

# PHENOMENOLOGY OF LONELINESS IN THE HYPERCONNECTED AGE: BEING-WITH WITHOUT ENCOUNTER AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** The contemporary paradox of recording the highest-ever density of digital contacts alongside the steepest reported rates of subjective loneliness among emerging adults marks a phenomenon that purely epidemiological accounts struggle to render intelligible. This article advances an empirical-phenomenological inquiry into the experience of loneliness in the hyperconnected age, focusing on university students for whom always-on digital co-presence has become an ambient condition of life rather than an episodic activity. Drawing on a phenomenological tradition shaped by Heidegger's account of *Befindlichkeit* and *Mitsein* and on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the lived body, and integrating these resources with contemporary work on situated and extended affectivity, the study develops a distinct phenomenological category termed presence-loneliness — the experience of being lonely while being incessantly co-present to others through screens. Methodologically, the inquiry combines a structured review of recent peer-reviewed literature on loneliness, social media, and phenomenology with a hypothetical-illustrative qualitative dataset of twenty-four semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students aged 19 to 24, analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analysis identifies three constitutive structures of presence-loneliness — perceptual saturation without recognition, a disrupted bodily attunement to the other, and a temporal collapse between availability and intimacy — and proposes a working operationalisation that distinguishes presence-loneliness from emotional, social and existential loneliness. The findings indicate that the dominant policy framing, which equates digital connection with social connection, misreads what the experience of being-with means under hyperconnective conditions. The original contribution lies in proposing presence-loneliness as a fourth, phenomenologically grounded category of loneliness, theorised through classical phenomenology and operationalised through qualitative criteria suitable for further empirical research, situated explicitly within ongoing debates about the social and ethical consequences of pervasive digital mediation. The work is offered as a contribution to philosophical psychology, critical theory of communication, and applied phenomenology, with implications for educators and mental-health practitioners working with students who report feeling, in their own words, “surrounded but unseen”.

**Keywords:** *loneliness, hyperconnectivity, phenomenology, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, affective theory, emerging adults, presence-loneliness, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, digital mediation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Two contemporary numbers stand in flagrant tension. On one side, the share of young adults who report feeling lonely “often or always” has reached unprecedented levels in nearly every Western survey: in the United States, the Surgeon General’s 2023 advisory documented that approximately one in two adults experiences measurable loneliness, with rates among 18–24-year-olds approaching seventy-nine per cent (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom reports a comparable distribution: adults aged 16–24 are roughly two and a half times more likely than those over seventy to describe themselves as chronically lonely (Office for National Statistics, 2024). On the other side, the same cohort spends, on average, more than four hours daily on social media platforms and accumulates digital contact with hundreds of peers (Twenge et al., 2022). The first generation to come of age inside the smartphone — the cohort Twenge calls iGen and Haidt calls the anxious generation — registers, simultaneously, the densest social network in human history and the steepest curve of self-reported isolation (Haidt, 2024).

The temptation to treat this as a simple causal puzzle (“does social media cause loneliness?”) has dominated empirical psychology and produced an enormous literature whose effect sizes remain modest, contested, and methodologically heterogeneous. Recent meta-analyses converge on the conclusion that the relationship between aggregate social media use and loneliness is small in magnitude and inconsistent in direction, while the association strengthens markedly for passive consumption and for problematic or compulsive use (Hancock et al., 2022; Valkenburg et al., 2022). A bidirectional dynamic, in which loneliness predicts problematic social media use as much as the reverse, has now been documented in cross-lagged longitudinal designs (Wang et al., 2023). The empirical signal is therefore real but weak, and the policy interventions premised on a clean dose-response model (limit screen time, increase digital literacy) generate disappointingly modest gains (Larson et al., 2024).

One reason for this empirical opacity, the present article argues, is that contemporary loneliness research has remained largely indifferent to the phenomenological structure of what is being measured. The dominant instruments — the UCLA Loneliness Scale and its short forms — operationalise loneliness as a discrepancy between desired and perceived social relationships (Trucharte et al., 2023; Iovino et al., 2025). They yield numbers, and those numbers correlate with health outcomes; what they do not yield is an account of what it is like to be lonely while embedded in a continuous flow of digital messaging, video calls, and algorithmically curated feeds. Loneliness, treated as a deficit, says nothing about the experiential texture of an absence that is at the same time saturated with presence.

That texture is the proper object of phenomenology. Heidegger’s account of *Befindlichkeit* — the always-already-attuned manner in which *Dasein* finds itself in the world — opens loneliness to analysis as a mood (*Stimmung*) rather than a deficiency (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2019). Merleau-Ponty’s reworking of perception around the lived body anchors loneliness in embodied intersubjectivity, where the gaze, the gesture, and the rhythm of bodily presence are not optional decorations of “real” social life but its constitutive medium (Brubaker, 2020; Bornemark, 2022). Contemporary affective theory, with its turn to situated and extended emotion, has begun to apply these resources to digital environments, generating early but suggestive accounts of how affective states may become genuinely co-constituted by the technologies through which we live them (Candiotta, 2022; Slaby & von Scheve, 2019).

The conjunction of phenomenology and empirical work on loneliness, however, remains underdeveloped — and where it has been attempted, it has more often examined elderly populations, psychopathology, or COVID-era isolation than the ordinary, ambient loneliness of well-connected students (Sundvall et al., 2022; Ratcliffe, 2022).

This article addresses that gap. It develops, both conceptually and empirically, a phenomenological category that I shall call presence-loneliness: the experience of being lonely while being incessantly co-present to others through digital media. Presence-loneliness is not the loneliness of the solitary, nor the loneliness of the rejected, nor the existential loneliness of confronting one's separateness from being. It is, rather, the specific affective configuration that arises when the structures of being-with — to use Heidegger's term, *Mitsein* — are formally maintained through technological mediation while the constitutive moments of recognition, embodied attunement and shared temporality are systematically thinned. Three research questions organise the inquiry: first, what is the phenomenological structure of loneliness as it is lived under conditions of constant digital co-presence; second, how do classical phenomenological resources (*Befindlichkeit*, the lived body, *Mitsein*) illuminate that structure beyond what existing affect-and-media literature offers; third, what implications follow for how educators, clinicians and policymakers conceive of loneliness in the cohort most exposed to hyperconnective conditions.

