

# Hidden Cost of Constant Connectivity: Digital Burnout and Its Interpersonal Pathways to Emotion Dysregulation among Young Adults

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## ABSTRACT

Growing access to digital devices and its continuous usage poses a threat of Digital Burnout. While digital burnout is associated with emotional difficulties, social processes that may explain this relationship remain less known. Social isolation and loneliness are conceptually distinct but are often treated as similar. The study examined how social isolation (objective lack of social connection) and loneliness (subjective perception of being alone) could help explain the relationship between digital burnout and emotion dysregulation. Data were collected from 303 Indian adults aged 18-44 years using self-report measures. Serial mediation analysis indicated that higher digital burnout was associated with higher difficulty in regulating emotions. This relationship was independently explained by loneliness but not by social isolation. However, social isolation acted as a contributor to loneliness, which in turn was linked to emotion dysregulation. Findings suggest the role of individual perception may be an important determinant for emotional functioning than mere presence or absence of social contact. Understanding this distinction can help curate better interventions aimed at promoting digital well-being and emotional health.

**Keywords:** Digital Burnout, Social Isolation, Loneliness, Emotion Dysregulation

## INTRODUCTION

Rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped life in contemporary times. Ease of access to digital devices, global internet availability and integration of digital platforms into work and education have all contributed to the growth and development of digital lifestyles, normalizing sustained digital engagement (Chang, 2016; Erten et al., 2020). In India, internet usage has grown exponentially over the past decade. While digital connectivity enhances accessibility, emerging evidence suggests that prolonged and excessive digital engagement may come with associated psychological costs, including heightened stress, depressive symptoms, and sleep disturbances (Thomé et al., 2011).

One of the increasing significant challenges associated with excessive usage of digital devices is Digital Burnout (Durmus, et al., 2022), which is caused due to excessive amount of time spent on digital devices (Erten & Ozdemir, 2020). Traditionally, burnout has been conceptualized as a psychological syndrome which results due to chronic interpersonal stressors at occupational settings and is characterized by a reduction in personal self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, 1998; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Extending this framework to digital contexts, digital burnout reflects exhaustion, psychological strain arising from sustained digital exposure, and difficulty disengaging from online environments (Grant-Marshall, 2014; Erten & Ozdemir, 2020; Silva et al., 2024). Continuous information availability and digital dependency may intensify digital exhaustion and cognitive overload (Detecon, 2013; Gregersen, et al., 2023). Attention to digital burnout has been growing, but the psychological mechanisms behind it remain insufficiently examined.

Emotion regulation involves monitoring, evaluating, and modifying one's emotional responses (Gross, 1998, 2002). Impairment of these processes leads to dysregulation of emotion characterized by difficulties in

comprehending, accepting, and managing emotional states (Gratz and Roemer, 2004). Burnout involves emotional exhaustion and depletion of regulatory capacity. This suggests that digital burnout may undermine one's ability to regulate emotions effectively. Yet emotional processes are deeply embedded within one's social context and do not operate in isolation. It then becomes crucial to understand how social experiences shape the relationship between digital burnout and emotional dysregulation.

Two constructs particularly relevant in understanding the role of social experiences are social isolation and loneliness. Often used interchangeably, they represent different dimensions of social disconnection. Social isolation refers to an objective reduction in social integration and participation in social and community networks (Steptoe et al., 2013; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Hasselmo et al., 2018; Yanguas et al., 2018). This structural reduction in social contact has been associated with adverse health outcomes, including increased mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Contrariwise, loneliness is the subjective perception of a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Danvers et al., 2023). Individuals may feel lonely even after being socially connected, or socially isolated without experiencing loneliness, highlighting the conceptual variance between objective and perceived social disconnection (Preece et al., 2021). However, socially isolated individuals often report greater loneliness (Yildirim and Kocabiyik, 2010). This suggests that objective disconnection may precede subjective disconnection.

Empirical findings suggest a mixed association between them. Some studies report weak but significant correlation between social isolation and loneliness (Coyle & Dugan, 2012; Danvers et al., 2023). Other studies indicate weak or negligible associations (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Schneider et al., 2013; De Koning et al., 2017; Lennartsson et al., 2021). Much of this research focus has been on older populations with comparatively limited investigation on middle-aged and young adults in rapidly digitizing contexts (Mehrabi & Beland, 2020; Sen et al., 2022).

