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Digital Discrimination and Emotional Dynamics: A Sociological Study of Social Media and Social Relationships

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Abstract

This study examines how digital interactions, including likes, comments, reactions, and silences, influence emotional experiences and social relationships in the era of social media. Drawing on data collected from 200 social media users in India through an online survey, the research explores the emotional consequences of online behaviours like being ignored, ghosted, excluded from groups, or not receiving expected responses. The study examines whether such digital experiences lead to feelings of emotional neglect, social anxiety, or real-life conflict. The findings reveal that a significant portion of users, especially younger respondents and women, report emotional distress linked to their online experiences. Many participants indicated that they had distanced themselves from others, blocked or muted individuals, or felt less valued due to the absence of expected digital engagement. Additionally, respondents expressed that digital favouritism, exclusion, and popularity-based attention mirror offline social inequalities, suggesting that online platforms are not socially neutral. The study highlights that online silence and selective engagement are benign behaviours and can carry deep social and emotional meanings. These interactions influence perceptions of trust, belonging, and self-worth. The research contributes to the growing body of sociological literature on digital life by emphasising how social media platforms have become emotionally charged spaces where recognition and exclusion are continuously negotiated. Ultimately, the study highlights the importance of considering digital behaviour as a significant site of emotional labour and relational negotiation, particularly for young users navigating friendships and social identities in hyper-connected environments.

Introduction

In this rapidly digitising era, social media has become deeply embedded in everyday life, fundamentally reshaping how individuals communicate, form, and maintain social relationships. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Snapchat have transformed interpersonal interaction through instant, asynchronous, and multimedia forms of communication. Social media has become an integral part of daily life worldwide, with over 5.04 billion users as of January 2024, representing approximately 62.3% of the global population. On average, individuals spend about 2 hours and 23 minutes daily on various social platforms, engaging with approximately 6.7 platforms each month (Globe Newswire, 2024). This pervasive usage underscores the significant role social media plays in communication, entertainment, and information dissemination across diverse demographics. In India, the social media landscape mirrors global trends, with over 900 million users, accounting for about 62.07% of the country's population (Data Reportal, 2024). The youth demographic, particularly those aged 18 to 24, constitutes a substantial portion of this user base, with platforms like Instagram reporting that 44.4% of their users in India fall within this age group. This age group is also the most active, spending an average of 2 hours and 59 minutes daily on social media platforms (Datar Reportal, 2024). The dominance of younger users underscores the significant role of social media in shaping contemporary youth culture and communication patterns in India. These platforms enable what Castells describes as a "network society", a decentralised yet interconnected social structure formed through digital communication networks (Castells, 2010).

Social media platforms have revolutionised the structure and content of social relationships. They facilitate the expansion of social circles, rekindling of distant ties, and the maintenance of long-distance relationships through frequent and varied forms of digital interaction (Ellison et al., 2007). Empirical studies show that active users experience increased social support and civic engagement (Hampton et al., 2011). These platforms also enable users to express affection, coordinate group activities, and celebrate life events, thereby enhancing emotional intimacy and strengthening bonds (Vitak, 2012). The asynchronous and location-independent nature of digital communication introduces a new relational flexibility, allowing people to remain connected across time and space. However, this hyperconnectivity also presents paradoxes. While digital interactions may enhance existing relationships, they can also diminish the quality of face-to-face interactions, leading to superficial and transactional relationships. One significant challenge is the phenomenon of "context collapse," in which diverse social spheres merge into a single online audience, thereby eroding context-sensitive communication (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Furthermore, the curated and idealised self-presentations on social media mostly distort interpersonal understanding and reduce authenticity in relationships (Toma & Hancock, 2013). This performative dynamic can intensify social comparison and feelings of envy, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Chou & Edge, 2012).

From a sociological perspective, social media's influence on relationships is also mediated by the concept of social capital. Putnam's distinction between bonding (strong ties within close-knit groups) and bridging (weaker ties across diverse social groups) has been extended to the digital realm (Putnam, 2000). Studies indicate that platforms like Facebook support both types of social capital, facilitating close connections while also enabling new, diverse relationships (Ellison et al., 2014). Yet, concerns remain about the tendency of online networks to prioritise quantity over quality, weakening interpersonal commitment and promoting ephemeral connections (Turkle, 2011). Importantly, the impact of social media on relationships varies across age groups, genders, cultures, and social contexts. Younger generations tend to incorporate social media naturally into their daily routines, while older adults frequently use it selectively to maintain familial ties (Quan-Haase et al., 2017). Cultural norms also shape how intimacy, privacy, and emotional expression manifest online; for instance, collectivist societies use social media to reinforce kinship and community ties, whereas individualistic cultures emphasise self-presentation and personal branding (Sajid et al., 2024)

