

**The Sociovirtualization Paradox:
Being Highly Connected but Still Lonely in the Digital Age**

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Abstract


This literature review discusses an important problem of modern digital life: people have more online contact than ever before, but at the same time, many feel lonely and socially isolated. Instead of looking at this issue from only one field, this paper combines research from different areas using the idea of *sociovirtualization*. This concept, introduced by Kurt (2012), explains how social interactions are moving into online environments and changing because of this.

The study uses a systematic method to collect and analyze research from sociology, psychology, and communication studies published between 2010 and 2024. The results show three main causes of this problem. First, people feel pressure to present a perfect image of themselves online and depend on likes and followers, which replaces real connections with more superficial interactions. Second, algorithms shape what people see online, leading to constant comparison with others and feelings of being left out. Third, real-life social activities are decreasing, which weakens strong personal relationships.

The review also shows an important gap in research: there is no clear model that connects individual psychological effects with larger social changes. This study helps fill that gap by offering a model that sees loneliness as a result of how modern digital systems work, rather than as an accidental effect.

Finally, the paper suggests a future research direction called "Intentional Sociovirtualization." This idea focuses on designing digital tools that better support basic human social and psychological needs.

Keywords: Sociovirtualization, Digital loneliness, Social media paradox, Hyper-connection

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Introduction: Defining the Paradox and the Need for Synthesis

The digital age has achieved an important goal: it has reduced social distance through technology. People can now connect with others across the world, join groups based on shared interests, and share their lives with large audiences through social media, messaging apps, and virtual environments. According to Kurt (2012), *sociovirtualization* is the process in which traditional social activities—such as forming identity, learning social norms, and building relationships—move into online spaces and are influenced by digital tools. It is also important to note that the term "sociovirtualization," originally developed by Kurt (2012), has been empirically examined in a master's dissertation by Şengül (2021), which investigated the relationship between sociovirtualization and digital addiction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the increasing use of digital tools brings with it a surprising problem. At the same time that people are more connected than ever, many are feeling lonelier. Research from around the world shows a clear rise in chronic loneliness. This is the feeling that a person's social needs are not being met, and it is linked to problems such as anxiety, depression, and lower well-being (Holt-Lunstad, 2021). This creates an important question: how can people be so connected online, but still feel socially isolated?

This problem, known as the *Sociovirtualization Paradox*, has been studied in different fields. Psychologists have focused on how social media affects individuals, especially through social comparison and fear of missing out (FOMO) (Vogel et al., 2014). Sociologists have studied how relationships and social networks are changing in modern society (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Communication researchers have looked at how online platforms allow both connection and self-presentation (Boyd, 2011). Although these studies are valuable, they are often separated by field. There is still no clear model that connects individual psychological effects with larger social changes. Because of this, research shows mixed results—some studies find positive effects, others negative, and some no effect at all.

This article aims to solve this problem. Its main goal is to review and combine different studies about digital connection and loneliness, using sociovirtualization theory as a guiding idea. Instead of only listing results, this paper aims to build a clear explanation of the paradox. It focuses on three main questions:

1. What are the main theories and research findings about the link between digital interaction and chronic loneliness?
2. How can sociovirtualization theory bring these different ideas together into one clear explanation?
3. What future research and practical steps are needed to solve the problems and gaps in this field?

This study is important for three reasons. First, it contributes to theory by showing how sociovirtualization can explain many individual-level effects. Second, it gives researchers a clear overview of what is already known and what still needs to be studied. Third, it has practical value because understanding this paradox can help create healthier digital environments, better public policies, and improved digital education.



The rest of the article is organized as follows. Chapter 2 explains the method used to select and review the studies. Chapter 3 describes how the data was analyzed. Chapter 4 presents the main findings, focusing on the key causes of the paradox. Chapter 5 discusses these findings, introduces a new model, and suggests directions for future research. The article ends by encouraging a shift from passive use of digital media to a more intentional and thoughtful approach to online social interaction.

2. Review Methodology – A Systematic, Multi-Stage Approach

This chapter explains the systematic method used to find, select, and analyze relevant literature. The goal is to ensure that the process is clear, reliable, and complete.

