

Untoward Digital Separation Amplifies Impulsivity: An Analysis through Transactional Analysis (TA) Lens

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ABSTRACT

In our omnipresent digital world, imagining our lives without connections to others is impossible. Advanced digital technology enables constant connectivity, regardless of our location. This paper is structured into three parts. The first section explores the relationship between mental health and digital platforms. The second section examines how digital disconnection impacts group dynamics in decision-making during crises, using a rapidly escalating student uprising in Bangladesh as a case study. This event created a nationwide threat while leaving the population digitally disconnected. The third section critically evaluates responses to such threatening situations through the lens of transactional analysis theory. Additionally, the paper discusses the consequences of digital separation and proposes future directions for maintaining connectivity during similar incidents.

Keywords: Digital Separation, Uprising event, Group Cohesion, Transactional Analysis, Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is widely recognized as a critical global public health challenge. However, in many developing nations, like Bangladesh, it remains profoundly neglected. These countries face multifaceted obstacles in establishing effective mental healthcare systems, including pervasive social stigma, insufficient public awareness, a severe shortage of trained professionals, inadequate insurance coverage, and a lack of integrated mental health policies. Students from these regions frequently encounter significant challenges during their academic journeys. They often experience psychological distress—such as stress, depression, and anxiety—alongside interpersonal conflicts, internet addiction, and underdeveloped social skills. The predominance of digital interaction can further impede their personal development and academic performance, reflecting the broader societal struggles within their home countries.

Recent research conducted on undergraduate students shows nearly one-third of students suffer from various mental health problems (Bruffaerts et al., 2018), according to the WHO, which now serves as a worldwide burden in non-fatal diseases (Brunier & Mayhew, 2016). However, the outbreak of stress, depression, and anxiety surges at an alarming rate of 54.3%, 64.8%, and 59.0%, respectively, in Bangladesh (Al Mamun & Griffiths, 2019; Alim et al., 2015; Mamun et al., 2021). The reason for these psychological problems is due to some psychosocial factors like high expectations of parents, peer pressure, politics, conflict in relationships, loneliness, future worries, financial hardships, sleep deprivation, and so on (Al Mamun & Griffiths, 2019; Brenneisen Mayer et al., 2016; Saeed et al., 2018). These factors adversely affect students' well-being as university students are psychologically sensitive and vulnerable (Balon et al., 2015). Anything that goes against their moral values and dignity may lead to a student movement for their rights. Student unrest is a common phenomenon worldwide; however, student activism and movements are always diverse and ubiquitous.

In today's digitalized world, staying connected with others has become essential for our sense of happiness and fulfillment. The internet serves as a vital gateway to the world of information, offering immense opportunities that have significantly increased our reliance on it. However, unexpected situations arise when we are suddenly disconnected from this digital lifeline. In this era of advanced technology, internet-based connections have bridged the gap between people separated by vast geographical distances, something once unimaginable. The widespread use of the internet and social networking platforms has profoundly transformed social interactions. Quick and frequent connections between individuals foster meaningful relationships and social groupings, particularly for those who spend considerable time online. These digital interactions have become an integral and powerful component of daily lives (Chayko, 2014). Moreover, it also acts as an educational platform, a relaxation, and a leisure weapon (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Although the digitalized society offers us vast opportunities, this connectivity can sometimes be disrupted by unforeseen circumstances such as poor network coverage, digital detox practices, technical malfunctions, or deliberate digital shutdowns, leading to digital separation. Digital separation refers to being disconnected from digital devices or online platforms, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, and relying less on digital communication tools. This phenomenon often results in heightened impulsivity, as the lack of non-verbal cues, real-time feedback, and contextual understanding can hinder one's ability to think critically and reflect before reacting. In an increasingly digital world, the way we communicate and respond to stressful or threatening situations is undergoing significant changes. Online platforms enable instant access to information and people, altering how individuals react to events during threatening situations, especially when digitally separated.