Moreover, the algorithmic design and commercialisation of social media platforms raise profound ethical concerns. Zuboff articulates this in her concept of "surveillance capitalism," where users' digital behaviours are commodified for profit (Zuboff, 2019). Algorithms increasingly shape what users see and how they behave, subtly nudging them toward engagement-driven content rather than authentic interaction. This has the potential to distort natural relationship-building processes, leading individuals to modify their behaviour based on algorithmic feedback rather than genuine social impulses. This paper examines the dual nature of social media's impact on interpersonal relationships, investigating both its potential to strengthen emotional and social bonds and its capacity to undermine relational authenticity and depth. Using a sociological lens, it focuses on how emotional experiences, such as exclusion, digital

favouritism, and muted interactions, reflect broader structures of social capital and digital discrimination.

Review of Literature

The sociological exploration of social media's impact on interpersonal relationships has generated a diverse body of literature, encompassing themes such as digital intimacy, social capital, online self-presentation, and the commodification of social interactions. Early studies emphasised the potential of social media to enhance communication and social connectivity, particularly through the maintenance of existing ties and the creation of new ones (Ellison et al., 2007) These platforms facilitate both bonding social capital, characterised by strong, emotionally close relationships, and bridging social capital, which involves weak ties that provide access to diverse resources and perspectives (Putnam, 2000; Ellison et al., 2014).

However, scholars have also noted that these benefits are not uniformly experienced. While social media can enhance social support, it may simultaneously lead to increased stress, reduced face-to-face communication, and shallow, transactional interactions (Turkle, 2011). The phenomenon of "context collapse," as discussed by Marwick and Boyd, has been central in explaining how diverse social roles (e.g., friends, family, and colleagues) converge into a single online audience, complicating users' ability to manage their self-presentation (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This convergence can inhibit authentic expression and create tensions in personal relationships.

Additionally, the role of self-presentation on social media platforms has received substantial scholarly attention. Research by Toma and Hancock highlights how users normally curate idealised images of themselves to gain social validation, which may misrepresent interpersonal understanding and contribute to relational dissatisfaction (Toma & Hancock, 2013). Similarly, Chou and Edge found that the tendency to compare oneself with others on social media leads to negative emotional outcomes, such as envy and reduced self-esteem (Chou & Edge, 2012).

The variation in social media usage patterns across demographic and cultural lines further complicates its impact on relationships. Age, gender, and cultural context significantly influence how individuals engage with social media. Quan-Haase, Mo, and Wellman argue that older adults typically use social media more conservatively to maintain familial ties, while younger users integrate it more seamlessly into their daily lives (Quan-Haase et al., 2017). In collectivist societies, social media is used to reinforce familial and community bonds, whereas in individualistic cultures, the emphasis is frequently on self-expression and identity construction (Sajid, Anwer, Mufti, & Iqbal, 2024).

Recent scholarship also interrogates the structural dimensions of social media platforms. Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism highlights how digital platforms exploit user interactions for profit, compromising meaningful social engagement (Zuboff, 2019). Algorithms that prioritise content based on engagement metrics encourage performativity and spectacle over genuine connection. As such, the

architecture of these platforms actively shapes social behaviour, subtly transforming the nature of human relationships in digital spaces.

Finally, the dual impact of social media is evident in both the facilitation and erosion of social ties. Hampton et al. suggest that digital platforms can increase civic engagement and offer emotional support, but these benefits are unevenly distributed (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). Moreover, the “always-on” culture promoted by social media can blur the boundaries between personal and public life, creating new forms of emotional labour and relational fatigue.

Although social media has become central to contemporary social life, existing research has largely prioritised psychological, technological, or communication-based perspectives on its impact. What remains underexplored is how social media, as a sociotechnical system, reshapes the formation, maintenance, and meaning of interpersonal relationships from a sociological perspective. This study addresses this gap by examining the dual role of social media in strengthening and weakening social ties, using sociological concepts such as social capital, performativity, and emotional labour.

Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive survey design to investigate the impact of digital interactions, particularly on social media platforms, on emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships. The research framework was grounded in sociological inquiry, focusing on users’ subjective experiences as they navigate the complexities of online communication (Babbie, 2020). Data was collected using a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised closed-ended multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions organised into thematic sections, including demographic information, social media usage habits, experiences of emotional neglect or exclusion, perceptions of digital favouritism, and the offline implications of online behaviour (Likert, 1932). A pilot study was conducted with a small group to test the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire, and minor adjustments were made prior to data collection. A brief preface on the form explained the purpose of the study and assured participants of their anonymity.

