

# Emotionally Unavailable but Always Online: The Rise of Digital Disconnection in Adolescent Friendship

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## Abstract:

Adolescents have never been more connected and never found it easier to feel emotionally disconnected from the very friends they message all day. This paper synthesises global and Indian evidence on “digital disconnection” in adolescent friendship, manifesting as phubbing (snubbing someone present for one’s phone), technoference (technology interrupting social interaction), fear of missing out (FoMO), nomophobia, and digital social multitasking. This research paper offers an understanding of how constant device use affects friendships. It explains that always being on a device can reduce attention to friends in person, increase digital stress and arguments, and harm the quality of friendships. However, the paper also notes that online interactions can sometimes improve peer support. This research proposes a new model that combines different theories to explain how technology impacts our relationships and psychological needs. The take-home is simple: teens don’t need *less* connection; instead, they need higher-quality, better-timed, and more embodied connection, with devices designed (and routines arranged) to protect it.

**Keywords:** adolescents; friendship; phubbing; technoference; FoMO; nomophobia; India; social media; displacement hypothesis; emotional availability

## INTRODUCTION:

In an era where a message can circle the globe in seconds, today’s adolescents are more connected than ever before, at least in the digital sense. (Turkle, 2011; Walokar, 2025) Smartphone and social media use are now inseparable from teen life and identity worldwide; the question is no longer whether adolescents go online, but how that online presence reshapes offline closeness. Problematic social media use is rising among adolescents, with measurable mental-health correlates and concerns about displaced face-to-face time. In India, digital access has expanded dramatically (886 million active internet users in 2024), including deep penetration into rural areas, which brings both opportunity and new pressures into adolescent social worlds. (Kantar IMAI Report 2024). National “pulse” reports link late-night social media to sleep loss and lower life satisfaction among Indian high schoolers, conditions that erode availability for friends the next day. Surrounded by Wi-Fi and social apps, a typical teenager might scroll through Instagram while Facetiming a friend, all as hundreds of “friends” watch their posts. On the surface, it appears impossible for a young person to feel alone. Many adolescents describe a profound sense of emotional isolation and disconnection despite this constant connectivity. A popular meme captures it succinctly: “emotionally unavailable but always online.” This witty phrase, though born on social media, reflects a growing reality acknowledged by psychologists and teens alike. Adolescent friendships, while

maintained through ceaseless digital interaction, may lack the close emotional bonds that characterise true companionship.

Teens themselves cite socialising as a primary reason for being online. Adolescence is a life stage when friendships become paramount, and the internet provides new venues to form and maintain these bonds. In a 2015 Pew Research Centre study, 57% of U.S. teens said they had made a new friend online, often through social media or gaming, though most of those relationships remained exclusively online (77% had never met those online friends in person). Social media platforms can amplify teens' sense of connection: about 83% of teen social media users say these platforms make them feel more connected to their friends' daily lives, and 70% feel more in tune with their friends' feelings through social media updates. Similarly, many Indian teens use social networking to augment their friendships, for instance, to stay in touch with schoolmates via WhatsApp groups or to discover peers with shared interests beyond their immediate circle. One qualitative study of Indian adolescents noted that teens often go online to seek social validation and self-expression, indicating that social media has become integral to how they connect and communicate with friends (Sharma & Vyas, 2025). Social media is not just an activity but a social lifeline for today's youth across the globe. It enables constant contact: sharing selfies, reacting to posts, exchanging jokes, coordinating meet-ups, or simply knowing who's doing what at any given moment.

On the face of it, this digital connectedness seems wholly positive, a way to fortify friendships and create new ones. Studies in the 2010s found that frequent online communication can reinforce feelings of closeness. Adolescents who interact with friends both offline and online tend to have more intimate friendships than those who connect in only one sphere (Baiocco et al., 2011). Online channels provide additional opportunities for self-disclosure and support that complement face-to-face interaction (Yau & Reich, 2018). Socially anxious youth even report feeling more comfortable and open in online interactions than in person, suggesting the internet can be a boon for those who struggle with in-person communication (Schouten et al., 2007; Anderson, 2018). A large share of teens say that digital communication, such as texting and social media, helps them feel connected: roughly 90% of teens exchange text messages with friends, and 55% do so daily, demonstrating that for many, chatting via screens is now as routine as chatting in the school hallway. These findings underscore that technology can enhance adolescent friendships by keeping young people in constant contact and up-to-date on each other's lives. However, this coin has a flip side. Constant contact does not automatically translate to emotional closeness, and the very nature of digital communication can introduce new strains and gaps in understanding between friends. Adolescent friendship has always been a cornerstone of social development and is characterised by intimate self-disclosure, loyalty, support, and shared experiences. In the digital era, the way these friendships manifest has profoundly changed. Teenagers today navigate a landscape where connectivity (being in touch 24/7) is often conflated with connection (feeling understood and close to someone). (Angelini et al., 2025; Fox et al., 2023) One of the hallmark changes is the expectation of constant availability. Social media and messaging apps create an environment where youths feel their friends should be reachable at any moment. If a message is sent, an immediate reply is hoped for, if not outright expected. Adolescents themselves acknowledge this: being a friend now means being "on call", tethered to your phone, ready to be attentive, online. This expectation is reinforced by visible indicators like status dots and read receipts (e.g., the notorious "blue ticks" in WhatsApp or "Seen" markers on Instagram DMs). When a friend is marked as online or has read a message but doesn't respond promptly, it can breed anxiety and resentment. "Why haven't you texted me back?" is no longer a trivial question but a source of genuine stress for many teens (Fox et al., 2023). Over three-quarters of adolescents in one study reported experiencing what has been

termed as digital entrapment, which is the feeling of being trapped by the need to respond immediately to friends' messages and be constantly available. This perceived need to be always "on" for their friends can make maintaining friendships feel like a full-time job. Teens worry that if they fail to respond or go offline, they might upset their friends or be left out of the social loop. This pressure to remain perpetually connected is a double-edged sword: it keeps friends in near-constant communication, but it also means interactions are driven more by FOMO (fear of missing out) and obligation than by genuine desire at times.