Despite these enormous benefits, this disconnection can lead to various psychological and social effects, such as anxiety or a reduction in face-to-face interactions. A recent poll in the U.S. found that an individual spent 7 hours per day on the Internet between the ages of 16-64 (Are Social, 2020). Excessive screen activities create impulsiveness within individuals, for example, the individual acts from immediate urges to do something dangerous without forethought consequences. Impulsivity means when a person acts from strong emotions that lack perseverance, premeditation, and remaining focused on daily tasks (Zheng et al., 2024). Moreover, impulsiveness is described in terms of the factor theory of personality, which consists of neuroticism, extraversion, and psychoticism. In addition, it is also indicated by unintentional risky behaviors and making up one's mind quickly (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). Impulsivity can be classified in terms of three dimensions: A) motor (action without thinking), B) cognitive (quick cognitive decision-making), and C) non-planning (decrease in orientation towards the future) factors (Felthous & Barratt, 2003; García-Forero et al., 2009). From a cognitive viewpoint, the inability to inhibit our behaviors and thoughts is called impulsivity, whereas learned behaviors are formed within the family from a social standpoint (Bakhshani, 2014). In this article, we will explore the psychological effects of the recent incident that took place in Bangladesh in July 2024.

This paper provides a brief overview of an unexpected event and its impact on group dynamics. Subsequent sections utilize transactional analysis to explore how group cohesion shifts from Adult rational decision-making to a Child ego state during an internet blackout. The conclusion discusses the ramifications of digital separation and proposes future directions for sustaining connectivity during such disruptions.

The Unexpected July Event

With the existing political and psychosocial pressure among the students, they faced a crisis in July 2024. Students started to protest the quota system for government jobs, which reserved almost 56% of employment for specific groups. Therefore, they raised a voice against the rule of unequal quota distribution, which remained for more than ten years. After a similar protest in 2018, the government removed the quota system from all jobs. The students wanted quota reform, but the government completely removed it, ignoring the essential quotas, such as for disabled people. As a result, the high court invalidated the government's decision in 2024, and the previous illogical quota system was activated again, which made the general students hopeless, and they started protesting. Part of the protest was to shut down all public universities in Bangladesh, called by the student leaders. All public and private university students agreed to this protest and gathered on the road. The government tried to stop the protesters using police and the paramilitary force BGB, and injured them, which turned it into a violent movement. They also clashed with the ruling party's student wing, holding influential

positions on university campuses and in the students' dormitories. This anti-government protest quickly escalated between the police-BGB and university students.

Later on, the government deployed the army, announced a curfew nationwide, and gave orders to the military to shoot on sight (*Bangladesh*, n.d.). During the curfew, at least one thousand were arrested for the protest (*Drenched in Blood - How Bangladesh Protests Turned Deadly*, n.d.). The broadband and mobile internet connections all over Bangladesh were shut down to stop the spread of information about the incidents. No one could connect with their family, friends, and relatives. That moment of digital separation created uncertainty and escalated impulsiveness as the students and other people could not get messages from their closest person; they were cognitively overloaded, which affected their decision-making process. Moreover, this separation exacerbated feelings of stress and anxiety. The bombardment of notifications, constant connectivity, and the need to stay updated can create an overwhelming sense of urgency. This digital pressure can increase physiological stress responses, negatively impacting mental well-being and social dynamics.

Changes in group dynamics during the uprising

Initially, the anti-discrimination student group was formed at one of the public universities. However, other public and private university students soon united in the protest. When the police enforced their power to restrain the student group through various disruption mechanisms like batons, tear gas, sound grenades, water guns, and rubber bullets, the group felt enormous pressure and agitation, and the leaders faced challenges maintaining cohesion. Many general students were arrested during the protest. Additionally, the general student group felt threatened lest the student ruling parties regain their position in the dormitories and the university campuses. However, the general students developed their group with some goals and contracted within themselves to continue the protest. Moreover, their internal communication was hampered due to the internet shutdown. At that moment, they tried to communicate through mobile, but it was not enough to handle the crisis. The dynamics of the group are given in Figure 1.