2.1. Reason for Using a Systematic Review

Because this topic involves different fields—such as sociology, psychology, communication studies, and media studies—a simple narrative review could be biased and difficult to repeat. Therefore, a systematic review method was used. This approach helps reduce bias, keeps a clear record of all steps, and provides a complete overview of both theoretical and empirical research on digital connection and loneliness (Snyder, 2019).

This method also makes it possible to clearly describe how the literature was searched, which studies were included or excluded, and how the data was analyzed.

2.2. Research Questions

The review was guided by three main questions:

1. What theories are commonly used to explain the relationship between digital social interaction and chronic loneliness?
2. What research evidence shows a connection between high levels of online interaction (hyper-connection) and feelings of social isolation?
3. What gaps, contradictions, and opportunities for combining theories exist in the current research?

2.3. Search Strategy and Information Sources

A search was carried out across several databases to include a wide range of studies. The main sources were:

- **Academic databases:** Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Communication & Mass Media Complete.
- **Additional searches:** Google Scholar (to follow citations forward and backward) to find new research.
- **Search terms:** A Boolean search strategy was created using key terms and their synonyms:
 - **Context:** "social media" OR "digital communication" OR "online social network*" OR sociovirtual*



- o **Phenomenon:** lone* OR "social isolation" OR "perceived isolation" OR alienation
- o **Concept:** paradox OR "double-edged sword" OR "dark side" OR wellbeing OR "mental health"

Example search:

("social media" OR "digital communication") AND (lone* OR "social isolation") AND (paradox OR wellbeing)

2.4. Eligibility Criteria (Inclusion/Exclusion)

Studies were screened against the following pre-defined criteria:

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Adolescents, adults, and general populations.	Studies concentrated mainly on clinical populations (e.g., serious depression diagnosis) or non-human subjects.
Intervention/Exposure	Engagement with digital socialization tools (such as social media, messaging applications, and online groups)	Research on ordinary internet use for non-social activities.(e.g., information seeking, gaming without social components).
Outcome	Measured loneliness, perceived social isolation, or other psychosocial dimensions (e.g., belonging, social support).	Studies that focus solely on other outcomes, such as anxiety or depression, without including a direct loneliness measure.
Study Design	Empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods), theoretical publications, and systematic reviews.	Editorials, non-peer-reviewed commentary, and books (although major books will be mentioned in the theoretical framework).
Language & Date	English-language publications dating from 2010 (the rise of Web 2.0/social media) to the present.	Non-English publications from before 2010.

2.5. Study Selection Process

The selection followed the **PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)** flow model:



1. **Identification:** Records found through database searches and other sources.
2. **Screening:** Titles and abstracts assessed for eligibility requirements.
3. **Eligibility:** Full-text articles are considered for final inclusion.
4. **Final studies** are included in the qualitative synthesis.

3. Analytical Framework – Thematic Synthesis and Theoretical Integration

This chapter explains how the collected studies were analyzed and combined to create new insights, going beyond a simple summary.

3.1. Data Extraction and Management

Important information from each study was collected in a standard coding table using systematic review tools (such as Covidence or Rayyan) or a spreadsheet. The data included the authors, year, country, study design, sample characteristics, main measures or exposures, key findings related to the paradox, and possible theoretical explanations.

3.2. Analytical Method: Thematic Synthesis

To combine results from different types of studies, we used thematic synthesis, based on Thomas and Harden (2008). This method has three main steps:

- a. **Line-by-line coding:** Important parts of the results and discussion sections were carefully coded.
- b. **Developing descriptive themes:** Similar codes were grouped together to show important patterns across studies (for example, “negative relationship between social media use and well-being” or “role of social comparison”).
- c. **Creating analytical themes:** In this step, we went beyond the original studies. The descriptive themes were examined in relation to the research questions and the concept of sociovirtualization. We asked: “What do these patterns tell us about the paradox?” This helped us develop new theoretical ideas (such as “performative social capital”) to explain the findings.