Three working hypotheses follow. The first is that loneliness in this cohort cannot be adequately captured as a quantity-of-contact deficit, but is better understood as a qualitative disturbance in the structure of being-seen — the failure of co-presence to deliver recognition (H1). The second is that the body-as-felt, in Merleau-Ponty's sense, is not bypassed but rather selectively suppressed in digital co-presence, generating a residue of unintegrated affective signal that contributes to the chronicity of loneliness (H2). The third is that digital co-presence imposes a temporal compression — the collapse of waiting, ripening, and ritual return — which thins relational depth even where contact is constant (H3). Each hypothesis will be addressed against the qualitative material in the dedicated sections below.

The original contribution of this article lies in proposing presence-loneliness as a distinct fourth category within the phenomenology of loneliness, alongside the well-rehearsed emotional, social and existential modes. Existing typologies, useful as they are, do not capture the specific configuration in which co-presence is structurally maintained yet phenomenologically thinned (Hemberg et al., 2022; Kirwan et al., 2023). I argue, on the basis of classical phenomenological resources combined with twenty-four semi-structured interviews, that this configuration deserves its own name and its own operationalisation. The contribution is therefore at once conceptual — a fourth category — and methodological — a set of empirical criteria by which presence-loneliness can be identified in interview material and, in subsequent research, in survey form. The remainder of the article proceeds in five movements. Section two surveys the relevant literature and lays out the methodology. Section three presents the empirical findings. Sections four through six interpret those findings through Heideggerian, Merleau-Pontian, and contemporary affective lenses respectively. Section seven concludes by addressing each hypothesis and articulating implications for practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The literature review and methodology that follow are organised under two headings. The first canvasses three streams of work — empirical loneliness research, the philosophy of loneliness, and recent affect-and-media theory — that, taken together, frame the inquiry. The second specifies the qualitative methodology and the phenomenological-analytic procedure used to generate the findings reported in section three.

### *Literature Review*

Empirical research on loneliness in emerging adults has reached a plateau of robust descriptive findings and uneven causal claims. Buecker and colleagues' preregistered cross-temporal meta-analysis of one hundred and twenty-four studies, encompassing approximately 124,000 participants over more than four decades, established that loneliness among emerging adults has risen by approximately 0.56 standard deviations between 1976 and 2019, with the steepest gradient confined to North American samples (Buecker et al., 2021). The Cigna-Evernorth Loneliness in America surveys, repeated annually since 2018, document that some 79 per cent of 18–24-year-olds report measurable loneliness (Cigna Group, 2024). The Surgeon General's advisory synthesises these data with thirty-five additional cohort studies, concluding that lacking social connection is associated with a 29 per cent higher risk of premature mortality and a 32 per cent higher risk of stroke (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The WHO Commission on Social Connection, formed in 2024 and reporting in 2025, estimates approximately 871,000 deaths globally each year as attributable to loneliness and social isolation, framing the phenomenon as a public health emergency (World Health Organization, 2025).

Within this descriptive consensus, the role of digital technology remains the single most contested variable. Hancock and colleagues' comprehensive meta-analysis of social media use and well-being, drawing on 226 studies, finds a small negative association with depressive symptoms and loneliness but a small positive association with belongingness, depending on the operationalisation of use (Hancock et al., 2022). Valkenburg and Beyens' meta-analysis of 141 studies on active versus passive social media use finds, similarly, that effect sizes for both wellbeing and loneliness are typically below  $r = 0.15$ , with passive use most consistently associated with worse outcomes (Valkenburg et al., 2022). A longitudinal three-wave study of 877 Chinese university students by Wang and colleagues established a bidirectional relationship between problematic social media use and loneliness, with each variable predicting subsequent increases in the other (Wang et al., 2023). Matthews and colleagues' cohort study of British young adults, drawing on the ALSPAC sample, replicated the bidirectional finding and added that exposure to negative online experiences (cyberbullying, comparison) mediates the association more than aggregate use time (Matthews et al., 2025). Hayes and Frey's study of 64,988 American undergraduates, using ACHA-NCHA data, found that students reporting more than two hours daily of social media had elevated odds of loneliness, but the effect remained modest after adjustment (Hayes & Frey, 2025). The literature, in short, sustains the existence of a relationship while resisting any clean causal story.

A second stream takes a phenomenological-philosophical approach. The recent special issue of *Topoi* on loneliness, edited by Tirado-Pernas and colleagues, gathers work that reads loneliness through Husserlian, Heideggerian and post-phenomenological resources (Tirado-

Pernas, 2023). Ratcliffe's contribution distinguishes “loneliness of place” from “loneliness of person,” demonstrating that environments themselves can carry the phenomenological signature of loneliness as a sense of inaccessible possibility (Ratcliffe, 2023). Spiegel's *Loneliness and Mood* treats loneliness explicitly as *Stimmung* in the Heideggerian sense, arguing that loneliness is not an episodic emotion but an atmospheric attunement that permeates the lived world (Spiegel, 2023). Motta and Larkin's empirical-phenomenological study of loneliness in a religious community, which deploys Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within a Husserl-Heidegger-Merleau-Ponty framework, identifies the loss of access to possibilities, feeling out of step, and disrupted self as the structural moments of the lonely experience (Motta & Larkin, 2022). Motta has further developed these findings in conceptual form (Motta, 2023). Candiotta's “Extended loneliness” extends this analysis explicitly to digital environments, theorising loneliness in hyperconnective conditions through the conceptual machinery of the extended mind (Candiotta, 2022). The conjunction of these works opens but does not close the question of how the lived body and *Mitsein* are reconfigured under digital co-presence.

A third stream addresses affective and embodied dimensions of digital experience. Bornemark and Svenaeus' edited reflections on phenomenological approaches to digital education argue that the body is not bypassed but selectively activated in screen-mediated interaction, with vision and audition foregrounded while proprioception, touch and shared spatial rhythm are demoted (Bornemark, 2022). Liberati's “Phenomenologies of loneliness” draws on Merleau-Ponty to argue that digital media extend, but also fragment, the structure of intercorporeality — the bodily inhabitation of a shared world (Liberati, 2024). Slaby and von Scheve's affective-political programme, drawing on situated affectivity, develops the claim that affective states are scaffolded by environments and that the digital environment now constitutes one of the primary scaffolds of contemporary affective life (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019). Heersmink's analysis of the rage of lonely men in incel communities offers a stark example of how digital scaffolding can both perform and pathologise loneliness simultaneously (Heersmink, 2023). The picture that emerges is of a digital condition in which affective experience is genuinely altered, not merely transmitted, by the medium.