### Literature Review:

The study of adolescent friendships in the digital era first raised concerns about whether online ties could replace the emotional depth of face-to-face connections. Early longitudinal work in the United States suggested that online bonds often lacked richness. For example, Szewdo, Mikami, and Allen (2011) found that adolescents experiencing strained relationships with their mothers were more likely to turn to online friendships. Yet these digital ties tended to be emotionally superficial, functioning more as compensation than as genuine support systems. This insight set the stage for future debates around the limits of digital connectedness in fulfilling adolescents' emotional needs.

By the mid to late 2010s, the conversation broadened to countries where smartphone access was expanding rapidly, particularly India. Davey, Davey, and Limaye (2018) reported that nearly half of Indian adolescents and young adults engaged in "phubbing," a behaviour defined as ignoring peers in favour of phone use. This habit was strongly linked to depression, time-management issues, and weaker relationship health. Around the same time, large-scale international research underscored the risks of digital overuse. Riehm and colleagues (2020), in a U.S. sample of more than 6,000 adolescents, found that using social media for over three hours a day predicted heightened internalising problems, such as depression and anxiety. Together, these studies signalled that increased connectivity often carried emotional costs.

Indian research in the early 2020s confirmed and deepened these observations. Tekkam et al. (2020) showed that more than half of Hyderabad college students were frequent "phubbers" and that these individuals reported moderate to severe psychological distress, alongside strained family and peer relationships. Similarly, Bhandari et al. (2021) observed that over one-third of adolescents in Gujarat were addicted to smartphones, with higher risks among urban students and those spending more than four hours daily on their devices. These findings highlighted that Indian youth were grappling with the same digital pressures as their Western peers, but often within a cultural backdrop of high academic stress and collectivist family expectations.

As the decade progressed, qualitative research illuminated adolescents' own perspectives. Winstone et al. (2021) found that 13–14-year-olds in the UK saw both benefits and burdens in their online friendships: while social media created opportunities to stay in touch, it also carried the exhausting obligation of constant availability. Luijten et al. (2022) reported similar trends in the Netherlands, noting that while strong friendships could buffer emotional strain, higher levels of social media use, especially among girls, still predicted greater internalising problems. Angelini, Marino, and Gini (2022) in Italy added nuance by showing that specific platform features, such as visual content and "likes," shaped adolescents' sense of closeness, mediated by perceptions of online support and emotional expression. Complementing this, Azhari et al. (2022) found that problematic social media use among UK girls was associated with heightened loneliness and poor sleep quality.

Parallel work in India revealed that adolescents were themselves aware of the costs of digital saturation.

Taddi and colleagues (2024), in a qualitative study, documented how young people described compulsive scrolling, sleep disruption, harassment, and stress as negative by-products of constant online engagement. This demonstrated not only the prevalence of these challenges but also adolescents' reflective awareness of them.

Cross-cultural research in Asia and beyond enriched the picture further. Gong et al. (2024) in China showed that problematic internet use intensified loneliness through diminished family communication and reduced perceived social support, a dynamic that resonates in collectivist cultures such as India, where extended family ties are critical. Al-Jbouri et al. (2024) in Canada found that platforms like Instagram and Snapchat only enhanced closeness when adolescents believed technology genuinely improved their connections. Mabaso et al. (2024) in the UK pointed out that public-facing accounts increased risks of anxiety and depression, though active parental guidance could buffer these effects. Similarly, Lin et al. (2023) highlighted that supportive friendships protected against loneliness and problematic social media use, but weak family support heightened vulnerability, pointing to the dual protective role of peers and parents.

By 2025, the paradox of “digital disconnection” had become clearer. Fassi et al. (2025) revealed that adolescents with preexisting mental health challenges not only used social media more but also experienced less authentic disclosure, greater social comparison, and stronger negative mood impacts, suggesting that online unavailability worsened existing vulnerabilities. Fox et al. (2025) described how over three-quarters of U.S. adolescents felt trapped by expectations of instant replies, a pressure especially predictive of friendship conflict and poorer health among boys. Angelini and Gini (2025) refined this by showing that disappointment from unmet availability expectations, more than the sense of entrapment itself, fueled friendship conflict. Meanwhile, Knowles and Danzi (2025) argued that while online support was particularly important for marginalised or rural U.S. adolescents, it did not consistently translate into improved mental health outcomes. Calvin et al. (2025) concluded that frequent posting on social media tended to reflect adolescents' existing self-esteem but did little to enhance it, underscoring that digital performance could not substitute for genuine emotional closeness.

| Author & Year         | Sample                           | Title of the Study                                                                                          | Phenomenon Discussed | Findings                                                                                       |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Davey et al., 2018    | 400 youth (India)                | Predictors and Consequences of “Phubbing” among Adolescents and Youth in India: An Impact Evaluation Study  | Phubbing             | 49% prevalence. Phubbing is significantly linked to depression and poorer relationship health. |
| Amandeep et al., 2019 | 1,386 high schoolers (Rajasthan) | Nomophobia and Its Relationship with Depression, Anxiety, and Quality of Life in Adolescents (Sharma, Manu; | Nomophobia           | 68% had nomophobia. Scores positively correlated with depression and anxiety.                  |