Digital engagement may influence both dimensions of social disconnection. Growing evidence indicates that excessive social media use has been associated with greater perceived social isolation (Primack et al., 2017), and smartphone overuse may reduce perceived social support despite increased connectivity (Thomèe et al., 2011). Moreover, individuals with a feeling of loneliness may engage in compensatory internet usage, potentially reinforcing both digital dependency and relational dissatisfaction (Kim et al., 2009). Loneliness has also been linked to greater difficulties in emotion regulation (Eres et al., 2023). Offline supportive relationships have various emotional benefits which digital interactions cannot replicate, and in turn may even undermine subjective well-being (Kross et al., 2013).

These findings suggest a possible sequential process. Sustained digital engagement may contribute to digital burnout, which may reduce meaningful social integration and participation (social isolation), fostering relational discrepancy (loneliness) feelings, ultimately impairing emotion regulation. Despite conceptual variation between social isolation and loneliness, none of the studies have examined their joint and potentially sequential roles in linking digital burnout to emotion dysregulation. It requires further examination to strongly ascertain and clarify whether social isolation contributes directly to emotion dysregulation or whether its effects operate through underlying subjective experiences of loneliness.

This study tries to understand the role of social isolation and loneliness in the relationship between digital burnout and emotional dysregulation. Understanding the varying role of objective and subjective dimensions of social disconnection, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of socio-emotional pathways underlying digital burnout. Based on the above literature, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- H1 Digital burnout will be positively associated with emotion dysregulation.
- H2 Social isolation will mediate the relationship between digital burnout and emotion dysregulation.
- H3 Loneliness will mediate the relationship between digital burnout and emotion dysregulation.
- H4 Social isolation and loneliness will serially mediate the positive association between digital burnout and emotion dysregulation.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling methods through online platforms. A total of 306 responses were obtained. Three responses were excluded as they did not meet the age inclusion criteria (18-44 years), resulting in a final sample size of 303 participants.

The mean age of participants was 21.99 years ( $SD= 2.71$ ). Sample comprised of 64.68% females ( $n= 196$ ) and 35.32% males ( $n=107$ ). Most of the participants were students (82.10%), followed by working professionals (11.80%), researchers (2%), and unemployed individuals (4.6%). 72% of participants reported residing in urban areas, 15.8% in semi-urban areas, and 12.8% in rural areas of India.

Participation was completely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Responses were collected while maintaining complete confidentiality.

### Design

The study employed a cross-sectional, correlational design to investigate the relationship between digital burnout and emotional dysregulation. Social isolation and loneliness were examined as potential mediating variables in this relationship. Demographic details including age, gender, education level, area of residence, and duration of duration of screen time usage, were also collected.

### Measures

#### Digital Burnout Scale (Erten & Ozdemir, 2020)

Digital Burnout Scale (Erten et al., 2020) was used to assess the levels of digital burnout levels among individuals. The scale consists of 24 items measuring three dimensions: Digital Aging (12 items), Digital Deprivation (6 items), and emotional exhaustion (6 items). Items are rated on a Likert type scale with higher scores indicating higher levels of digital burnout. The original scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha= .946$ ). On the current sample, it demonstrated an excellent internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha=.93$ ).

#### PROMIS Social Isolation Scale (8a) (David Cella, 2010)

The PROMIS (Patient-Reported Outcomes Measurement Information System) social isolation scale (Version 2.0, 8a) was used to assess social isolation. This 8-item measure assesses perceived detachment, exclusion, and lack of social integration. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). A higher score indicates greater perceived social isolation. The PROMIS measures were developed using Item Response Theory (IRT) and have demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations (Primack B A, et al., 2017; Whaite et al., 2018). Originally, the scale exhibited excellent internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha= .92$ ). On the current sample, it demonstrated an excellent internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha= .90$ ).

#### UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996)

Loneliness was assessed using the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) (Russell, 1996). The scale consists of 20 items measuring subjective feelings of loneliness and relational dissatisfaction. Responses are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often) with some items reverse scored. A higher score reflects greater loneliness. The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency (alpha ranging from .89 to .94) and good test-retest reliability. On the present sample the UCLA loneliness scale demonstrated good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

## Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz and Roemer, 2004)

Difficulties in Emotion Dysregulation were assessed using the 36-item self-report Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. It assesses multiple dimensions of emotion dysregulation, including non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal directed behavior, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to regulation strategies, and lack of emotional clarity. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always), with some items reverse scored. A higher total score indicates greater emotion dysregulation. The original scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .93$ ). On the current sample, it demonstrated excellent internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### Procedure

Data was collected between June 2025 and July 2025 using an online survey administered through Google Forms. The survey link was distributed through email and social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram, Survey circle). Participants first provided informed consent and then completed demographic questions followed by the study measures. The study was carried out in accordance with the ethical research guidelines.

## RESULTS

The present study attempted to understand the relationship between Digital Burnout, Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Emotion Dysregulation. Table 1 depicts descriptive statistics.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of all the Variables

Dimension	Mean	SD
Digital Burnout	63.75	16.92
Social Isolation	19.72	6.85
Loneliness	43.82	9.4
Difficulty in Emotion Regulation	93.00	22.6

Note. The respective mean and standard deviation of Digital Burnout (M= 63.75; SD= 16.92), Social Isolation (M= 19.72; SD= 6.85), Loneliness (M= 43.82; SD= 9.4) and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation (M= 93.00; SD= 22.6).

Table 2: Correlation among Digital Burnout, Social Isolation, Loneliness and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation

Parameters	DB	SI	LS	DER
DB	1			
SI	.613**	1		
LS	.504**	.693**	1	
DER	.578**	.444**	.444**	1

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed); DB- Digital Burnout; SI- Social Isolation; LS- Loneliness; DER- Difficulty in Emotion Regulation

Table 2 depicts inter-correlations among the variables of interest. The association between the variables was determined by Pearson's Product Moment Correlation method. Significant positive correlation was observed between digital burnout and social isolation ( $r = .613, p < .01$ ), loneliness ( $r = .504, p < .01$ ), and difficulty in emotion regulation ( $r = .578, p < .01$ ). Social Isolation and Loneliness were also found to be positively correlated ( $r = .693, p < .01$ ). Difficulty in Emotion Regulation was positively correlated to social isolation ( $r = .444, p < .01$ ) and loneliness ( $r = .444, p < .01$ ). It was hypothesized that digital burnout would be positively associated with emotion dysregulation (H1). The results of Pearson's Product Moment correlation analysis supported this hypothesis, indicating a significant positive relationship between digital burnout and difficulty

in emotion regulation ( $r = .578, p < .01$ ). Correlation analysis indicated the existence of relationships among the variables of interest.

A serial mediation model (Hayes' PROCESS macro model 6) was used to investigate if social isolation and loneliness mediated the relationship between digital burnout and difficulty in emotion regulation. Bootstrapping iterations set at 5000 and confidence interval 95% was used for the serial mediation analysis. It was further hypothesized that social isolation (H2) and loneliness (H3) would independently mediate the relationship between digital burnout and emotion dysregulation and that these variables would also function as serial mediators (H4). As evident from Figure 1, the direct relationship between Digital Burnout and Social Isolation was found to be significant ( $\beta = .2481, p < .05$ ) with higher digital burnout leading to more social isolation. The relationship between Social Isolation and Loneliness was also significant ( $\beta = .8436, p < .05$ ) with higher levels of social isolation predicting greater loneliness. Loneliness also predicted difficulty in regulating emotions ( $\beta = .4625, p < .05$ ). The relationship between Digital Burnout and Loneliness was also significant with higher levels of digital burnout predicting more loneliness ( $\beta = .0702, p < .05$ ). However, Social Isolation could not predict Difficulty in Emotion Regulation ( $\beta = .0827, SE = .2327, p = .7725, 95\% CI [-.3752, .5406]$ ).