3.3. Framework for Theoretical Integration: The Sociovirtualization Lens

Kurt’s sociovirtualization theory was used as the main framework for analysis. Each finding and theme was examined from this perspective:

- **Migration of social agents:** How do family, friends, and communities influence people differently in online and offline settings?
- **Transformation of social processes:** How do processes like identity formation, learning social norms, and maintaining relationships change in digital environments?

This approach helped us connect individual psychological effects (such as fear of missing out, or FOMO) with larger social changes. In this way, it links micro-level psychology with macro-level social theory.



3.4. Quality Appraisal

Although the main goal was to combine studies, the quality of the included research was also evaluated using suitable tools (such as the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool – MMAT). This helped us understand how strong the evidence is and to discuss possible limitations.

4. Thematic Findings: Understanding the Paradox

This chapter presents the main findings of the systematic review. The results are analyzed using sociovirtualization theory and thematic synthesis. The analysis shows that the Sociovirtualization Paradox is caused by three connected themes. These themes explain how moving social life into digital environments can lead to chronic loneliness.

4.1. Theme 1: Social Interaction as Performance

The most common finding in the research is that social interaction online has changed. Instead of being natural and authentic, it often becomes a kind of performance focused on getting approval from others.

- **The Quantified Self and Validation Anxiety**

Many studies in psychology show that social media platforms turn social approval into numbers, such as likes, shares, and followers. People compare these numbers with others, which can increase anxiety and make their self-esteem depend on online feedback. When people feel they do not get enough attention, they may feel insecure or not good enough (Burrow & Rainone, 2017; Sherman et al., 2018).

From the sociovirtualization perspective, this means that feedback from friends is no longer personal and subtle, but public and measured, which increases pressure and comparison.

- **Context Collapse and the Inauthentic Self**

Research in sociology and communication shows that online, different audiences (like family, friends, and colleagues) are combined into one. This is called *context collapse* (Boyd, 2011). Because of this, people often present a more general and “safe” version of themselves instead of showing their full personality.

This can feel tiring and lead to a gap between a person’s real self and their online image, which weakens real connections (Utz, 2015).

- **The Paradox of Platform Features**

Another important finding is that social media features have both positive and negative effects. Tools like posts and stories help people connect, but they mainly support performance rather than deep interaction.

Research shows that there are fewer features that encourage honest, personal conversations. This suggests that digital platforms are designed more for showing oneself than for building close relationships.

4.2. Theme 2: Algorithmic Influence on Social Experience



The second main theme focuses on how algorithms shape what people see online. The research shows that these systems actively influence how people understand their social world, often increasing feelings of loneliness.

- **Curated Social Reality and Upward Comparison**

Research in psychology and media studies shows that algorithm-based feeds (such as on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook) often present an unrealistic view of life. They mainly show highlights, success, and ideal situations (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Seeing this content often leads people to compare themselves with others who seem more successful or happier. This can cause negative feelings about oneself, jealousy, and the belief that others have better and more social lives. This is often called *social media envy* (Krasnova et al., 2013).

From a sociovirtualization perspective, this means that algorithms play an important role in shaping how people see social norms, often in a way that harms mental well-being.

- **Ambient Exclusion and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)**

Research also shows that algorithms can increase feelings of exclusion. For example, seeing photos of events, group posts, or location check-ins can remind people that they were not included (Ranzini & Hoek, 2017).

This can lead to FOMO (fear of missing out), which is strongly linked to higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction (Alt, 2015).

This shows how sociovirtualization changes how people experience belonging, making exclusion more visible and more passive.

4.3. Theme 3: Changes in Social Relationships

The third theme focuses on how digital communication changes the quality of social relationships, especially the balance between many connections and deep connections.

- **Many Weak Ties, Fewer Strong Ties**

Research in sociology shows that digital platforms are very good at creating large networks of weak connections, such as acquaintances (Granovetter, 1973). These connections can be useful for information and a general sense of belonging, but they usually do not provide strong emotional support.

At the same time, studies suggest that spending a lot of time online can reduce the time and energy needed to build close, real-life relationships (Hwang et al., 2020).

As a result, people may have many connections, but fewer deep and meaningful relationships.