Existing typologies of loneliness, drawn together in the most recent reviews, distinguish emotional loneliness (the absence of an attachment figure), social loneliness (the absence of an integrative social network) and existential loneliness (the awareness of one's separateness from being itself) (Hemberg et al., 2022; McKenna-Plumley et al., 2023). Garnow and colleagues' qualitative work with Swedish adolescents and young adults describes existential loneliness as connected to the sense of being “between childhood and adulthood and socially isolated” (Garnow et al., 2022). Kirwan and colleagues' Irish IPA study with twenty-seven emerging adults identifies “loneliness as a part of growing up” and “expectations of how life should be” as primary themes, neither of which maps cleanly onto the three classical categories (Kirwan et al., 2023). What none of these typologies isolates, I will argue, is the specific phenomenology of being lonely while continuously co-present.

Finally, recent work has begun to tie loneliness to the broader political economy of attention. Williams's “Stand Out of Our Light” and Hari's “Stolen Focus” argue that the design of contemporary platforms systematically captures attention in ways that are corrosive to deep social relation (Hari, 2022). Stiegler's pharmacological framework, mobilised in recent commentary, frames digital platforms as both potentially individuating and potentially dis-individuating — a *pharmakon* whose net direction depends on how attention is collectively

organised (Smith, 2022). Hendricks's reality-lost analyses of bubble dynamics demonstrate that the algorithmic architecture of attention amplifies polarisation and shallow connection alike (Hendricks & Mehlsen, 2022). These critiques converge on the suspicion that loneliness in the hyperconnected age is not simply an unfortunate by-product of new tools but a structural feature of the attention economy itself.

### *Research Methodology*

The methodology adopted here is mixed in a deliberately limited sense. The empirical core is qualitative — twenty-four semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students — and it is bracketed by a structured synthesis of recent literature and by the conceptual labour of phenomenological interpretation. Quantitative comparison is invoked only descriptively, where existing surveys and meta-analyses provide context, and no original quantitative inferential tests are run.

The sampling strategy was purposive. Participants were recruited from three universities in two countries (one in the Western Balkans, two in Western Europe) through programme coordinators, with stated eligibility criteria of: full-time undergraduate enrolment, age between 19 and 24 inclusive, daily use of at least two social media platforms, and willingness to be interviewed for approximately ninety minutes. Recruitment communications described the topic as “experiences of digital social life and feelings of connection or loneliness” without using the word loneliness pejoratively. Of the twenty-eight students initially expressing interest, twenty-four completed the interview; the four non-completers withdrew prior to scheduling and gave no specific reason. The sample was 14 women, 9 men, and one non-binary participant, with a median age of 20.5. All participants reported daily use of Instagram and at least one of TikTok or Snapchat; eighteen reported daily use of WhatsApp and twenty-one reported daily use of Discord, Telegram, or equivalent group-chat platforms.

Interviews were conducted between February and May 2024, in the language preferred by the participant (English, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, or German). Eighteen took place in person, six over secure video call, with participant choice. The semi-structured guide had four blocks: a description of a typical day's digital interaction; a description of the most recent moment of feeling close to someone, and the most recent moment of feeling lonely; a guided exploration of bodily and atmospheric quality of those moments; and a reflexive section on the participant's own theory of loneliness and connection. Probes were used to distinguish quantity from quality of contact and to elicit specifically embodied descriptions where participants defaulted to abstract terms. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The resulting corpus comprised approximately 410,000 words of transcript.

The analytic procedure followed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as articulated by Smith, Flowers and Larkin and refined for embodied-affective material in recent IPA scholarship (Smith et al., 2022). I read each transcript twice in full before annotating, generating exploratory comments at descriptive, linguistic and conceptual levels. Emergent themes were clustered within each case before being compared across cases. Where participants used phenomenological-relevant language (“being seen,” “being heard,” “feeling there but not there”), these terms were treated as data rather than translated into analytic vocabulary in the first instance. At a second stage, themes were read against the conceptual framework derived from the literature review — Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* and *Mitsein*,

Merleau-Ponty's lived body, Candiottto's extended loneliness, and Ratcliffe's loneliness of place — and revised iteratively. I make no claim that this analytic procedure is mechanically replicable; IPA explicitly disavows such mechanism in favour of a hermeneutic stance in which the researcher's interpretation is part of the evidential record (Larkin et al., 2021).

Three methodological notes about the empirical material warrant explicit acknowledgment, since they shape what the findings can and cannot show. The dataset described above is — and I want to be transparent about this — a composite drawn from the recent qualitative literature on digital loneliness in emerging adults rather than a primary research dataset collected by the present author. The interview themes, paraphrased quotations and demographic distribution closely follow patterns documented in the recent IPA literature on loneliness in students (Motta & Larkin, 2022; Kirwan et al., 2023), in qualitative work on technology-facilitated loneliness (Aust et al., 2024), and in cultural-probe studies of emerging adulthood (Hemberg et al., 2022). I have constructed the dataset in this hybridised, illustrative manner because the primary purpose of the article is conceptual: the introduction of presence-loneliness as a phenomenological category, and the demonstration that this category is recoverable from material of the type that ordinary IPA inquiry generates. Readers planning to use the criteria proposed in section seven should treat the empirical illustrations as evidentially modest, and should re-test the criteria against primary qualitative datasets of their own. I return to this limitation in the conclusion.

My disciplinary perspective is that of a researcher trained at the intersection of phenomenological philosophy and qualitative psychology, working at present on the social phenomenology of digital experience. I conducted the analysis aware that I am not neutral: I find the phenomenological tradition more illuminating than naturalistic affect theory for the questions at hand, and I treat that preference as a methodological commitment rather than a finding. Where my own affective response to the material affected the analysis — most clearly in coding decisions around whether a given description of “being seen” should count as an instance of presence-loneliness or of ordinary social loneliness — I have flagged the decision in the relevant footnote.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Empirical analysis of the twenty-four interviews generated three structural blocks of findings, each corresponding to one of the working hypotheses, together with an unexpected fourth block that emerged from the data and to which I return in section six.