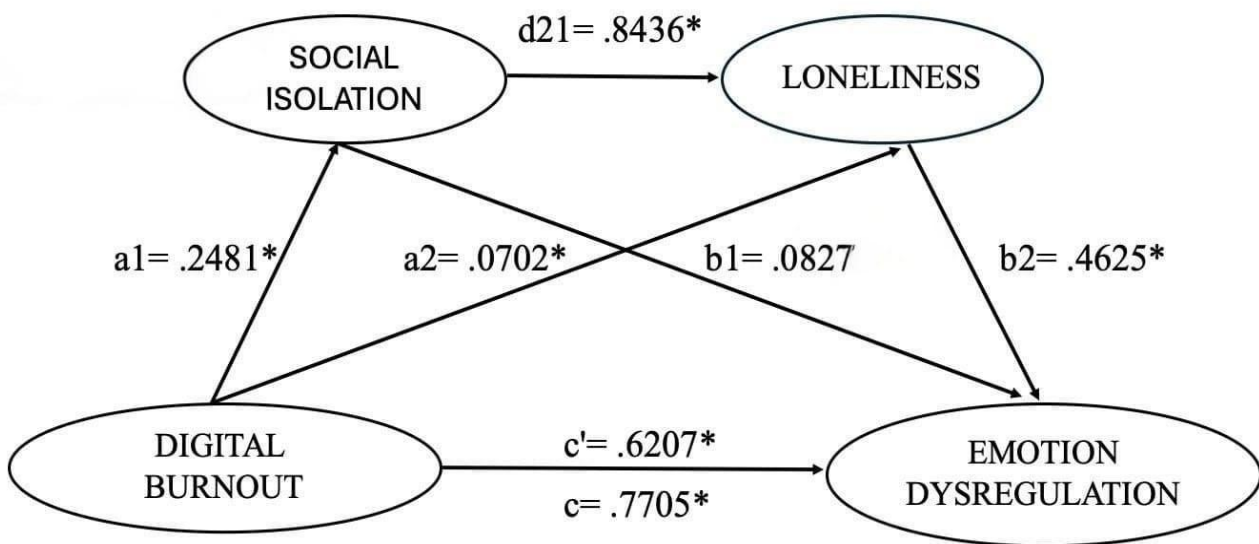


Figure 1: Serial mediation with Social Isolation and Loneliness as mediator variables in the relationship between Digital Burnout and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation;  $*p < .05$

Table 3: Indirect effects of Digital Burnout on Difficulty in Emotion Regulation through Social Isolation and Loneliness

Indirect Effect Key	Effect	SE	Lower	Upper
DB→SI→DER	.0205	.0643	-.1045	.1506
DB→LS→DER	.0325	.0178	.0036	.0724
DB→SI→LS→DER	.0968	.0363	.0242	.1675

Note.  $N = 303, k = 5000, *p < .05$ , DB- Digital Burnout, SI- Social Isolation, LS- Loneliness, DER- Difficulty in Emotion Regulation.

Table 3 depicts the indirect effects of Digital Burnout on Difficulty in Emotion Regulation through Social Isolation and Loneliness. Within the current model, statistical significance of the indirect effects was examined with a 95% Confidence Interval as an estimate. Evident from Table 3, the indirect relationship between digital burnout, social isolation and difficulty in emotion regulation stands insignificant (effect = .0205; SE= .0643; 95% CI [-.1045, .1506]). Results point to the direction that social isolation does not independently mediate the relationship between digital burnout and difficulty in regulation of emotions. Hypothesis 2 was not supported as social isolation did not independently help explain the relationship between digital burnout and difficulty in

emotion regulation. However, the indirect relationship between digital burnout, loneliness, and difficulty in emotion regulation was found to be statistically significant (effect = .0325; SE = .0178; 95% CI [.0036, .0724]). This suggests a positive indirect path. Hypothesis 4 was supported as the serial mediation pathway through social isolation and loneliness was found to be significant. The results of the indirect effects between digital burnout, social isolation, loneliness and difficulty in emotion regulation also stand statistically significant resulting in partial mediation (effect = .0968; SE = .0363; 95% CI [.0242, .1675]). Hypothesis 3 was also supported, as loneliness significantly mediated the relationship between digital burnout and difficulty in emotion regulation.