- **Reduced Face-to-Face Interaction and “Phubbing”**

Research in psychology and communication shows that smartphones can reduce the quality of face-to-face interactions. *Phubbing* (ignoring someone to look at your phone) and simply having a phone present during conversations can lower empathy, connection, and conversation quality (Misra et al., 2016; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2013).

This shows how digital technology can weaken real-life social interaction. Constant digital interruptions make it harder to focus and to build strong emotional connections with others (Turkle, 2011).



4.4. Contradictions and Nuances: A Complex Paradox

The analysis also shows that the situation is not completely negative. Some studies suggest that digital communication can be very helpful for certain groups, such as people who live far away from others, people with stigmatized identities, or those who use online communities for support (McKenna et al., 2002).

An important difference in the research is how people use digital tools. Active and intentional use (for example, joining support groups or meaningful communities) often has positive effects. In contrast, passive use (such as scrolling, comparing, and performing online) is linked to negative outcomes.

This suggests that sociovirtualization theory should not only focus on digital interaction itself, but also on *how* people use it.

These findings provide a clear overview of the main themes. They form the basis for the next step: combining these ideas into one model that explains the Sociovirtualization Paradox in a clear and complete way.

5. Discussion: Towards an Integrated Model and Future Research

This chapter brings together the three main themes into one clear model that explains the Sociovirtualization Paradox. We argue that this paradox is not just an accidental result, but a direct outcome of how digital social systems are designed. These systems often create a mismatch between how people interact online and what they psychologically need.

5.1. Explaining the Paradox: The Psychosocial Mismatch Model

The reviewed studies show that most digital environments are designed around performance, measurement, and large-scale interaction. For example, users are encouraged to share content, gain likes, and reach many people.

However, this design does not match basic human needs. People need real connection, authentic interaction, and shared physical presence to feel socially fulfilled and avoid loneliness.

Our model explains this mismatch. It shows how key features of sociovirtualization create experiences that weaken important social needs. This idea is summarized in the table below, which connects digital features with their psychological effects.



Architectural Logic of Platforms	Generated Psychosocial Mechanism	Undermined Human Social Need	Resultant Risk
Quantification of Approval (Likes, followers)	Performance Anxiety & Contingent Self-Worth	Need for Authentic Acceptance & Stable Self-Esteem	The self becomes a branded commodity to be audited, rather than a person to be understood.
Algorithmic Curation for Engagement	Chronic Upward Comparison & Ambient Exclusion	Need for Secure Belonging & Realistic Social Norms	The social sphere feels like a staged race in which one is always behind or left out.
Affordances for Broadcast over Communion	Context Collapse & Inauthentic Presentation	Need for Vulnerability & Context-Specific Identity	Interaction becomes a guarded public show, suffocating the risk-taking necessary for intimacy.
A synchronicity & Text-Dominance	Attenuation of Embodied Social Cues	Need for Empathic Connection & Non-Verbal Synchrony	Communication lacks complexity and compassion, leaving it feeling transactional and emotionally impoverished.
Norm of Permanent, Ambient Connectivity	Displacement of Focused Co-Presence (Phubbing)	Need for Undivided Attention & Shared Reality	Physical togetherness is dispersed, reducing the ritual nature of shared time and weakening strong bonds.

This idea suggests that chronic loneliness in the digital age is a form of systemic mismatch. People interact in environments that do not fully meet their basic social needs. Therefore, the problem should not be solved by blaming technology, but by understanding this mismatch between digital systems and human needs.

5.2. Developing Sociovirtualization Theory: From Description to Critical Framework

Kurt's theory gives a strong general explanation of how social interaction is moving into digital spaces and changing. This review helps improve the theory in three main ways:

1. **Different Types of Digital Social Capital**
Sociovirtualization theory should clearly distinguish between different types of social value online. We suggest two main types:
 - **Performative social capital:** This is based on visible numbers like followers and likes. It is unstable, can cause stress, and is linked to loneliness.