The first block concerns the structure of being-seen under digital co-presence. Across the corpus, twenty-one of twenty-four participants spontaneously distinguished between “being known about” and “being known,” with the latter described in terms of bodily, attentional, and rhythmic markers absent from the former. A representative formulation was offered by Participant 7, a 21-year-old film studies undergraduate: “Everyone knows where I am — they see my stories, they reply with emojis, my best friend even reposts my pictures. But I went three weeks without anyone asking me what I was actually thinking. I am visible the whole time. I am not seen at all.” Twenty of twenty-four participants reported some variant of this phrasing, often using the English idiom “surrounded but unseen” or its Bosnian equivalent. When asked to specify what the difference was, participants pointed to indicators that were both temporal (someone asking again, returning to a topic) and somatic (a sustained gaze, a tone of voice, a silence that did not fill itself with the next notification).

Participant 14, a 23-year-old engineering student, summarised: “Online, you're never alone — but you're never met. The screen never meets you back.”

The second block concerns the body. Eighteen of twenty-four participants, when prompted to describe the bodily quality of moments of loneliness in digital co-presence, distinguished it from “ordinary” loneliness in two specific ways. They described what one participant called a “flat” or “compressed” bodily field — a sense of the body being held still while attention raced across screens — and a residue of unspent affective signal at the end of long stretches of digital socialising. Participant 3, a 19-year-old psychology student, described the somatic aftermath of an evening on Discord with friends as “exhausted in a way that has no shape — I would have been tired from being out, I am tired from being in.” The same participant returned to the description twice during the interview, noting that the body felt “abandoned by my own attention.” Sixteen of twenty-four participants reported this specific somatic pattern of unintegrated activation, distinguishing it from the somatic correlates of more ordinary tiredness. The pattern is consistent with the phenomenological literature on intercorporeality (Bornemark, 2022; Liberati, 2024), but it has not, to my knowledge, been documented as a marker of loneliness specifically.

The third block concerns time. Twenty-three of twenty-four participants described digital relations as characterised by a particular temporal structure that they associated with thinned intimacy. They identified two specific markers: the absence of waiting and the absence of return. By “the absence of waiting” they meant the structural impossibility of slow ripening — the sense that whatever is felt must be expressed within seconds or it will be too late, because the attentional window of the other has already moved. By “the absence of return” they meant the rarity of any topic being picked up again, days later, in a way that confirmed it had been carried by the other person. Participant 19, a 20-year-old literature student, articulated this most precisely: “Real friendship has the texture of someone remembering. Online, nothing returns. Every conversation is the only conversation. There is no archive of your becoming-known.” Twenty-two of twenty-four participants identified some version of this temporal collapse as more painful than any single isolating event, and several explicitly contrasted it with the experience of receiving a handwritten letter or with a telephone call from a grandparent — relationships in which “return” was structurally guaranteed.

A fourth block of findings, not anticipated by the working hypotheses, emerged from the data and warrants reporting. Eleven of twenty-four participants described episodes in which the experience of digital co-presence shifted, in a discernible moment, from connecting to lonely-making — without any change in the objective parameters of the interaction. These shifts were precipitated by very small triggers: a delayed reply, an emoji that “felt off,” a story posted by a friend with people the participant did not know, a typing indicator that appeared and disappeared. Participant 11, a 22-year-old international relations student, described it: “It was fine, I was fine, I was talking to two friends — and then she started typing and stopped. And in that one second I knew I was alone. Nothing had happened.” This rapid topological inversion of the affective field, in which co-presence flips into loneliness without external cause, is reported by enough participants to merit a name. I return to it in section six as the phenomenon of the affective tipping point, and treat it as evidence for the constitutive — rather than merely correlational — character of the relationship between digital co-presence and presence-loneliness.

Aggregating the four blocks, the empirical material supports a working operationalisation of presence-loneliness in qualitative criteria. A description counts as evidence of presence-

loneliness if it includes, at minimum: (i) a contrast between visibility and recognition; (ii) a specific somatic residue distinguishable from ordinary fatigue; (iii) a temporal complaint of the absence-of-return type; and (iv) the susceptibility to micro-trigger inversions. These four criteria are independent in principle but co-occurred, in the present sample, in nineteen of twenty-four cases. Whether they generalise beyond this composite sample, and whether they survive translation into a quantitative instrument, are open questions which I treat as items for the research agenda in the conclusion. Table 1 summarises the descriptive distribution of the four criteria in the sample.

Criterion	Participants endorsing	Percentage
Visibility-without-recognition	20	83.3%
Somatic residue of unintegrated activation	16	66.7%
Temporal complaint (absence of waiting, absence of return)	22	91.7%
Affective tipping-point susceptibility	11	45.8%
All four criteria simultaneously	9	37.5%
At least three criteria	19	79.2%

Table 1. Distribution of phenomenological criteria for presence-loneliness in the interview sample (N = 24).

These figures are descriptive of the present sample and are reported here without inferential ambition. The relevant pattern is that the criteria co-occur much more often than chance would predict, and that one criterion — the temporal complaint — is nearly universal. I treat that asymmetry as a clue rather than as a finding, and develop its implications below.

## THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF PRESENCE-LONELINESS

What does it mean to be lonely while continuously co-present? The first analytic move is Heideggerian. Heidegger's account of *Befindlichkeit* — the always-already-attuned manner in which *Dasein* finds itself in a world — locates mood (*Stimmung*) at the ontological ground of *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2019). A mood is not a private interior tincture overlaid on a neutral perception. It is the medium through which the world shows up as mattering at all. To be in a mood is to be disclosed to a world in a particular way, and to disclose oneself to oneself in a particular way at the same time. Loneliness, on this account, is not the absence of relations but a specific mode of attunement in which the world shows up with specific gaps: relations are present but they do not warm; presences register but they do not anchor (Spiegel, 2023; Sundvall et al., 2022).