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|                       |                                  | Amandeep; Mathur; Jeenger)                                                                                                     |                               |                                                                                                                                    |
| Tekkam et al., 2020   | 430 college students (Hyderabad) | Consequences of Phubbing on Psychological Distress among the Youth of Hyderabad                                                | Phubbing                      | 52% frequent phubbers. Associated with severe/moderate psychological distress and strained family/friend ties.                     |
| Bhandari et al., 2021 | 496 school teens (Gujarat)       | Smartphone Use and Its Addiction among Adolescents in the Age Group of 16-19 Years                                             | Smartphone addiction          | 37% addicted. Higher risk in urban teens, those with >4 hrs/day phone use.                                                         |
| Purwar et al., 2023   | 1,234 students (India)           | Phubbing Phenomenon and its Determinants among Medical College Students in Greater Noida: A Cross-sectional Study              | Phubbing prevalence           | 42.7% habitual phubbers. Phubbing correlated with loneliness and lower interpersonal trust.                                        |
| Taddi et al., 2024    | 204 adolescents (Noida)          | Perception, use of social media, and its impact on the psychological well-being of adolescents                                 | Social media overuse          | Overuse is linked to higher stress, anxiety, and depression. Teens described midnight doomscrolling and poor emotional regulation. |
| Ladani et al., 2024   | 560 school teens (Gujarat)       | Exploring Smartphone Utilisation Patterns, Addiction, and Associated Factors in School-Going Adolescents: A Mixed-Method Study | Smartphone addiction          | 64.6% addicted (post-pandemic). Addicted teens had ~10x higher odds of severe stress symptoms.                                     |
| Malik et al., 2024    | 505 adolescents (pan-India)      | Mediating Roles of Fear of Missing Out and Boredom Proneness on Psychological Distress and Social Media Addiction              | FoMO & social media addiction | Distress strongly predicted addiction, mediated by FoMO and boredom proneness.                                                     |

|                   |                             | Among Indian Adolescents                                   |                          |                                                                                            |
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| Basu et al., 2025 | 410 emerging adults (India) | Predictors of Sleep Quality Among Emerging Adults in India | FoMO, Nomophobia & Sleep | Evening-type teens with high FoMO/nomophobia had worse sleep quality and shorter duration. |

**Table 1: Major Indian Studies covering the digital connectivity phenomenon**

| Author & Year         | Sample                    | Title of the Study                                                                                             | Phenomenon Discussed                                              | Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Szwedo et al., 2011   | 92 (longitudinal) (USA)   | Qualities of peer relations on social networking websites: Predictions from negative mother–teen interactions  | Online Friendships, Early SNS sites (e.g. MySpace)                | Adolescents with poorer mother–teen relationships at age 13 were more likely to prefer online-only friendships. They had more online friends by age 20, but these online friendships were lower in quality. Early family context can push youth to seek peers online, but with less emotional closeness.            |
| Riehm et al., 2020    | 6595 (longitudinal) (USA) | Associations between time spent using social media and internalising and externalising problems among US youth | Social media (all, time use)                                      | US teens spending >3 hours/day on social media had prospectively higher odds of internalising problems (depression/anxiety). Each additional hour raised the risk. This large cohort study suggests heavy SM time is a risk factor for emotional distress in adolescence, even controlling for prior mental health. |
| Winstone et al., 2021 | 24 (Qualitative) (UK)     | Social media use and social connectedness among adolescents in the UK: a qualitative exploration               | Social media & messaging (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) | Qualitative analysis of 13–14-year-olds identified four themes: (1) displacement of face-to-face socialising, (2) social obligations to be available, (3) (mis)trust in online interactions, and (4) effects on personal/group                                                                                      |



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|                       |                                                                      |                                                                                                            |                                                     | identity. Overall, results favoured a “stimulation” view (SM enhances connectedness) more than pure “displacement,” but noted complex patterns (e.g. “rich-get-richer” for some friendships). Adolescents described pressure to be constantly available online, leading to misunderstandings and trust issues in friendships.                                                                                   |
| Luijten et al., 2022  | 1298<br>Longitudinal survey (2 waves, 1 year apart)<br>(Netherlands) | The roles of social media use and friendship quality in adolescents’ internalising problems and well-being | Social media (time/spending)                        | In Dutch youth (age 14), higher social media time predicted increases in internalising symptoms (depression/anxiety) for girls (not boys). Independently, higher friendship quality at baseline predicted lower internalising problems and higher well-being for both genders (especially girls). Social media use and friendship closeness had additive effects on mental health.                              |
| Angelini et al., 2022 | 744<br>(Cross-sectional survey; path analysis)<br>(Italy)            | Friendship quality in adolescence: the role of social media features, online social support and emotions   | Social media (features: visual, quantifiable, etc.) | Among Italian teens (16 y), various perceived social-media features (e.g. visibility of content, ability to edit posts) were differentially associated with dimensions of friendship quality, often mediated by perceived online social support and emotional expressivity. For example, more “visual” features are linked to some closeness aspects via online support. Effects also differed by gender and by |

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|                        |                                               |                                                                                                                                  |                                           | problematic SM use, highlighting that SM's impact on friendships is nuanced and moderated by individual factors.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Azhari et al., 2022    | 41 (Online Survey) (UK)                       | Social media use in female adolescents: associations with anxiety, loneliness, and sleep disturbances                            | Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter    | In a British female-only sample, those meeting criteria for Social Media Disorder (addiction-like use) reported significantly higher loneliness and poorer sleep compared to non-addicted peers. Social media obsession on any platform was linked to feeling more isolated. Intense SM engagement can undermine emotional well-being and rest in teen girls.                                                                                                                       |
| Lin et al., 2023       | 1056 (Survey; mediation analysis) (China)     | Family matters more than friends on problematic social media use among adolescents: mediating roles of resilience and loneliness | Social media (general)                    | Perceived social support from friends vs family had opposite indirect effects on Problematic SM Use. Friend support increased resilience and reduced loneliness, which in turn decreased SM problems. Family support, however, was linked to lower resilience and higher loneliness, which increased SM problems. This highlights that adolescents lacking genuine family support may turn to SM to cope with loneliness, whereas supportive friendships buffer against SM overuse. |
| Al-Jbouri et al., 2024 | 547 Social network (peer nomination) + survey | Friends, followers, peers, and posts: Adolescents' in-person and online                                                          | Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, smartphones | Canadian teens often had overlapping in-person and online friendship networks. Use of Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and longer daily                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |



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|                     | Canada (Ontario)                                   | friendship networks and social media use influences on friendship closeness via the importance of technology for social connection   |                                           | smartphone use increased how important technology was for their social connection, which in turn boosted perceived friendship closeness. In other words, these media served as tools to feel close. Gender differences were minor (e.g. smartphone use mattered more for girls). This suggests active SM engagement can strengthen feelings of closeness via valuing digital connection.                                                                                             |
| Gong et al., 2024   | 2483 Survey: structural equation modelling (China) | The impact of problematic internet use on adolescent loneliness – chain mediation effects of social support and family communication | Internet use (general)                    | Among Chinese adolescents (12–17 y), higher Problematic Internet Use significantly predicted greater loneliness ( $\beta \approx 0.47$ , $p < .001$ ). Critically, this effect was mediated by reduced perceived social support and poorer family communication: heavy internet use eroded support networks and family ties, which in turn increased loneliness. This chain mediation highlights the social/relational pathways by which online overuse fosters emotional isolation. |
| Mabaso et al., 2024 | 16,655 Cross-sectional school survey (UK)          | Exploring the relationship between public social media accounts, adolescent mental health, and parental guidance in England          | Social media (public vs private accounts) | 40.4% of teens (11–18 y) had <i>public</i> social media accounts. Having a public account was associated with $\sim 1.4\times$ higher odds of screening positive for anxiety or depression. Notably, teens with active parental guidance (as opposed to strict rules or none) showed lower risk.                                                                                                                                                                                     |

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|                        |                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                 |                                    | Thus, public account status (more online exposure) is linked to mental health risks, mitigated by supportive parental involvement.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Knowles & Danzi., 2025 | 275<br>(Survey)<br>(USA)                                           | The role of online social support in mental health: comparing rural and urban youth                                                             | Social media                       | In US adolescents (13–19 y), greater social media use was linked to higher perceived online social support. Rural youths (and particularly rural LGBTQ+) reported significantly more SM use and online support than urban peers. However, online support was not directly tied to depression or anxiety, suggesting SM may bolster supportive connections without clear effects on clinical outcomes. This implies SM can enhance youths' support networks, especially for marginalised or isolated subgroups. |
| Calvin et al., 2025    | 142<br>(low SES)<br>Longitudinal (observational + survey)<br>(USA) | A longitudinal study of directly observed social media posting: Association with socioemotional well-being during the transition to high school | Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc | In low-SES US youth observed at ages 13 and 15, adolescents with higher self-esteem at age 13 made <i>more</i> social-media posts by age 15. However, more posting did not predict future gains in self-esteem or reductions in loneliness. In fact, posting had no protective effect on well-being. Active online engagement reflected existing confidence but did not causally improve emotional outcomes during the high-school transition.                                                                 |
| Angelini & Gini, 2025  | 1185<br>Longitudinal survey (2                                     | Digital stress and friendship conflict in adolescence:                                                                                          | Social media (features, norms)     | Italian teens perceiving higher social-media norms (e.g. expectation to be                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

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|                    | waves); SEM modelling (Italy)                         | the role of perceived norms and features of social media                                                           |                                    | always online) and certain features (like visual posts) experienced greater digital stress, which in turn predicted more friendship conflict. Crucially, disappointment from unmet expectations of availability drove conflict more than feeling “entrapped” to reply. (E.g. males who saw friends as highly available reported less feeling of entrapment than females.) In sum, unmet emotional expectations in online friendships led to friction.                                            |
| Fox et al., 2025   | 714 Longitudinal survey (2 waves, 1 year apart) (USA) | Why haven’t you texted me back? Adolescents’ digital entrapment, friendship conflict, and perceived general health | Texting/social media (smartphones) | In a US sample, 76.3% of teens reported feeling digitally entrapped (pressured to respond online). For boys (not girls), higher entrapment at baseline predicted more friendship conflict and worse general health one year later. Girls did not show this effect. Entrapment did not predict depressive symptoms. This suggests constant connectivity can create pressure (“entrapment”) that strains friendships and well-being, especially for boys, even if not causing clinical depression. |
| Fassi et al., 2025 | 3340 Survey (national; registered report) (UK)        | Social media use in adolescents with and without mental health conditions                                          | Social media (general, multiple)   | adolescents diagnosed with mental health conditions spent more time on social media than their peers. They were <i>less</i> satisfied with the number of online friends and, if they had internalising                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

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|  |  |  |  | <p>conditions (anxiety/depression), they reported more social comparison, greater mood impact from feedback, and lower honest self-disclosure on SM. (Adolescents with externalising conditions mainly just spent more time). This indicates that pre-existing vulnerability relates to more SM use but poorer online social experiences.</p> |
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**Table 2: Major Global Studies covering the digital connectivity phenomenon**

Taken together, Indian and global findings reveal a clear developmental arc in how adolescent friendships have been shaped by the digital age. Early work had already raised alarms that online connections, though convenient, often lacked genuine depth (Szwedo et al., 2011). As smartphone use surged in India, concerns became more localised, with adolescents caught between cultural expectations of high academic performance and the temptations of digital distraction. Studies documented rising patterns of phubbing and smartphone addiction that were closely tied to stress, strained relationships, and psychological distress (Davey et al., 2018; Tekkam et al., 2020; Bhanderi et al., 2021). The international research painted a parallel picture: young people described constant availability as both a demand and a burden, with many reporting feelings of entrapment and conflict in their friendships (Winstone et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2025). What emerges is a consistent theme that being permanently online does not guarantee genuine emotional closeness. While supportive friendships and mindful digital engagement can protect against some harms, the moment interactions become transactional, performative, or weighed down by expectations of instant response, adolescents often report loneliness, conflict, and declining well-being. Whether in collectivist societies like India or more individualist Western contexts, the paradox endures: digital proximity cannot replace the substance of emotional presence.