The survey utilised a non-probability convenience sampling technique and was circulated among Indian social media users through platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram (Etikan et al., 2016). A total of 200 respondents participated in the study. The sample reflected a balanced demographic profile, with 50% of the respondents aged 18–24, 35% in the 25–34 age group, and the remaining 15% above 35 years of age. The gender distribution was 105 males and 95 females. Participants came from diverse educational backgrounds, from high school completion to doctoral degrees. Individuals without internet access or limited digital exposure were excluded to maintain the study’s focus on active online behaviour. The data was analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Responses were tabulated and visualised using Excel. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all survey items (Pallant, 2020). To deepen the analysis, responses were disaggregated by age and gender, highlighting potential intersectional patterns in emotional responses and perceived digital inequality. This enabled a

comparative analysis of how different demographic groups experience the emotional and relational impacts of social media.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed about the study's aims, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. No personal identifiers were collected. All data have been used strictly for academic purposes and in accordance with ethical guidelines for social research.

Table I: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 200)

Category	Sub-category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	105	52.50
	Female	95	47.50
Age Group	18–24 years	120	37.50
	25–34 years	60	22.50
	35 years and above	20	5.00
Qualification	Undergraduate	88	44.00
	Postgraduate	72	36.00
	Others (e.g. Diploma, 12th grade, etc.)	40	20.00

This study is grounded in the intersection of Goffman's dramaturgical theory and the concept of digital affect, both of which provide a robust lens to understand how online interactions influence emotional well-being and social relationships. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, as introduced in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), conceptualises social interaction as a performance where individuals manage impressions in the presence of others (Goffman, 1959). Social media platforms extend this stage, allowing users to curate, perform, and observe social behaviours in real time. The act of posting, sharing, liking, or remaining silent becomes part of an ongoing social performance. When expected cues of recognition, such as likes or replies, are absent, individuals may interpret this as rejection or disapproval, which can affect their emotional states and alter interpersonal dynamics. This framework helps explain why digital neglect (e.g., being seen but not replied to) is experienced as socially and emotionally significant.

In parallel, the study draws from the emerging field of digital affect theory, which explores how emotions circulate, are amplified, and become politicised in digital spaces. Scholars like Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2013) and Zizi Papacharissi (Papacharissi, 2015) argue that emotions in digital environments are not private but are shaped by platform structures and social hierarchies. From this view, feelings of exclusion or inferiority online are not simply personal insecurities but reflect broader dynamics of digital inequality, attention economies, and affective labour. Together, these frameworks allow us to understand

digital behaviour not as trivial or superficial but as deeply embedded in the politics of recognition, social validation, and emotional survival in contemporary digital life.

Results

Table II: Digital Behaviour and Social-Emotional Impact (N = 200)

Theme	Key Indicator	Total (%)	Age			Gender	
			18–24	25–34	35+	Male	Female
Digital Engagement	● Social media use (1–3 hours daily)	50% (100)	27.50%	17.50%	5%	24%	26%
	● Regularly shares posts/statuses	40% (80)	25%	10%	5%	18%	22%
Emotional Response	● Felt ignored when someone viewed but didn't respond	67% (134)	37.50%	22.50%	7%	30%	37%
	● Mood affected by social media reactions	60% (120)	35%	20%	5%	29%	31%
	● Felt jealous seeing others get more reactions	50% (100)	30%	15%	5%	24%	26%
	● Cried/lost sleep/anxiety due to online exclusion	20% (40)	12%	6%	2%	8%	12%
Digital Reciprocity	● Felt obligated to react to maintain a relationship	70% (140)	35%	28%	7%	34%	36%
	● Reacted out of obligation despite disinterest	70% (140)	32.50%	30%	7.50%	35%	35%
Disconnection & Boundaries	● Distanced self, due to being ignored	42.5% (85)	25%	12.50%	5%	19%	23.50%
	● Blocked/muted someone due to conflict	60% (120)	30%	25%	5%	28%	32%
Group Exclusion	● Removed from a group without explanation	30% (60)	18%	9%	3%	14%	16%
Perceived Inequality	● Felt favoritism in group chats/comments	60% (120)	40%	15%	5%	29%	31%
	● Believes digital space mirrors real-world inequality	55% (110)	28%	22%	5%	26%	29%

