DIGITAL SOCIAL CONNECTION AT THE LONELY URBAN FRINGE

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Introduction

Extensive research has explored the way social and mobile media have fundamentally transformed social connection. This body of work explores the potential of digital communities (Baym, 2015), the dynamics of mobile social connection (Chayko, 2008; Humphreys, 2007) and digital intimacy (Dobson et al., 2018; Alinejad, 2019). Recent discussions also focus on digital disconnection (Karppi, 2018; Light, 2014) and the deepening crisis of social connection and loneliness (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), alongside concerns over the deterioration of commercial social media platforms, their 'enshitification' (Doctorow, 2023) and the struggle to combat hostility and disinformation.

This paper draws on funded research in partnership with three local government councils and two community organisations. It examines individuals' efforts to navigate a digital social connection ecosystem in outer metropolitan areas – settings where the interplay of people, place and technology meets challenges posed by daily temporal rhythms and the isolating nature of urban fringes. Employing an interdisciplinary lens, we conceptualise social connection as relationships within intimate, close, and broader social circles. These connections serve specific functions, such as maintaining proximity, access to social support and interest groups, and fostering a sense of belonging (Farmer et al., 2021; 2024; De Cotta et al., 2024).

The project addresses the need to revisit mediated or digital social connections in place-based digital media research. It aims to provide local councils and community

organisations with practical insights that can help them leverage digital tools to enhance community social connections (Farmer et al., 2024; Currey et al., 2024). The central question to our investigation is: How do social media and messaging apps mediate diverse forms of social connection in outer metropolitan areas?

Methods

The research design adopted an agnostic stance towards the mediums, apps and platforms for social connection, avoiding assumptions about their social or connective affordances. Participants (n=44) represented diverse demographics, including new immigrants, young people in precarious employment, and those managing mental health issues – all residing in outer metropolitan areas with limited social infrastructure. Each participant underwent two semi-structured face-to-face interviews focused on their understanding of social connection and how they establish and maintain connections, including through digital tools. Data analysis employed an abductive approach, blending inductive and deductive reasoning to relate empirical observations with theoretical frameworks (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022).

The functional layers of hybrid social connection

We observed a broad spectrum of engagement with communication technologies, encompassing active use and deliberate non-use. By digital social connection ecosystem, we mean the complex, dynamic, and interacting modes of digital media people use to attain and maintain the social connections they need. This includes various platforms and modalities—from mobile messaging and social media platforms to dating or friending apps and spanning text, voice, image sharing, and video calls. These were used to facilitate different modes of digital social connection, enabling distinct functions across four layered categories of social connection. Participants employed specific digital tools and features, often adapting their use to cater to different layers of social connection. Despite their interconnection, we dissect these layers individually to expose their contributions to the digital social connection ecosystem.

Maintaining and making close connections through hybrid timescapes

Emery considers her mother a vital part of her 'inner circle' of intimate connections: *'We call each other once a week, every week. Sometimes twice. Or if I've got a problem, I'll call at least twice a week. We send pictures, texts, and stuff between regular contact'* (Emery, young adult). Participants frequently cited the strategic use of digital communication tools to foster social connections with their closest contacts, seamlessly integrating these interactions into their busy lives. This connection layer hinges on using digital media for consistent yet low-intensity exchanges. Emery's case illustrates this approach, involving video calls and messaging to share life snippets. Participants favoured digital tools that offered immediacy and enabled 'conversational grazing,' a communication modality allowing intermittent engagement. Some deliberately crafted spaces for ambient co-presence (Madinaou, 2016), allowing them to maintain a sense of closeness amidst the fluctuating demands of daily life.

Enabling Social Support

The social support function fundamentally relies on reciprocity – exchanging various assistance or resources. This entails sustained interaction within a diverse network, where each person offers different resources and methods for sharing and accessing them. Amanda's story illustrates how the strategic use of social media and messaging apps can assist in navigating the social support network amidst mental health strains. She leverages WhatsApp to maintain connections with a broader circle in a way that allows a layer of delayed response (Farman, 2018): *'You can just kind of check up on each other see how everyone is, but it's like, I don't want to text back straightaway [and] I don't have to'* (Amanda, midlife adult). Others engaged in passive consumption, seeking stories, information, and content that fostered a lasting sense of camaraderie and friendship.

Identifying with others and participating in groups

The third facet of hybrid social connection encompasses a broader social circle, focusing on engaging with groups that foster a shared identity. This engagement guides behaviours, influences trends such as fashion, and keeps individuals informed on current events while providing a sense of belonging through the assurance of groupness. Young adults in our study used platforms like Instagram, Telegram, Viber, Discord, WhatsApp, and Facebook Groups to engage collectively. Issa shared, *'I have lost count of the number of groups I'm in, like soccer and church groups. Nowadays, people just add you to groups...'* (Issa, young adult). However, managing this can be challenging: *'There are so many church groups, and I can't keep up with all the notifications. I end up muting them, so I don't get overwhelmed'* (Issa, young adult). This exemplifies the tension between seeking connection and managing the digital influx of belonging.

Interfacing with the community

Social connection extends beyond immediate circles, fostering an affective sense of belonging within the broader social and cultural landscape. Geographical location and digital media consumption are essential for these broader connections, enabling less frequent and intimate interactions than those in inner circles but crucial for affirming one's place within the wider community. For example, Olivia, an older participant, values staying connected to her community through local Facebook groups and news sources, which keep her informed about local events and activities. *'I often discover things I'd like to attend, and it becomes a talking point with friends who might share similar updates they've encountered on social media,'* she explains. Despite their irregularity, these peripheral engagements are essential for maintaining a sense of community and shared interest within the larger social ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study introduces the concept of a digital social connection ecosystem and demonstrates how people in urban fringe areas navigate digital media to fulfil their social connection needs. It extends research on digital intimacy and mobile social

connection dynamics to these contexts. Our findings reveal that social connection outcomes via digital media depend on users' digital literacy, adaptability, and labour. Moreover, these outcomes are profoundly contextual and somewhat uncertain, especially in isolating settings such as urban fringes, where achieving social connection can be increasingly complex.

We demonstrate how individuals navigate and adapt digital tools to meet their specific social needs and contexts. We also illustrate the dynamic interplay between digital labour and user adaptability, which plays a crucial role in navigating the complex landscape of the digital social connection ecosystem.

The enabling role of digital tools for social connection in these contexts is dynamic, revealing the need for a deeper understanding of how digital and face-to-face communication complement each other. Local government and community service providers in those areas could leverage these findings to offer targeted support, enhancing knowledge and skills for those navigating this intricate and, at times, fraught digital ecosystem.

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