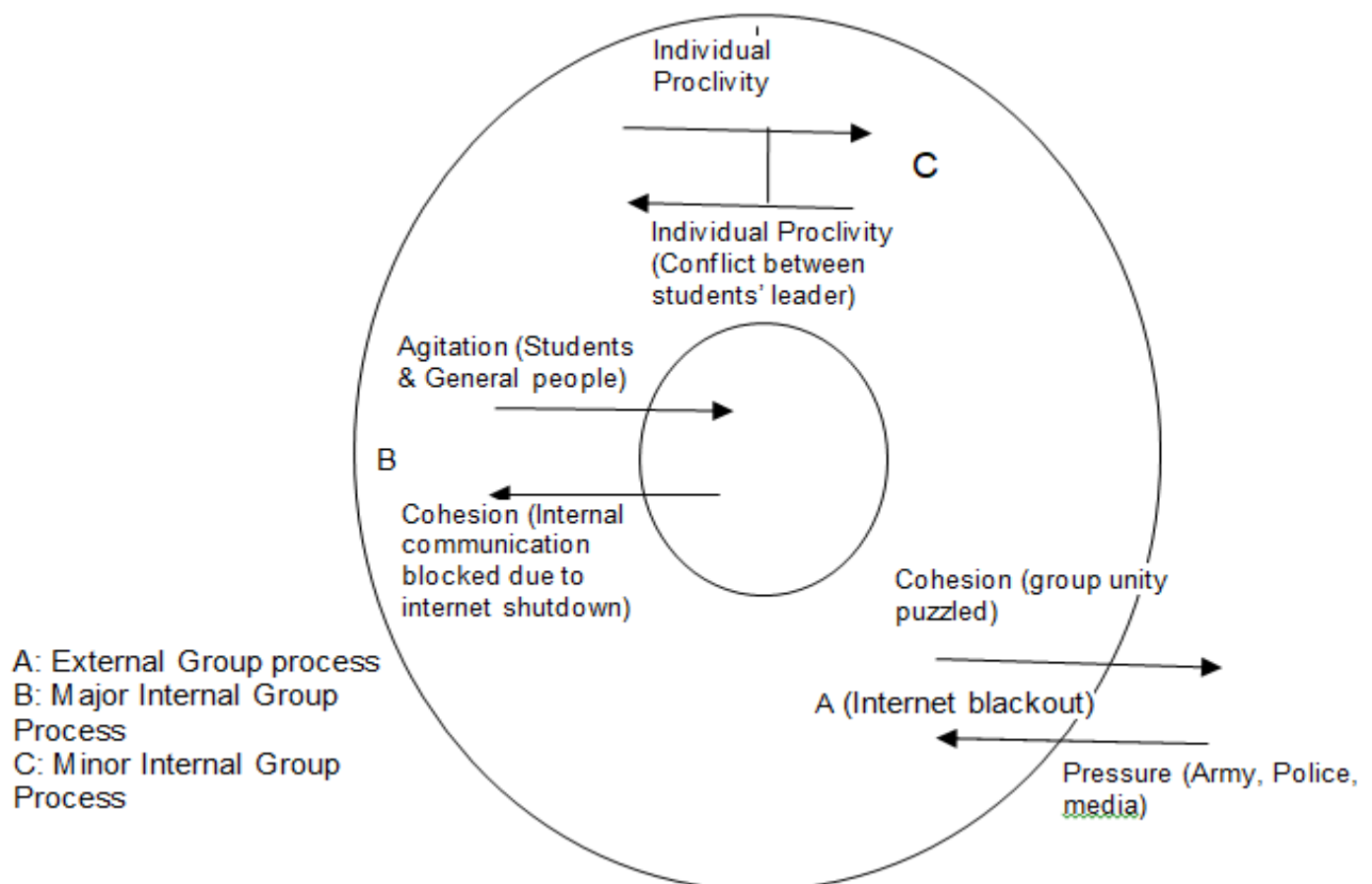


Fig. 1: Group Dynamics (Berne, 1963)

More importantly, teachers, parents, and people from various walks of life also played leadership roles, such as responsible leaders, effective leaders, and psychological leaders, to encourage their protests and make them highly effective, as shown in Figure 2 below.