Theme	Key Indicator	Total (%)	Age			Gender	
			18–24	25–34	35+	Male	Female
Offline–Online Overlap	● Feels closer to those who engage with their posts (even if never met)	60% (120)	30%	25%	5%	28%	32%
	● Online misunderstanding led to real-life conflict	35% (70)	20%	12%	3%	17%	18%
Ghosting/Exclusion	● Been ghosted or blocked without explanation (emotionally affected)	20% (40)	12%	6%	2%	9%	11%
	● Ghosted others themselves	15% (30)	8%	5%	2%	14%	16%
General Outlook	● Believes digital behaviour harms real-world relationships	30% (60)	18%	10%	2%	15%	15%
	● Experienced favouritism, being ignored, or digital silence (Q28 combo)	65% (130)	35%	25%	5%	33%	32%

Discussion

The advent of social media has redefined the way individuals experience acknowledgement and recognition in their everyday social interactions. In traditional face-to-face communication, simple gestures like nods, smiles, and verbal affirmations affirm one's presence and participation. On digital platforms, these have been replaced by likes, comments, views, and emojis. While these mechanisms serve as proxies for social validation, their absence can be deeply unsettling. The results of the study (Table II) indicates that 67% of respondents felt ignored when someone viewed their status or post but did not respond. Similarly, 60% reported that their mood was affected by the type or amount of reactions they received on social media. These findings suggest that individuals are increasingly investing emotionally in digital acknowledgements (Mee et al., 2026). This emotional vulnerability is most acute among younger users (18–24) and female respondents, who consistently reported higher levels of distress when their digital presence was not acknowledged. These dynamics echo what sociologist Arlie Hochschild referred to as "emotional labour," now transferred to the online world where maintaining appearances and emotional tone requires constant vigilance and self-monitoring (Hochschild, 1983).

The experience of being ‘seen but not responded to’ can produce what some researchers have termed “digital silence stress,” which contributes to anxiety, self-doubt, and reduced self-worth. These patterns strongly align with symbolic interactionism, which holds that individuals derive meaning and self-conception through interaction and social feedback. In online spaces, where communication is fragmented and partial, the symbols of interaction (likes, views, replies) gain heightened importance, making their absence feel like rejection.

Another dimension of emotional stress online arises from the constant exposure to peers’ curated lives. The study reveals that 50% of users reported feeling jealous when friends reacted to others’ posts but not their own. This reflects a competitive emotional landscape shaped by the quantification of attention. Even among friends, social media becomes a platform of comparative visibility, where one’s worth appears to be indexed by the reactions received from others. This phenomenon is deeply connected to Leon Festinger’s social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others (Festinger, 1954). In digital ecosystems, where these comparisons are ever-present and algorithmically amplified, feelings of inadequacy and jealousy become normalised. The curated nature of social media content intensifies this effect, presenting an idealised version of others’ lives that invites envy and insecurity. For younger users, especially, such a comparison can blur the line between online identity and real self-worth. The emotional cost is not limited to occasional disappointment but extends to chronic dissatisfaction and strained interpersonal bonds, especially when unequal attention leads to feelings of exclusion.

One of the more striking findings in the survey is the evidence of performative digital behaviour driven by social obligation. A full 70% of respondents felt obligated to react to others’ posts to maintain relationships, and an equal proportion admitted to reacting out of obligation despite disinterest. This indicates a significant level of emotional labour being expended not out of desire but out of perceived social necessity. As (Goffman, 1959; Hogan, 2010) The concept of impression management suggests, social media serves as a stage where users present idealised versions of themselves, and reciprocal interaction plays a crucial role in maintaining these performances. Failure to reciprocate may be interpreted as detachment, disinterest, or even hostility, thereby creating a norm of mutual performance that may not always be emotionally sincere (Chan et al., 2026).

Moreover, the pressure to engage with others’ content, even when uninterested, transforms social media from a space of spontaneous connection to one of strategic engagement. This emotional performance falls disproportionately on women, who may internalise the expectation of being socially attentive and responsive. The constant need to maintain digital bonds not only shapes daily routines but also contributes to emotional fatigue.

Exclusion is one of the most painful human experiences, and in the digital era, it manifests through subtle acts, such as being left out of group chats, not receiving replies, or being removed from online groups. In the study, 30% reported being removed from groups without explanation, and 42.5% said they had distanced themselves from someone due to being ignored online. These behaviours indicate that

digital exclusion can have tangible effects on relational continuity. Such findings align with Bauman's concept of "liquid relationships", where connections are easily formed and dissolved in modern society (Bauman, 2013). The lack of commitment or clarity in digital interactions contributes to emotional detachment and relationship breakdown. What might be dismissed as "just online behaviour" carries deep relational weight, especially among younger users who view digital interactions as central to their social lives. The fact that 20% of respondents reported crying, losing sleep, or experiencing anxiety due to online exclusion underscores the depth of impact such behaviour can have. This reinforces the argument that digital belonging is not trivial; it is socially and emotionally significant, and its loss can mirror the pain of physical exclusion.