## Objectives:

### Objective 1:

To systematically review Indian and global research on digital disconnection in adolescent friendships, with a focus on phenomena such as phubbing, technoference, FoMO, nomophobia, and digital multitasking.

### Objective 2:

To identify cross-cultural patterns and suggest practical strategies for parents, educators, and policymakers that can promote healthier digital habits and support authentic adolescent friendships.

## Research Methodology:

The present study is grounded in a secondary data-based qualitative research design, chosen deliberately to bring together and interpret the wide range of existing scholarship on digital disconnection and adolescent friendships. Instead of collecting primary data through direct surveys or experiments, this

approach relies on already published research, allowing for a broader, cross-cultural perspective that incorporates findings from both Indian and international contexts. A secondary research design is particularly suitable here, as it enables the study to map patterns, highlight gaps, and build a coherent narrative from multiple strands of evidence that may otherwise remain fragmented. For this purpose, peer-reviewed journal articles, research papers and credible reports published between 2010 and 2025 were carefully reviewed, with greater emphasis placed on work from the most recent decade. Databases such as PsycINFO, PubMed, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate were systematically searched using combinations of keywords including digital disconnection, phubbing, technoference, FoMO, nomophobia, smartphone addiction, digital multitasking, adolescent friendships, and social media use. The inclusion criteria limited the selection to studies focusing on adolescents (11–19 years) and addressing the psychological, emotional, or relational consequences of digital behaviours.

To interpret the collected literature, the study employed thematic analysis, a flexible yet rigorous method well-suited for synthesising qualitative findings. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) widely recognised six-phase framework, the process began with an immersive reading of the selected studies to gain familiarity, followed by the generation of initial codes that captured recurring ideas such as digital stress, constant availability, friendship conflict, loneliness, and protective factors. These codes were then clustered into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented both Indian and global findings. Clear definitions and labels were assigned to each theme, for instance, "Always Online, Rarely Available" to capture the paradox of constant connectivity without emotional presence, and "Buffering through Supportive Friendships" to describe protective relational dynamics. The final step involved weaving these themes into a structured narrative that integrates evidence chronologically and cross-culturally.

Ethical considerations in this study were minimal, since no direct human participation was involved. Academic integrity was maintained by acknowledging all sources, presenting interpretations transparently, and ensuring that the synthesis did not misrepresent the original authors' conclusions. By combining the strengths of secondary research with the interpretive depth of thematic analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how digital disconnection shapes adolescent friendships across different cultural contexts.

### **Discussion:**

Several interrelated psychological phenomena help explain how adolescents can be constantly connected yet emotionally disconnected in their friendships. Key mechanisms include Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), nomophobia, phubbing and technoference, digital stress (e.g. "digital entrapment"), social comparison pressures, and emotional regulation difficulties in the online context. These factors often overlap and reinforce each other. Together, they contribute to an environment where adolescents feel pressure to be always available and "perform" socially online, leading to superficial interactions, anxiety, and strained friendships.

### **Fear of Missing Out (FoMO):**

FoMO, or the "fear of missing out," is a pervasive anxiety among social media users that others are having rewarding experiences without them. This phenomenon, first identified around 2004 with the rise of social networking sites, has become especially pronounced in the adolescent population. FoMO involves two components: first, the perception or worry that one is missing out on social events, conversations, or in-

jokes that peers are sharing; and second, a compulsive desire to stay continuously connected via social media to avoid missing these experiences. Research by Gupta & Sharma (2021) describes FoMO as deeply tied to adolescents' need to belong and maintain interpersonal relationships. Teenagers naturally yearn for inclusion and fear being excluded by peers; social media amplifies this by making peer activities hyper-visible in real time. Seeing friends' photos, statuses, or stories of hanging out can trigger acute anxiety if one wasn't invited or cannot join, motivating the teen to engage even more intensely online.

The compulsive aspect of FoMO means the teen's attention is perpetually split; they may appear distracted or disengaged during face-to-face encounters, as their mind is on what other friends or networks might be doing. This diminished presence can erode the quality of time spent with a friend, making the person feel less valued. FoMO often leads to overcommitment and social overload. A FoMO-driven adolescent might say "yes" to multiple group chats, events, or calls out of fear of missing anything, spreading themselves thin and being unable to invest deeply in any one friendship. The result can be lots of superficial interactions but few truly intimate bonds. FoMO correlates with negative emotions that strain friendships. FoMO is linked to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and loneliness. Despite constantly seeking connection, high-FoMO teens often end up less satisfied socially, because they are always aware of what they miss (the party they couldn't attend, the inside joke they didn't get). This mindset can breed resentment toward friends ("They didn't invite me") or depression about one's social life, thereby reducing the capacity to be happy and present with the friends one *does* have. Indeed, one review noted that even with instantaneous peer interactions via social media, "young adults are feeling lonelier and more disconnected than ever", and FoMO is thought to be a contributing factor. In short, FoMO keeps adolescents tethered to their devices and fretting about elsewhere, preventing them from fully engaging and emotionally connecting here and now with their friends.