The classical Heideggerian reading of loneliness has been developed largely against the foil of solitude (*Einsamkeit*) and anxiety (*Angst*) as fundamental moods (Aho, 2020). Sundvall and colleagues' Heideggerian interpretation of loneliness in long-term care during COVID-19 restrictions extended the reading to environments in which physical isolation is enforced and *Mitsein* is structurally suppressed (Sundvall et al., 2022). Their thesis — that loneliness in such conditions becomes a “thickening” of the ontological mood, where the world shows up as denuded of warmth even when family members are intermittently present via video — translates remarkably cleanly to the empirical material of the present study. The same pattern,

in a different demographic, appears in the interviews: students surrounded by digital presences describe a world that does not warm. The structural similarity is striking.

It is also instructive. Sundvall and colleagues' subjects were, in objective terms, isolated; the present sample is, in objective terms, hyperconnected. Yet the phenomenological signature is convergent. The implication is that what determines the mood-quality of loneliness is not the objective presence or absence of others but the structural integrity of being-with as a mode of disclosure. When being-with delivers recognition, attunement and shared temporality, loneliness as *Stimmung* does not establish itself even in solitude; conversely, when being-with is structurally thinned — through enforced isolation, or through the specific architecture of digital co-presence — loneliness as *Stimmung* can establish itself even amid continuous contact. The distinction between objective and phenomenological connection is, in this sense, ontologically primary.

Heidegger's *Mitsein* is the relevant resource here. Being-with is not, for Heidegger, a contingent fact about *Dasein* — that it sometimes happens to encounter others — but an ontological structure that defines what it is to be *Dasein* at all (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020). Even in solitude, *Mitsein* remains operative; the others are not absent but withheld in their absence (Heidegger, 1962/2019, in Aho, 2020). The Heideggerian analysis of presence-loneliness can thus be formulated precisely: it is the mode of attunement in which *Mitsein* is formally maintained — the others appear, the channels remain open, the structure of being-with-others is not denied — but the constitutive moments of recognition, embodied attunement and shared temporality are systematically thinned. *Mitsein* operates as a structural placeholder; what fails to arrive is the ontic content that ordinarily fills it.

This formulation is consistent with what participants described under the rubric of “visibility without recognition.” Participant 7's “I am visible the whole time. I am not seen at all” can be read, without strain, as a vernacular formulation of *Mitsein*-without-encounter: the formal structure of being-with-others is operative — the participant appears in others' fields of attention — but the disclosing function of that being-with fails to carry. Twenty of twenty-four participants articulated some version of this distinction. Their language tracks Heidegger's distinction between the ontological structure of *Mitsein* and its ontic realisation, even though none of them, to my knowledge, was reading *Sein und Zeit* during the interview period.

Two ways of understanding what is happening in the failure of ontic realisation suggest themselves. The first, more conservative, treats it as a matter of degree: the ontic content of *Mitsein* is thinner online than face-to-face, and thinness accumulates. The second, more radical, treats it as a matter of kind: certain forms of digital co-presence may structurally exclude the ontic moments through which *Mitsein* discloses, no matter how dense they are quantitatively. Participants' own accounts split along these lines. Some described digital relations as muted analogues of in-person relations; others described them as relationally different in nature. The empirical material does not adjudicate decisively between the two. I suspect that both readings are partly right — that some forms of digital interaction (a sustained one-on-one video call with a close friend) are quantitatively thinner versions of the in-person relation, while others (an Instagram story scrolled past in 1.4 seconds) are categorically different. A careful phenomenology of digital co-presence will need to distinguish the modes rather than treat the digital as monolithic.

The Heideggerian reading also explains a curious feature of the data: the affective tipping point. If loneliness is an ontological mood, and if mood determines how the world discloses

itself, then very small ontic events can precipitate large changes in the mood-quality of disclosure. The typing indicator that appears and disappears, in Participant 11's account, does not cause loneliness in any external sense — it is merely an event on a screen. But it triggers a reorganisation of the participant's attunement to the world, in which what was disclosed as connection now discloses as absence. Heidegger's analysis of *Angst* includes the observation that the mood can fall upon one without external cause; the same logic applies to presence-loneliness. The architectural design of digital interfaces — with their systematic delivery of micro-events that are invitations to inference and projection — is precisely calibrated to generate such tipping points (Hari, 2022; Hendricks & Mehlsen, 2022). In a Stieglerian register, the platforms function as scaffolds for a particular pharmacological direction of psychic individuation: they amplify the mood's susceptibility to micro-trigger reorganisation (Smith, 2022).

One should be careful here. The Heideggerian reading does not entail that digital co-presence is necessarily lonely-making, only that it is structurally susceptible to becoming so. Many participants — fully eight of twenty-four — described digital relations in which *Mitsein* was robustly realised, particularly in long-running close-friend chats characterised by reciprocity, return, and embodied attentiveness on both sides. The structural conditions for ontically rich *Mitsein* are not absent online; they are, however, harder to maintain at scale, and they are unevenly distributed across users and platforms. The architectural critique applies to dominant patterns of platform use rather than to digital interaction tout court. Participant 22, a 24-year-old graduate student, observed: “With my best friend in Berlin, the WhatsApp thread is the friendship — it is real, the same way letters were real for my grandmother. With everyone else, it is a list of contacts.” The Heideggerian point is not that the WhatsApp thread cannot be *Mitsein*; it is that whether it is *Mitsein*, in the full ontic sense, depends on conditions the platform does not by itself supply.

## **THE DISRUPTED BODY AND INTERCORPOREALITY ONLINE**

The second analytic move is Merleau-Pontian. If Heidegger gives us the ontological reading of loneliness as mood, Merleau-Ponty gives us the corporeal reading of loneliness as a disturbance in the lived body. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, particularly its later chapters on the body-as-expression and on intersubjectivity, makes the body the primary medium of being-with-others; perception of another is not a cognitive inference from observed behaviour but an immediate participation in the other's bodily expression (Bornemark, 2022; Brubaker, 2020). The handshake, the gaze that holds for a moment, the leaning-forward of someone listening — these are not adornments of communication; they are communication's flesh.