While some users experience pain from being excluded, others take control by setting boundaries through blocking or muting. In this study, 60% of participants reported blocking or muting someone due to personal conflict, and 15% admitted to having ghosted others themselves. These findings show that blocking is not only a defensive tool but also a normative part of digital interaction. In sociological terms, this can be viewed as an act of boundary maintenance, where individuals protect emotional space by severing contact (Vitak & Ellison, 2013). But such acts, when done without context or closure, result in confusion and psychological distress for the person on the receiving end. The rise of ghosting as a normalised exit strategy further illustrates the decline of mutual accountability in online relations. Interestingly, the data also reveals that women slightly outpace men in using these boundary-setting tools, possibly reflecting a need to avoid toxic, repetitive, or emotionally draining digital engagements. Blocking becomes a form of digital self-care, albeit one with relational consequences.

The divide between digital and real-world relationships is increasingly blurred. 60% of respondents said they feel closer to people who regularly engage with their posts, even if they've never met offline. This suggests that digital intimacy, formed through consistent and thoughtful interaction, can shape real emotional connections. Moreover, 35% reported that an online misunderstanding had led to real-life conflict, showing that online dynamics do not remain confined to screens. They spill over into real-world emotions, behaviours, and relationships. These findings challenge the traditional view of online interaction as superficial and instead highlight its capacity for both deep connection and real emotional harm (Baym, 2015). The sociological implication here is that online spaces are no longer auxiliary to real life. They are central arenas for social interaction, identity formation, and emotional exchange. This demands new forms of etiquette, emotional literacy, and empathy that are still evolving.

Contrary to the early ideals of the internet as a democratizing force, 55% of respondents agreed that digital behaviour mirrors real-life inequality. From group favouritism to visibility bias, users observe that those with more popularity, attractiveness, or social capital receive more attention and validation online. This observation is supported by Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which can be translated into digital spaces as "digital capital." Individuals with high follower counts, better aesthetics, or engaging content accumulate more interactions, which in turn enhances their digital value (Bourdieu, 1986). Those without such advantages may struggle for visibility, leading to feelings of marginalisation or irrelevance. Additionally, 65% reported experiencing digital favouritism or emotional neglect in various forms,

including being ignored or left out of celebratory interactions. These findings underscore those digital interactions, like offline ones, are shaped by implicit biases, informal hierarchies, and emotional economies. This study reveals that digital interactions are emotionally and socially complex. They are not merely modes of communication but arenas of validation, exclusion, performance, and boundary-making. Across age and gender, but especially among younger and female respondents, the emotional significance of online interactions is profound. Key sociological theories, including symbolic interactionism, social comparison, impression management, emotional labour, and social capital, offer valuable lenses to interpret these behaviours. They highlight that social media is not a neutral tool but a structured space where identity, value, and emotion are negotiated in real time.

Conclusion

This study reveals that social media is not a detached or secondary sphere of human interaction; it is a deeply embedded extension of everyday relational life. Emotional cues, once confined to face-to-face settings, are now negotiated through likes, comments, muting, and visibility, with high emotional stakes. While platforms promise connectivity, they also reproduce and sometimes intensify existing social hierarchies and emotional burdens. From a sociological standpoint, these digital behaviours are not trivial; they are symbolic actions loaded with meaning, deeply shaped by users' social locations, particularly gender, age, and class. Social media becomes a stage for affective labour, impression management, and the accumulation (or depletion) of digital social capital. This challenges the dominant narrative that online communication is superficial or disconnected from real-world sociality. Unlike studies grounded in psychology or media studies, this research underscores the relational and structural nature of digital emotions. My interpretation is that social media platforms, while designed for user expression and connection, function within a political economy that privileges visibility, popularity, and algorithmic favour. This can create subtle but persistent emotional hierarchies that users must navigate daily.

Future research should expand on these findings by examining intersectional dimensions such as caste, class, and region, which may further shape how individuals experience digital belonging or exclusion. As digital life becomes increasingly inseparable from everyday life, the sociology of digital emotion will become a vital field of inquiry.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct and reporting of this research.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved voluntary and anonymous participation. Participants were informed about the nature of the research and gave their consent prior to responding. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data was used strictly for academic purposes.

Author Contribution

Santhosh Gugulothu: Conceptualisation, literature review, theoretical framework, writing (drafting and revision).Shah Din: Data collection, data analysis, and preparation of thematic summary.Venoth Nallisamy: Review, proofreading, funding.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the information collected from participants. However, de-identified excerpts relevant to the study's analysis are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and institutional guidelines.

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