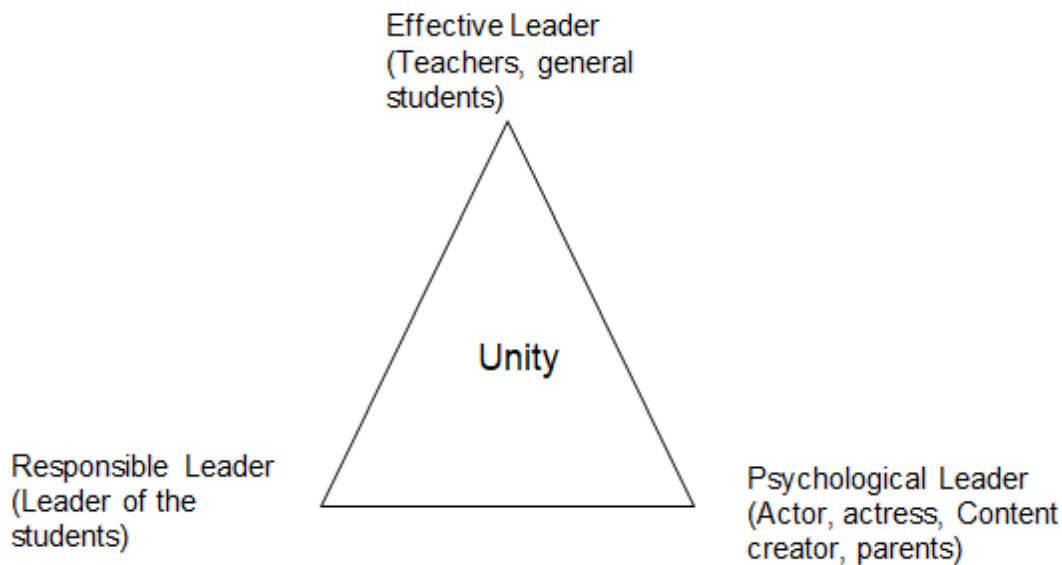


Fig. 2: Unity among Various Leaders

Analyzing the uprising event through the TA lens

Initially, a few students at public universities showed courage to start the protest against quotas and raised their strong voices, showing rebellious behavior; however, this courage quickly became contagious when one of the students stood in front of the police with stretched hands and told them to shoot me, and instantly the police shot that student. That student died on the spot. Later, courage was contagious to general students, parents, teachers, actresses, and influencers nationwide. As we have seen, courage spread so massively that they were ready to die like that student in the protest. At that time, the government felt threatened to manage the whole situation, and within a short time, Bangladesh was in turmoil. As a result, the government made a few decisions against the students with the support of the army and policies, including internet shutdown, limited mobile phone services, and an imposed curfew nationwide. Hence, all the people of Bangladesh were locked in their homes and could not go outside due to the fear of being attacked. But still, a few protesters continue their protest even during the curfew on the university campus. It seemed like a peaceful protest, but a volcano awaited an eruption. Consequently, it massively transformed again into nationwide unrest.

This social interaction simultaneously triggers individuals, physiologically or neurologically, through others' facial expressions and observing behaviors by synchronizing with the feelings of others during communication (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021). During this state, the Parent ego state (P) of the student, teachers, and general people is activated from the should and must beliefs regarding the regime government. Some negative beliefs about the government, educational system, politics, etc, were transformed into general beliefs among the people. Therefore, they expressed aggression, sadness, mourning, and hopelessness towards the government. Massive numbers of people from every socio-economic level protested for justice and were killed. After this killing, the anti-discrimination student group declared a non-cooperation movement, at one point demanding the stepdown of the prime minister and calling all people from every corner of the country to join them.

On the other hand, the Adult ego state (A) faces challenges in gathering information about the incidents and deciding their steps against the government's action. Moreover, frustration, impulsiveness, and helplessness are expressed by the Child ego state (C) in threatening situations with digital separation leading to irrational decisions. In addition, the general people and mass students showed agitation, incapacitation, and violence towards the government. The crossed and parallel transactions are explained in Figures 3 and 4 consecutively below:

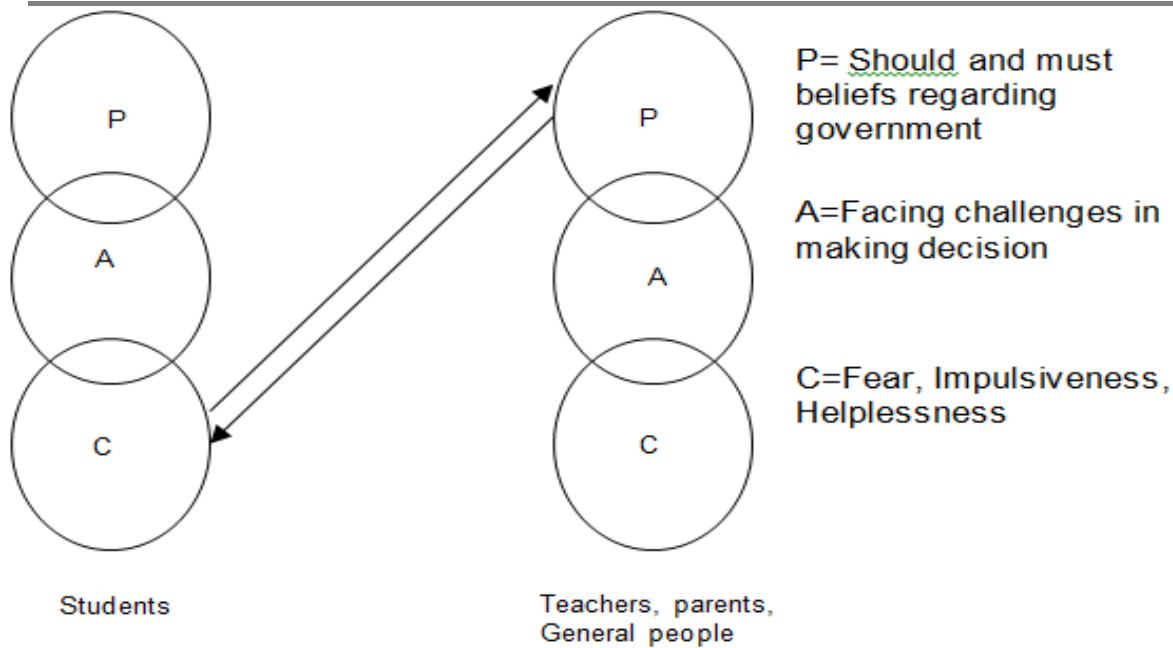


Figure 3: Crossed transaction during digital separation

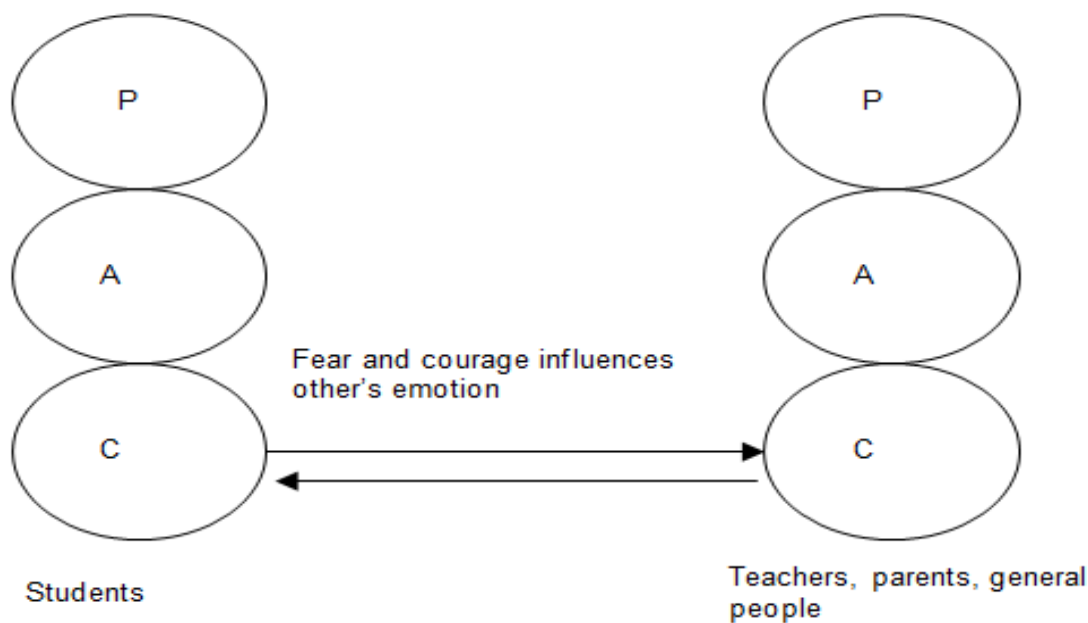


Figure 4: Parallel transaction during digital separation

The consequences of digital disconnections

Quota reform protests spread across the country and had a tremendous negative effect on the various sectors. Firstly, when people are locked in their homes without the internet, their anxiety accelerates, and they face difficulties in maintaining their daily routines. During that time, they could not talk with their friends and relatives; hence, various psychological problems developed, such as stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, fear, grief, etc. Secondly, the families of the students killed underwent emotional shock. Suddenly, a few parents died when they heard their children were being killed. They could not accept the unexpected death. Thirdly, many historical buildings, metro rail, buses, internet data centers, and TV centers were damaged. As a result, the economy suddenly cracks down, and the inflation of goods puts pressure on the middle-class family. Fourthly, all public and private universities, all primary and secondary schools, and all colleges were shut down. Therefore, the whole educational system was under threat. Fifthly, since the COVID-19 outbreak, online counseling has become available in our country, but this advantage has also stopped due to the blackout of the internet.

Moreover, people could not continue face-to-face counseling sessions, so mental health services were interrupted on a vast scale. Sixthly, freelancers, online businessmen, and online educators faced challenges continuing their work. Seventhly, people who live hand to mouth suffer from not working. Lastly, the foreign supply chain was completely cut off, and foreign remittance was shut down—the huge negative impressions created by not delivering products and services of the foreign orders without any communication.

Possible future preparation to keep the connectivity

It is difficult to imagine a moment without internet and cellular connectivity. We have observed that disconnecting exacerbates psychological challenges. As a result, maintaining minimal connectivity during shutdown periods can help individuals manage their emotions to some degree. During the recent incident, only internet connectivity was shut down, while cellular voice connectivity remained operational. The government-imposed internet block restricted access to websites and apps; however, IP-based connectivity within the country remained active, allowing access to any locally hosted website via its IP address. Several programmers developed social networking sites and chat applications during the blackout, enabling communication with family and friends. Similarly, mental health applications and voice/video communication tools could also be hosted on these IP-based servers.