### **Nomophobia (Fear of Being Without a Phone)**

Nomophobia is short for "no mobile phone phobia," which refers to the intense fear or anxiety of not having access to one's smartphone. For today's teens, the smartphone is the lifeline to their social world, so much so that losing phone access (whether by misplacing it, battery dying, or parental limits) can induce panic. Nomophobia has become alarmingly prevalent among adolescents. The implications for friendship and emotional well-being are significant. Teens with high nomophobia experience pervasive "connection anxiety." They may constantly worry about their phone working, obsessively check that they have a network signal or battery life, and avoid any situation where phone use is restricted. In social settings, this can translate to reduced attention and increased stress: a nomophobic teen at a friend's house might repeatedly glance at their phone or feel jittery if a message goes unanswered for a few minutes. This anxiety can be contagious; friends might feel the teen is on edge or not really "with" them mentally. Nomophobia often co-exists with other mental health issues. The constant fear of disconnection essentially puts teens in a state of heightened alert, not unlike a fight-or-flight response. They find it hard to relax or be emotionally open in person because part of their mind is fixated on staying digitally tethered. This can erode the trust and patience in friendships, for example, a nomophobic individual might interpret a friend's brief unavailability (not answering a text immediately) in catastrophic ways, leading to conflict or feelings of abandonment. Nomophobia fuels a vicious cycle: the more anxious teens are about being offline, the more they cling to their phones, further detracting from real-life interactions and reinforcing their dependence. Over time, this can stunt adolescents' ability to self-regulate and tolerate normal separations, skills that are important for healthy relationships. A balanced friendship requires that each person sometimes give the other space, but nomophobia-driven behaviour resists any space, which can become



smothering or irritating to peers. Thus, while smartphones promise constant connection, the fear of being without one can paradoxically impair the very friendships the device is meant to facilitate, by injecting anxiety and compulsivity into every interaction.

### **Phubbing and Technoference: Erosion of In-Person Presence**

Modern friendship challenges are not only about anxiety when apart; they also manifest in disrespect or neglect when together, due to technology's intrusion. Phubbing (a portmanteau of "phone" and "snubbing") refers to the act of ignoring someone in one's presence by concentrating on one's smartphone instead. Technoference refers more broadly to the interference of digital devices in the midst of face-to-face interactions or activities. Both phenomena have become common in adolescent life, as youths are often tempted to respond to messages, scroll feeds, or play mobile games even when friends are right beside them. The impact on friendship quality is decidedly negative. When an adolescent is "phubbed" by a friend, i.e. that friend continuously checks their phone during conversation or stops paying attention whenever a notification arrives, the phubbed individual tends to feel disrespected, unimportant, and frustrated. A 2023 study by Al-Saggaf examined the consequences of being phubbed among 202 adolescents. The findings were striking: being phubbed by friends was linked to higher loneliness, lower friendship satisfaction, and poorer overall psychological well-being. Mediation analyses revealed that phubbing increases adolescents' feelings of loneliness and decreases the closeness and satisfaction they derive from the friendship, which in turn erodes self-esteem and mental health. When a friend habitually looks at their phone instead of making eye contact or listening, the bond weakens, and the affected teen may withdraw emotionally, feeling their friend is "not really there" for them. Over time, this can create a rift or at least a shallow, transactional relationship. Technoference has been documented to harm relationships. Although much research on technoference has focused on romantic partners and parent-child dynamics, the concept extends to peers. Even the mere presence of a phone on the table can lower the perceived quality of a conversation between friends, studies suggest, because it reduces empathetic engagement (people anticipate a disruption). In group settings, teens often experience "continuous partial attention" from friends, where everyone is semi-engaged in person but also partially engaged with their devices. This mode of interaction tends to stay surface-level; deep or vulnerable topics are avoided or cut short when someone's phone pings. As a result, friendships marked by frequent technoference may remain emotionally shallow. The erosion of basic conversational norms (like active listening) due to smartphones means adolescents get fewer opportunities to practice empathy and communication skills with friends. Phubbing and technoference directly undermine the quality of face-to-face interactions, leaving friends feeling unheard and emotionally distanced. To maintain strong friendships, undivided attention and genuine presence are key, yet those are exactly what pervasive phone use in social settings takes away.

### **Emotional Regulation Difficulties and Digital Coping**

Healthy friendships depend on individuals' capacity to regulate their emotions and empathise with others. Through real-life interactions, teens learn to read emotional cues, manage conflicts, and console each other. However, heavy reliance on digital communication may be impairing those developmental tasks. Adolescents who struggle with emotional regulation might turn to the internet as a coping mechanism, mainly for distraction, mood relief, or validation instead of dealing with feelings in person. Over time, this externalises emotion regulation: when upset or bored, a teen immediately scrolls TikTok or seeks dopamine from likes, rather than reflecting or seeking real support. Social media prevents learning of more robust coping, leading to a cycle of deeper dependence and dysregulation.

In friendships, poor emotional regulation manifests as either overreactions online or an inability to handle