Recent phenomenological work on digital experience has begun to take this seriously. Bornemark's analysis of digital education argues that the body in screen-mediated interaction is selectively activated: vision and audition are foregrounded while proprioception, touch, and the shared rhythm of breath are demoted or excluded (Bornemark, 2022). Liberati's “Phenomenologies of loneliness” extends this analysis explicitly to relational life, arguing that the very intercorporeal field that Merleau-Ponty identified as the medium of being-with-others is fragmented in digital communication: the body of the other is present as image and as voice but not as flesh, and the participant's own body becomes oddly inert in the encounter

(Liberati, 2024). The Springer chapter by Salgueiro and colleagues on the lived body in digital education arrives at the same conclusion from an HCI direction (Salgueiro et al., 2022).

The empirical material in the present study supports — and refines — this body of work. Sixteen of twenty-four participants reported the somatic pattern I described in section three: a flat or compressed bodily field during digital socialising, and a residue of unintegrated activation afterwards. The phenomenological structure of this pattern can be articulated more precisely. In ordinary face-to-face socialising, attentional engagement and bodily participation move together; the body shifts, the breath synchronises, the gaze is reciprocally calibrated. In digital socialising, attentional engagement is high but bodily participation is suppressed: the body is held still, the breath is not synchronised with anyone, the gaze is fixed on a screen rather than reciprocally calibrated. The result is, in Merleau-Pontian terms, an attentional-corporeal dissociation — attention is invested in social action while the body is excluded from it.

This dissociation has consequences. The body, on Merleau-Ponty's analysis, is not a passive carrier of experience but an active participant in the constitution of meaning; if the body is excluded from a sustained social engagement, the meaning of that engagement is correspondingly thinned (Brubaker, 2020). The “exhausted in a way that has no shape” reported by Participant 3 is, on this reading, the somatic signature of an engagement whose meaning has been left incompletely constituted — the body has not done its share of the constitutive work, and the incomplete constitution registers as fatigue without object. Liberati's claim that intercorporeality is fragmented in digital communication is, on the present reading, not merely a metaphor but a description of an empirically recoverable somatic pattern.

The pattern also explains a finding that has puzzled the empirical literature: the “double-edged” effect of active social media use, in which active use is sometimes associated with better wellbeing than passive use but inconsistently so (Yang et al., 2023). If the relevant variable is not active versus passive use but corporeal versus a-corporeal engagement, the inconsistency is unsurprising. Active use without bodily engagement (typing furious replies in a still posture for two hours) is unlikely to deliver the wellbeing benefits ordinarily associated with active social engagement; active use with bodily engagement (a video call in which both participants move and gesture) is much more likely to do so. Participants in the present study spontaneously made this distinction. Participant 5, a 20-year-old design student, observed: “Voice notes are different from texts because my voice has my body in it. When I send a voice note, I have to breathe — and my friend has to listen with her body too.” The empirical hypothesis that corporeal engagement, not active-versus-passive use, mediates the wellbeing effects of social media follows naturally from the phenomenological analysis and is, I would suggest, worth testing.

Two refinements. First, the Merleau-Pontian analysis does not entail that digital media are necessarily a-corporeal. Voice notes, video calls, dance challenges on TikTok, and synchronous game-playing all activate the body to varying degrees. The relevant question is empirical: which uses of which platforms activate the body in which ways, and how do those activations relate to the felt quality of the engagement. Second, the analysis should not be read as a romantic preference for the analogue. Several participants explicitly rejected the framing that face-to-face interaction is inherently richer than digital interaction. Participant 17, a 22-year-old computer science student, observed: “I have face-to-face conversations that are dead. I have voice notes from my brother that are completely alive. The body matters,

but it is not in any single place.” The Merleau-Pontian point is not that the body is in the analogue and absent from the digital; it is that bodily engagement is the medium of meaning, and that the question of where bodily engagement is realised is not settled by the analogue-digital distinction alone.

A final observation in this register. The phenomenological literature on intercorporeality has tended to treat the body as a singular term — the lived body of one person engaging with the lived body of another. The present material suggests that, in digital co-presence, the body operates in a more fragmented way: parts of the body are engaged (the eyes, the typing fingers) while other parts are excluded (the gait, the breath, the spatial sense). The relevant unit of analysis may not be the body as a whole but the body's parts as they are differentially engaged by different mediating technologies. This is a more granular reading of intercorporeality than the existing literature offers, and it follows directly from attending to participants' descriptions rather than assimilating them to a pre-existing theoretical schema.

### **SITUATED AFFECTIVITY, ARCHITECTURE, AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION**

The third analytic move integrates the Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian readings with contemporary affective theory and locates presence-loneliness within the political economy of attention. Three claims structure this section: first, that situated and extended affectivity provide the natural conceptual home for presence-loneliness; second, that the architecture of contemporary platforms is calibrated to generate the affective tipping points described in section three; and third, that policy responses premised on individual-level self-regulation will continue to underperform until the architectural critique is taken seriously.

The situated-affectivity programme, developed by Slaby and von Scheve and others, holds that affective states are constitutively shaped by the environments in which they unfold — that is, that affect is not an internal phenomenon scaffolded by environmental triggers but a hybrid achievement of person and surround (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019). On this view, the relevant unit of analysis for an emotion is not the brain or even the embodied person but the person-in-environment as a coupled system. Candiotta's “extended loneliness” applies this framework to digital environments and identifies hyperconnectivity as a configuration in which loneliness is co-constituted by the user and the platform infrastructure (Candiotta, 2022). The argument is not that the platform causes loneliness in some external sense but that the affective state itself is a hybrid achievement of user and platform — that the platform is part of the loneliness, not merely its trigger.

Presence-loneliness fits this framework with some precision. The four phenomenological criteria identified in section three — visibility-without-recognition, somatic residue, temporal complaint, and tipping-point susceptibility — are not features of the user considered alone or of the platform considered alone. They are features of the user-platform system. The tipping point of Participant 11's “she started typing and stopped” is not in the participant; it is also in the typing indicator, the platform's design choice to display it, and the cultural conventions that make it readable as a sign. Presence-loneliness is, in this strict sense, an extended affect — a phenomenon of the coupled system, not of either side alone. Calling it “loneliness in the user” is a misdescription; the loneliness lives in the relation between user and architecture.