However, we can envision an even more severe scenario where cellular and internal IP-based networks become unavailable. In such cases, ad hoc networks could be established using smartphones, Wi-Fi routers, and other networking devices and servers. With proper preparation, such communication systems could function, albeit with limited bandwidth and slower connectivity. This proactive approach could ensure that essential communication remains possible even under extreme circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Political instability has long been a significant issue in Bangladesh, serving as a major source of stress in our daily lives. Political upheavals often trigger negative emotions, which take a toll on mental health. Recent monthlong unrest disrupted the education of millions of students across universities, schools, and colleges, throwing academic calendars into complete disarray. Compounding these challenges, the sudden and prolonged digital disconnection—preventing people from connecting and interacting online impacted behavior, particularly fostering impulsiveness. Through the lens of Transactional Analysis (TA), it becomes evident that such disconnection disrupts the balance among the Parent, Adult, and Child ego states. This imbalance often amplifies the influence of the Child ego state, driving individuals to seek immediate gratification or display unregulated emotional responses, acts to compensate for the perceived loss of connection and validation. Examining this dynamic offers critical insights into the psychological effects of digital disconnection and highlights the importance of developing digital resilience and emotional regulation strategies. By understanding the interplay of TA's ego states, individuals and communities can better manage impulsive behaviors stemming from sudden digital separation, paving the way for healthier interactions in an increasingly interconnected world.

Despite the setbacks resulting from the suppression of the student uprising through violence, Bangladesh is currently facing a multitude of challenges and uncertainties across all sectors. Restoring stability to the economy, the educational system, mental health services, and medical infrastructure will be an immense undertaking, and it is unclear how long it will take to rebuild the trust and hope that have been shattered. Additionally, it remains uncertain when a sense of mental peace can be reestablished among the nation's people. In the interim, numerous mental health organizations are stepping forward to offer free mental health first aid to survivors, aiding them in coping with and overcoming the trauma they have experienced. While these initiatives are praiseworthy, the path to complete recovery and stability remains arduous and uncertain.

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