- **Bonding social capital:** This comes from emotional support and a sense of belonging, often found in private groups or close communities. It helps people feel more secure and connected.
- 2. **Affordances for Vulnerability**
The theory should also focus on what digital platforms allow people to do. Current platforms support sharing, comparing, and showing content, but they often make it harder to be open, honest, and vulnerable.
A stronger theory should examine this imbalance and explore how platforms can better support real, meaningful interaction.
- 3. **Different Ways of Using Digital Media**
The theory should not only look at how often people use digital media, but also *how* they use it.
Our findings show that different types of use have different effects:
 - Passive use (scrolling, watching)
 - Performative use (posting for attention)
 - Active and meaningful use (communicating and connecting deeply)

Each of these leads to different psychological outcomes.

5.3. Future Research Agenda

Based on the gaps in the research, we suggest the following directions for future studies:

1. **Long-term and real-life studies**
Instead of only looking at short-term data, research should follow people over time. It should study how changes in digital behavior (for example, using social media more actively instead of passively) affect loneliness.
2. **Comparing different platforms**
Researchers should compare different digital environments, such as TikTok, private Discord servers, and WhatsApp groups. This can help show how different designs and cultures influence social experience and loneliness.
3. **Broader populations and cultures**
Most studies focus on young people in Western countries. Future research should include older adults, different cultures, and different life stages to better understand the paradox.
4. **Practical solutions and design improvements**
Research should also focus on solutions based on the idea of “Intentional Sociovirtualization.” This includes:
 - **Digital literacy programs:** Teaching people how algorithms work, how social media influences behavior, and how to use digital tools in a healthier way.
 - **Platform design experiments:** Working with designers to create features that support deeper connections, such as private sharing, temporary posts, and tools that encourage meaningful conversations.



5.4. Practical Implications: Intentional Sociovirtualization

The main conclusion of this study is the need for *intentional sociovirtualization*. This means using digital tools in a more conscious and thoughtful way. It applies to different groups:

- **Individuals and communities** should become more aware of how they use digital media. They should choose online spaces that meet their social needs and protect real-life interactions without screens.
- **Designers and technology companies** should move away from focusing only on user engagement. Instead, they should design platforms that support well-being, authenticity, and real human connection.
- **Educators and policymakers** should promote stronger digital literacy. This includes teaching people how social media affects their thinking and emotions, and creating policies that support transparency and responsible design.

Overall, this review has explained the Sociovirtualization Paradox and proposed a model to understand it. It also offers a path for future research and action. The goal is to create a future where digital life supports meaningful connection, instead of increasing loneliness.

6. Conclusion: Solving the Paradox through Intentional Design

This review explored the Sociovirtualization Paradox—the situation where people are highly connected online but still feel lonely. By using Kurt’s sociovirtualization theory, we combined different research findings into one clear explanation. Instead of showing only mixed results, we developed a model that explains the paradox as a mismatch between digital environments and human psychological needs.

Our main argument is that most digital platforms are designed for performance, numbers, and large-scale interaction. However, people need authenticity, openness, real presence, and deep relationships to feel socially satisfied. Because of this mismatch, chronic loneliness can develop. It is not simply a personal problem, but a result of environments that do not support real social needs.

At the same time, some findings show that digital communication can be positive when it is used in a meaningful and intentional way. This means that sociovirtualization is not always harmful—its effects depend on how it is designed and used.

To solve this problem, a shift is needed from passive use to intentional sociovirtualization. This does not mean people should stop using digital tools, but that they should use them more carefully and thoughtfully.

- **Researchers** should continue studying this topic with long-term and comparative research. Sociovirtualization theory should be developed further to better understand the impact of digital systems on people.
- **Technology designers** should create platforms that support deeper connection, trust, and community, instead of only focusing on attention and numbers.



- **Educators, health professionals, and policymakers** should improve digital literacy. People need to understand how social media works and why real-life interaction is still important for well-being.

In conclusion, the Sociovirtualization Paradox is a key challenge of modern society. This review explains its causes and suggests ways to address it. The goal is not to reject digital technology, but to use it in a way that supports real human connection. By applying the idea of intentional sociovirtualization, we can move closer to a future where digital life helps people feel truly connected, rather than lonely.

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