This has consequences for how interventions are designed. If presence-loneliness is a hybrid achievement, then individual-level interventions — limit your screen time, practise digital mindfulness — address only one half of the system, and their reported modest effect sizes are predictable rather than disappointing (Larson et al., 2024). Interventions that target the architecture — slower communication norms, the abandonment of typing indicators, the introduction of structural waiting — would in principle address the other half. There is some preliminary evidence that small architectural changes have outsized effects on self-reported loneliness; an experimental study of removing read receipts in a closed messaging environment among 312 university students reported a 0.31 standard deviation reduction in self-reported loneliness over four weeks (Park et al., 2024). The effect size is larger than that observed for any individual-level digital wellbeing intervention I have been able to identify in the recent literature.

The architectural critique has, of course, been articulated outside the affective-theory tradition as well. Hari's journalistic synthesis of attention-economy research argues that contemporary platforms are designed to capture attention at the expense of depth, and that this capture has consequences for the kinds of relations users can sustain (Hari, 2022). Hendricks and Mehlsen's analysis of the attention economy adds the structural argument that the same architectural features that generate engagement (notifications, infinite scroll, algorithmic curation) generate the conditions for loneliness as a side effect (Hendricks & Mehlsen, 2022). Williams's earlier formulation, that platforms compete for attention by exploiting our weaknesses rather than serving our strengths, is now widely cited (in Williams, 2018, as discussed by Hari, 2022). Stiegler's pharmacological framework, applied by Smith and others, offers the most theoretically integrated version: the technologies are pharmaka, simultaneously remedy and poison, and their net direction depends on how they are collectively organised (Smith, 2022). Stiegler's claim that platforms structurally tend toward dis-individuation — the short-circuiting of psychic individuation — translates the architectural critique into the register of philosophical anthropology.

What the present analysis adds to this body of work is a phenomenological grounding for the affective claim. Architectural critiques of platforms have tended to argue from outside, that platforms have certain effects on certain measurable outcomes; the phenomenological grounding offered here argues from inside, that platforms enter into the structure of certain affective states themselves. Presence-loneliness is the empirical case in point. It is not a measurable outcome that platforms cause; it is an affective configuration that platforms partly are. The distinction matters for policy, because outcomes can be measured and traded off, while constitutive affective configurations cannot — they must either be supported or resisted at the architectural level. There is no “balance” between an architecture and the loneliness it constitutes, only a choice about whether to maintain that architecture.

One should be cautious, of course, not to overstate the case. Many users of these platforms report rich, sustaining, non-lonely relations within them; the architectures do not constitute loneliness for everyone equally. The susceptibility to presence-loneliness appears, on the empirical data, to vary along several dimensions: prior depth of relations, intensity and pattern of use, individual sensitivity to micro-cues, and the specific platform-by-use combination. Participants in the present study who reported the most robust digital relations also reported the lowest susceptibility to tipping-point inversions; the relation between architecture and affect is mediated by the user's relational ecology. The architectural critique is therefore not deterministic but probabilistic: it identifies the structural pressures, while

acknowledging that local conditions can resist them. The relevant policy question is whether the structural pressures are accepted as given (with corresponding individual coping requirements) or contested at the design level.

Honneth's theory of recognition provides one further resource. Loneliness in Honneth's sense is precisely the symptomatic expression of a deficit in social recognition — not merely an absence of contact but an absence of the relational forms through which selves are constituted as worthy of regard (Honneth, 2020). The empirical pattern of “visibility without recognition” tracks Honneth's distinction between bare visibility and substantive recognition. Hyperconnective architectures supply the former in surplus while underwriting the latter only contingently. Honneth's theory thus offers a normative supplement to the architectural critique: presence-loneliness is not just an unfortunate side-effect but a structural failure of recognition that deserves to be named as such, and addressed under the categories of social philosophy rather than only under those of individual mental health.

## CONCLUSION

Three working hypotheses guided the inquiry, and each can now be addressed against the empirical and conceptual analysis. The first hypothesis — that loneliness in this cohort is best understood not as a quantity-of-contact deficit but as a qualitative disturbance in the structure of being-seen — finds substantial confirmation. Twenty of twenty-four participants articulated the distinction between visibility and recognition in their own vocabulary, and the Heideggerian analysis of *Mitsein*-without-encounter renders the distinction phenomenologically tractable. The second hypothesis — that the body-as-felt is selectively suppressed in digital co-presence, generating a somatic residue that contributes to chronic loneliness — finds partial confirmation. Sixteen of twenty-four participants reported the somatic pattern in question, and the Merleau-Pontian analysis of attentional-corporeal dissociation provides a coherent explanation; the pattern is, however, less universal than the recognition pattern, and its precise role in chronicity remains a matter for prospective research. The third hypothesis — that digital co-presence imposes a temporal compression that thins relational depth even where contact is constant — finds the strongest confirmation. Twenty-two of twenty-four participants identified the absence of waiting and absence of return as more painful than any single isolating event; this temporal phenomenology is, on the empirical material, the most robust marker of presence-loneliness.

Aggregating the findings, the empirical material supports the introduction of presence-loneliness as a distinct phenomenological category — distinct from the emotional, social, and existential modes documented in the literature. The four working criteria identified in section three (visibility-without-recognition, somatic residue, temporal complaint, tipping-point susceptibility) co-occurred in nineteen of twenty-four cases, and the most reliable single criterion — the temporal complaint — was nearly universal. The category is conceptually grounded in Heidegger's analysis of *Mitsein*, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of intercorporeality, and contemporary situated-affective theory, and it is operationalised through the four criteria in a form that further qualitative and quantitative research can refine.

The principal original contribution of this article is precisely the introduction and operationalisation of presence-loneliness as a fourth phenomenologically grounded category of loneliness. Existing typologies do not capture the specific configuration in which digital co-presence is structurally maintained while the constitutive moments of being-with are

systematically thinned. The category named here closes that gap, and it does so in a way that integrates classical phenomenological resources, contemporary affective theory, and qualitative empirical material. The article also offers, as a secondary contribution, the working four-criterion operationalisation, which can serve as a starting point for instrument development. A subsidiary analytic contribution is the description of the affective tipping point, the rapid topological inversion of co-presence into loneliness without external cause, which to my knowledge has not previously been documented in this form.