offline emotions. For example, a teen who is upset with a friend might impulsively vent on social media or send an angry text, actions often taken without the cooling mechanisms present in face-to-face talks (where one can see the friend's reactions, take pauses, etc.). Digital communication, being instantaneous and lacking nonverbal feedback, can lead to emotionally charged misunderstandings or escalations. A small disagreement can spiral into a huge conflict through heated message exchanges, or a sarcastic comment may be misread as serious, causing hurt. The emotional intensity online can be higher, yet resolution is harder in the absence of physical presence. When together in person, some teens now find it challenging to express or even feel emotions as deeply. Adolescents show blunted affect or difficulty sustaining in-person emotional conversations because they are habituated to the detachment of digital interactions. As Dr. Bryan Weed explains, teens who miss out on “embodied” interactions may have trouble developing empathy and emotional intelligence. Some youths struggle with eye contact, active listening, or responding with appropriate concern, signs that constant device use might be hampering their social-emotional development. If friends cannot emotionally understand or comfort each other, their bond remains shallow. Emotional availability means being able to be present with someone's feelings, but a teen who has primarily communicated via emojis might find a real crying friend quite uncomfortable to deal with. Social media can act like an “emotional buffet,” exposing teens to a flood of others' emotional content (celebrations, tragedies, rants). Consuming this without processing can lead to empathic distress fatigue, essentially burnout from feeling so many secondhand emotions. Teens may then withdraw emotionally as a protective measure, becoming desensitised or apathetic. Furthermore, the pressure to constantly perform positivity or support online (e.g. always liking or commenting supportively on friends' posts) can become an “emotional labour” that drains adolescents. They might feel they must put on a happy, responsive persona even when they themselves are struggling, leading to emotional exhaustion and authenticity gaps in friendships. All these factors, including impulsivity, miscommunication, empathy deficits, and emotional burnout, illustrate how the digital medium complicates emotional regulation for teens. When friends do not have well-regulated emotions, conflicts worsen, small slights feel huge, and supportive exchanges diminish. Conversely, well-regulated teens can soothe each other and endure disagreements without severing the bond. Thus, the challenges of emotional regulation in the digital age directly feed into the quality of adolescent friendships and can contribute to that sense of being “emotionally unavailable”, even if one is frequently messaging friends.

### Findings and Suggestions:

Digital stress has tangible impacts on teen friendships. A 2025 study by Angelini and colleagues examined how social media norms contribute to friendship conflicts. They found that adolescents' perceptions of social media expectations, especially the expectation of fast replies and constant engagement, were significantly linked to conflicts with friends over time. Interestingly, disappointment when friends don't meet one's online expectations (such as not responding or not engaging with posts) turned out to be an even stronger predictor of later friendship conflict than the sheer pressure of one's own availability. Being “left on read” (seeing your friend active online but ignoring you) can spark feelings of rejection or betrayal that later erupt into arguments. Visual social media further amplifies this: apps like Instagram or Snapchat let teens see their friends' activities in real time. In a Pew survey, 26% of teens admitted they had fought with a friend over something that happened online or via text, which is a clear indication that digital conflicts are now a common facet of friendship. Over 68% of teen social media users say they have witnessed “drama” among friends on these platforms, often stemming from misunderstandings, subtweets,

or perceived slights such as not liking someone's post.

Digital disconnection in friendships can impair the very social skills and emotional intelligence that friendships are meant to hone. Adolescence is a critical period for learning how to empathise, resolve conflicts, communicate feelings, and build trust. If much of teen interaction shifts to mediums where these skills are under-practised or where miscommunication is rife, young people may enter adulthood less prepared for deep relationships. Some educators in India have voiced concerns that today's teens, while tech-savvy, struggle with basic emotional communication like active listening or expressing empathy in person (Bedi, 2024). In the worst cases, constantly communicating through impersonal channels can foster a sense of dehumanisation. People can become just icons on a screen, and a teen might say hurtful things online that they'd never say face-to-face, harming friendships.

The rise of digital disconnection represents a subtle but significant public health concern: adolescents may have their social needs met in quantity but not in quality, leading to emotional undernourishment. As one group of researchers put it, social connection is a "key target for youth mental health"; fostering positive connections is protective, whereas a sense of social disconnection is a risk factor for depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation. Chronic loneliness, as seen among some constantly online youth, has been linked to a weakened immune system and other health issues over time. The stakes of not addressing this trend are high, potentially affecting the next generation's well-being and their capacity to form meaningful adult relationships. It's worth noting that youths themselves often *crave* deeper connection; they sometimes just need permission or a nudge to step out of the digital hamster wheel. One heartening anecdote comes from a Delhi classroom where students, after a discussion on friendship, collectively decided to start a "circle time" once a week, leaving phones aside and each sharing something personal with their friends. What began awkwardly soon became a treasured ritual, with students reporting they felt "lighter" and more closely knit with friends. This underscores that when given the chance, adolescents do value authentic connection; the human need for belonging and understanding has not changed, only the pathways have. Thus, the challenge and opportunity before us is to help young people harness the benefits of their always-online world while mitigating its pitfalls. By doing so, we can hope to turn "emotionally unavailable but always online" into "emotionally present and smartly online."

It is important to note that digital disconnection is not a universal or irreversible fate. Many teens do maintain emotionally rich friendships, using social media as a supplement (not a replacement) to in-person connections. Social media itself is not "good" or "bad", its impact depends on how it is used and integrated into life. The challenge, then, is to help adolescents strike a healthy balance that preserves the benefits of online connectivity while minimising the harms to emotional intimacy. Based on the insights gathered, several directions emerge for safeguarding adolescent friendships in the digital age:

- **Promoting Mindful Social Media Use:** Teens (and parents/educators guiding them) should be encouraged to use social media more mindfully. This could include *limiting* multitasking, e.g., when spending time with friends in person, putting phones on silent or away for chunks of time to allow full attention. By establishing "phone-free" zones or times (at meals, during one-on-one conversations), friends can practice being present with each other, rebuilding habits of active listening and empathy.
- **Setting Healthy Boundaries and Expectations:** Adolescents need support in understanding that no one can or should be constantly available. Clear communication between friends is key: for example, normalising statements like "I might not reply after 10 pm" or "I sometimes need a day offline" can manage expectations and prevent misunderstandings. Educating teens that not answering immediately does not imply betrayal can relieve the pressure of digital entrapment. Likewise, teaching them to

politely tell a friend “I need to focus on something, talk later” sets boundaries that protect against burnout. The APA’s 2023 advisory recommends that early adolescents should have adult monitoring and limits on social media time to ensure it does not encroach on sleep, exercise, and in-person socialization. Over time, teens can internalise these limits as self-discipline.

