bounded, dense networks of mutual obligation, the kind of social capital that Putnam (2000) associated with civic organizations, religious congregations, and neighborhood associations. Digital society has given rise to what researchers describe as networked or distributed communities, in which shared interest, identity, or need, rather than physical proximity, becomes the primary basis of association. Online support groups for individuals with rare medical conditions, diaspora communities maintaining cultural ties across continents, and interest-based communities organized around hobbies or professional fields exemplify this shift toward community organized around networked individualism rather than place (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

This reorganization has implications for social trust. Because networked communities often lack the repeated, embodied interaction that traditionally reinforced trust and accountability within physical communities, digital platforms have had to

develop substitute mechanisms, including reputation systems, verification badges, and moderation structures, to sustain cooperative behavior among relative strangers. Recent computational research on digital society has modeled how the diffusion of information and misinformation across online networks shapes collective trust dynamics, particularly during periods of societal stress such as public health crises, when platforms can act simultaneously as vital channels for accurate information sharing and as vectors for the rapid spread of rumor and distrust. This dual character of digital platforms, as both trust-building and trust-eroding infrastructures, is one of the defining tensions of contemporary digital society.

Challenges and Concerns in Digitally Mediated Sociality

Alongside the benefits of expanded connectivity, the literature identifies several persistent challenges associated with digital society's effects on relationships. The first is the risk of superficial engagement displacing deeper forms of connection. Turkle's (2011) research suggests that the availability of low-effort digital communication can create an illusion of companionship that substitutes for, rather than supplements, more demanding but more rewarding face-to-face relationships. The second is the phenomenon of digital loneliness, in which individuals experience a felt absence of genuine social recognition despite being embedded in extensive online networks; recent research on artificial intelligence companionship applications suggests that as conversational agents become more sophisticated, they may increasingly be used to substitute for, rather than facilitate, human relational recognition, raising new questions about the boundaries of digitally mediated intimacy.

A third concern is the unequal distribution of digital connectivity itself. Although digital platforms are often described as universally accessible, research on older adults' technology adoption shows that meaningful gaps in digital access and literacy persist across age, income, and geographic lines, meaning that the relational benefits of digital society are not equally available to all populations. A fourth concern involves the algorithmic mediation of social interaction: because most large digital platforms curate the visibility of content and contacts through proprietary algorithms, individuals' experience of their own social networks is increasingly shaped by commercial and technical logics that are not transparent to users, complicating any straightforward assessment of how much genuine social agency users retain within digital environments. Finally, concerns about privacy, surveillance, and the permanence of digital records introduce a distinct relational risk: because digital interactions are persistent and searchable in ways that face-to-face interactions are not, users must navigate relationships under conditions of

visibility and accountability that differ qualitatively from those of pre-digital social life, a concern reflected in boyd's (2014) account of teenagers' strategic management of visibility within networked publics.

Discussion

Read together, these findings suggest that digital society has not produced a simple decline or expansion of social relationships but a structural reorganization of how relationships are formed, scaled, and maintained. Digital platforms lower the transaction costs of maintaining large, geographically dispersed networks, which helps explain robust empirical findings linking social media use to increased bridging social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). At the same time, the same features that make digital communication convenient, its asynchronicity, editability, and low emotional risk, appear to work against the formation of the kind of vulnerable, high-bandwidth interaction that sustains deep bonding social capital, lending support to concerns raised by Turkle (2011) and related research on hyperconnectivity and relational depth.

This suggests that the central sociological question is not whether digital society is good or bad for relationships in the aggregate, but which configurations of use, individual, platform, and social context, produce which relational outcomes. The networked individualism framework (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) is useful here because it reframes the individual, rather than the bounded community, as the appropriate unit of analysis: contemporary relational well-being depends increasingly on an individual's skill and effort in managing a personally curated network that spans online and offline contexts, rather than on membership in a small number of stable, geographically fixed groups. This has implications for social inequality, since the capacity to manage a large personal network effectively is itself unevenly distributed by education, income, and digital literacy, echoing concerns about differential technology access identified in research on older populations.

Conclusion

Digital society has fundamentally altered the infrastructure through which social relationships are formed, sustained, and experienced, without producing either the wholesale erosion of community feared by early critics or the frictionless expansion of connection promised by early enthusiasts. The evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that digital platforms are particularly effective at extending and maintaining bridging social capital and geographically dispersed ties, while posing genuine risks to the depth, emotional bandwidth, and equitable distribution of relational life. Family, friendship, romantic, and

community relationships have each been reorganized along the lines predicted by the network society and networked individualism frameworks, with individuals increasingly responsible for actively managing personally centered networks that blend digital and face-to-face interaction.

Future research should continue to move beyond binary framings of digital technology as either socially destructive or socially beneficial, and instead investigate the specific conditions, including platform design, algorithmic curation, age, culture, and socioeconomic context, under which digital mediation supports or undermines meaningful human connection. Policy and educational responses should likewise focus not on discouraging digital engagement altogether but on cultivating the digital literacy, self-regulation, and platform accountability needed to help individuals use digital tools to strengthen, rather than substitute for, the relationships that remain central to human well-being.

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