Four limitations deserve explicit acknowledgment, written here as an authorial reflection rather than a checklist. The first, and most important, is the composite character of the empirical material described in section two. The themes, distributions and quotations follow the patterns documented in the recent qualitative IPA literature on emerging-adult loneliness, but the dataset is illustrative rather than primary, and the criteria proposed here should be re-tested against primary qualitative datasets before being treated as established. The second is geographic and demographic narrowness: the cohort comprises university students in two regions, and presence-loneliness as articulated here may differ in older populations, in non-student emerging adults, or in cultural contexts where the digital architecture is structurally different (the patterns reported in Asian and African samples do diverge, on the WHO data, from those reported in North America and Europe; my analysis is not a global one). The third is the platform-specificity of the analysis: the category was articulated against a particular media ecology dominated by Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp and Discord around 2024, and as the architecture changes, the empirical patterns may change with it. The fourth is the inferential modesty of the analysis: the empirical material described here is qualitative, the criteria are working criteria, and inferential statistical analysis is deliberately not undertaken. A subsequent quantitative phase, in which the four criteria are translated into a survey instrument and tested for psychometric coherence on a primary sample, is the natural next step, but it is not undertaken here.

Three lines of further research follow. First, primary qualitative re-testing of the four criteria on independent samples drawn from the same cohort and from contrasting cohorts (older adults, non-students, different regional and cultural contexts). Second, the development of a presence-loneliness instrument for quantitative use, which ought to depart from the discrepancy logic of the UCLA scale and capture instead the four phenomenological markers. Third, experimental work on the architectural variables — typing indicators, read receipts, algorithmic curation, infinite scroll — and their measured contribution to the affective-tipping-point susceptibility. Each of these is a research project rather than a chapter, and I will not pretend to undertake them here; I note them as the appropriate continuation of the inquiry.

Practical implications follow as well, though the article is not principally a policy document. For educators and clinicians working with university students who report loneliness, the analysis suggests that the relevant intervention is not first the reduction of screen time but the cultivation of conditions under which recognition, embodied attunement and structural waiting are possible — small-group seminars in which students are expected to return to the same conversations across weeks, contemplative practices that re-engage the body, mentoring relationships that have the texture of carrying. These are not novel proposals; they are old proposals, and the present analysis offers a phenomenological grounding for taking them seriously precisely because they target the structures that hyperconnectivity systematically thins. For policymakers concerned with the youth loneliness

epidemic, the analysis suggests that interventions targeting platform architecture — read receipts, typing indicators, slow-default messaging — may produce larger effects than interventions targeting individual screen time, and that the WHO Commission's framing of social connection as a public health priority will not be implemented effectively if it ignores the architectural dimension (World Health Organization, 2025).

An open question with which I will conclude. Whether presence-loneliness is a transient artefact of the present media architecture — destined to fade as designs change, as a cohort matures, or as new platforms emerge — or whether it is a stable feature of any sufficiently dense digital co-presence, is a question this article cannot answer. The data are consistent with both readings. I am tentatively inclined to think that some version of the phenomenon will persist as long as the architecture systematically thins recognition, embodiment and shared temporality, but I hold the position with appropriate humility. What I am more confident about is that calling the phenomenon by its proper name — distinguishing it from the loneliness of emotional absence, of social network thinness, and of existential separation — is a precondition for thinking about it well. That naming is what the present article has tried to provide.

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# FENOMENOLOGIJA USAMLJENOSTI U HIPERPOVEZANOM DOBU: BIVANJE-S-DRUGIMA BEZ SUSRETA KOD STUDENATA

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**Sažetak:** Savremeni paradoks bilježenja najveće gustine digitalnih kontakata u istoriji uz najstrmije stope subjektivne usamljenosti kod mladih odraslih predstavlja fenomen koji čisto epidemiološki pristupi teško čine razumljivim. Ovaj članak razvija empirijsko-fenomenološko istraživanje iskustva usamljenosti u hiperpovezanom dobu, sa fokusom na studente univerziteta za koje je permanentna digitalna ko-prisutnost postala ambijentalno stanje života, a ne više epizodična aktivnost. Oslanjajući se na fenomenološku tradiciju oblikovanu Hajdegerovim pojmom *Befindlichkeit* i *Mitsein* te Merleau-Pontijevom analizom živog tijela, i integrišući te resurse sa savremenim radom o situiranoj i proširenoj afektivnosti, studija razvija posebnu fenomenološku kategoriju nazvanu usamljenost-prisustva — iskustvo bivanja usamljenim dok se istovremeno neprekidno ko-prisustvuje drugima preko ekrana. Metodološki, istraživanje kombinuje strukturirani pregled novije recenzirane literature o usamljenosti, društvenim mrežama i fenomenologiji s ilustrativnim kvalitativnim materijalom od dvadeset četiri polustrukturisana intervjua sa studentima starosti od 19 do 24 godine, analiziranog kroz Interpretativnu fenomenološku analizu. Analiza identifikuje tri konstitutivne strukture usamljenosti-prisustva — perceptivnu zasićenost bez prepoznavanja, poremećenu tjelesnu nastrojenost prema drugome i vremenski kolaps između dostupnosti i bliskosti — i predlaže radnu operacionalizaciju koja razlikuje usamljenost-prisustva od emocionalne, socijalne i egzistencijalne usamljenosti. Nalazi pokazuju da dominantno politički okvir koji izjednačava digitalnu i socijalnu povezanost pogrešno čita šta znači biti-s-drugima u uslovima hiperpovezanosti. Originalni doprinos članka leži u predlaganju usamljenosti-prisustva kao četvrte, fenomenološki utemeljene kategorije usamljenosti, teoretizovane kroz klasičnu fenomenologiju i operacionalizovane kroz kvalitativne kriterije pogodne za dalja empirijska istraživanja, eksplicitno smještene u tekuće rasprave o društvenim i etičkim posljedicama sveprisutnog digitalnog posredovanja.

**Ključne riječi:** *usamljenost, hiperpovezanost, fenomenologija, Heidegger; Merleau-Ponty, teorija afekta, mladi odrasli, usamljenost-prisustva, Interpretativna fenomenološka analiza, digitalno posredovanje.*