- **Building Digital Literacy and Empathy:** Schools and communities should treat digital social skills as part of life skills education. This includes recognising how online actions affect others, e.g., how phubbing hurts friends, or how a cruel comment can wound and fostering online empathy. It also means critically understanding social media content: teens benefit from reminders that Instagram feeds are curated highlight reels, not full reality. Some programs have students engage in exercises to compare “real me” vs “online me” and discuss feelings of envy or inadequacy openly, thereby defusing them. Increased awareness that peers often only post the good moments can help adolescents take others’ online presentations with a grain of salt. Practicing gratitude and focusing on offline achievements can counteract the negative effects of social comparison.
- **Encouraging Offline Interactions and Emotional Skills:** Perhaps most importantly, adolescents need ample opportunities for face-to-face friendship experiences where they can hone their emotional skills. Schools and parents can facilitate regular get-togethers, team projects, sports, arts, and unstructured hangout time – without digital interference. In these settings, teens can re-learn how rewarding spontaneous, device-free socialising can be. Such experiences teach eye contact, conversational turn-taking, conflict resolution, and reading friends’ body language micro-skills that are crucial for deep friendships.
- **Modelling and Mentorship:** Adults play a role by modelling balanced digital habits. Parental phubbing has been associated with lower emotional intelligence in children. If teens see their parents and teachers demonstrate engaged listening and moderate phone use, they are more likely to emulate those behaviours. Mentorship programs or peer leaders can also speak to younger teens about managing FoMO or coping with feeling left out, sharing that these feelings are common and surmountable. Sometimes just knowing that others also feel lonely despite being online can break the false perception that “everyone else has it together,” thereby inviting more honest conversations among friends.

Ultimately, we might take solace and guidance from the resilience of real friendship. Close friendships are a protective factor linked to better health and longevity. If we invest in helping adolescents cultivate at least a few close friendships, the kind where they can be truly themselves and emotionally supported, we give them a gift that buffers against the loneliness that technology alone cannot cure. It’s not the number of friends or constant chatter that matters, but the feeling of closeness and being understood (Nesi et al., 2018). That feeling can be achieved in an online era, but it requires intentional effort and sometimes stepping away from the keyboard to look a friend in the eyes. Adolescents should not have to choose between being online and being truly connected; those can and should be complementary. If we succeed, the adolescents of tomorrow will harness their always-online world to strengthen their bonds, not weaken them. They will use the smartphone as a tool to arrange heart-to-heart meetups, to express feelings in creative ways, to maintain bonds across time and space – all while knowing when to put it aside and hug a friend. They will reclaim the “tethered” connections of today and infuse them with the warmth and depth that make friendship one of the most rewarding parts of life. Then the phrase “always online” might finally live up to its promise, not a state of perpetual digital busyness, but a state of never feeling alone.

### Conclusion:

The rise of digital disconnection in adolescent friendships is a classic paradox of our times: young people are surrounded by connectivity, yet yearn for connection. They carry in their pockets powerful devices that link them to everyone, yet sometimes struggle to find *someone* who truly understands. (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Turkle, 2015) The phrase “emotionally unavailable but always online” resonates not because teens have become uncaring or apathetic but because many feel caught in a social system that emphasises constant contact over meaningful conversation, breadth of network over depth of relationship. Today’s adolescents enjoy social opportunities and conveniences unparalleled in history; they can keep friendships alive across distances, meet peers with similar passions, and access support at any hour. The quality of some of those friendships may be eroding under new strains: pressure to be perpetually available, superficial engagement, fear of intimacy, and the alienating effects of living behind screens. This is not a lament to discard technology, but a call to re-balance its role in human relationships. The critical task ahead is to help this generation (and those following) to integrate digital communication with timeless principles of friendship, trust, empathy, vulnerability, and presence. The problem is now well recognised by researchers and increasingly by teens themselves. The solution will likely be a combination of conscious individual choices and supportive structures (in education, design of social media, family norms) that prioritise human needs. Social media platforms, for instance, could consider features that encourage well-being tools to easily signal “I need a friend to talk” or gentle reminders after long chats to “maybe call instead?” Developers and policymakers should include youth voices in creating a healthier digital social environment.

The lack of nonverbal cues in text-based communication also hampers emotional understanding. Face-to-face, a friend’s tone of voice, facial expression, or a simple hug can convey empathy and encourage openness. Online, even with video or voice messages, much of this richness is lost or filtered. A friend might type “I’m here for you” in a chat, but without the warmth of a voice or physical presence, it may not provide the same comfort. Subtle emotions can get misinterpreted or overlooked entirely when conveyed through text. Although adolescents have become adept at using emojis, GIFs, and abbreviations to add emotional flavour to messages, these are imperfect substitutes for real human presence. Empathy can falter when friends communicate primarily through screens. Emotional unavailability is not an inevitable outcome of technology use, but a widespread risk given current patterns. Many adolescents do maintain emotionally rich friendships, often those who consciously balance their communication methods. For instance, friends who regularly spend time face-to-face (going for walks, studying together, having sleepovers) in addition to texting tend to report higher trust and closeness. Those who use digital tools more intentionally, e.g. having a real conversation over video chat rather than just sending streaks on Snapchat, also fare better in terms of feeling connected. But the concern is that the *default* mode of interaction trending among youth leans toward rapid, shallow exchanges that prioritise constant contact over meaningful contact. The rise of digital disconnection is essentially a rise in emotional insulation: teens surround themselves with the buzz of friends’ presence, yet keep a part of themselves locked away, whether out of fear, habit, or the ambient noise of social media life.

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