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to understand and clarify the psychological mechanisms linking digital burnout to emotion dysregulation. Prior evidence suggests that excessive digital engagement may lead to emotional strain; the present finding extends this understanding by identifying loneliness, as the chief mediating mechanism.

Consistent with expectations, higher digital burnout was associated with greater emotion dysregulation. Sustained depletion of resources characterized by digital exhaustion and cognitive overload due to digital burnout may compromise the emotion regulation capacities of an individual. The findings highlight the difference between objective and subjective social disconnection. Digital burnout predicted greater social isolation, and social isolation predicted loneliness, but only loneliness directly contributed to emotion dysregulation when considered simultaneously. The serial pathway emerged significant but not the independent indirect effect of social isolation. It suggests that mere reduced social interaction alone does not impair emotion regulation; it is the perceived discrepancy between the desired and actual relational connection that brings the consequence.

The findings may be understood in the light of the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which posits that psychological strain arises when individuals experience depletion of resources that are valued. Digital burnout results in sustained cognitive and emotional resource loss resulting from constant digital connectedness. Drawing from the framework, social connectedness is an important interpersonal resource. Digital burnout predicted greater social isolation and loneliness, which reduces emotional regulatory capacity. Loneliness may intensify perceived loss of relational social resources and may heighten processes such as rumination and vigilance towards threat, taxing emotional regulation mechanisms. Thus, digital burnout and loneliness may together erode necessary resources for adaptive emotional functioning.

This distinction has theoretical implications. While social isolation is objective in nature, loneliness is perceived and subjective appraisal of relational inadequacy. Emotional dysregulation may arise not from the absence of social contact itself, but the internalization of this absence which then manifests into emotional dysregulation (Eres et al., 2023). Loneliness is known to heighten negative affectivity and increase rumination, which in turn might impair an individual's emotion regulation capacities.

The findings give a fresh perspective to the already existing debate about the pros and cons of digital connectedness. Although digital devices are believed to increase social connectivity and accessibility, they may paradoxically intensify social isolation and loneliness. Given that digital mediums are increasingly integrated in organizational and educational settings; young adults turn out to be an extremely vulnerable group. The observed relationship brings attention to the potential mental health relevance of sustained digital strain on young adults. From an inherently clinical perspective, interventions targeting emotional health in digitally engaged individuals should address underlying experiences of loneliness alongside screen-time behavior.

Within the Indian sociocultural context, where interdependence and group affiliation are emphasized and appreciated, loneliness may carry heightened emotional weight. In collectivistic environments, social embeddedness is the cultural expectation and thus when loneliness arises, it may potentially intensify the emotional strain. In an era of constant digital connectivity, the findings suggest that addressing digital fatigue is as important as addressing subjective feelings of loneliness to better intervene in emotion regulation difficulties among young adults.

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature on digital well-being by demonstrating that digital burnout is associated with emotion dysregulation and this relationship operates partially through social isolation and loneliness. The findings underscore how digital well-being is relevant in the contemporary era for mental health. While social alone did not directly mediate the relationship, its sequential effect through loneliness stood significant and highlighted how objective disconnection manifests into the subjective loneliness perception. Findings underscore the significance of loneliness in understanding how digital exhaustion translates to emotional dysregulation, particularly among young adults in an increasingly digital environment. Proper redressal mechanisms can help strengthen psychological resilience among concerned individuals.

## Limitations And Future Implications

The study has certain limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling and overrepresentation of student populations restricts the generalizability of findings beyond the present sample. Second, the use of cross-sectional and correlational design limits causal interpretations of the observed relationships. Third, reliance on self-report measures may lead to social desirability and response biases. Future research should bring in longitudinal and experimental designs and more diverse samples to strengthen causal inference and external validity. In future, researchers can focus on including diverse age groups, occupations and rural populations to strongly ascertain generalizability.

The study advances the understanding of digital burnout by examining interpersonal processes into its emotional consequences. Interventions aimed at reducing digital burnout should not focus solely on screen-time reduction but must also consider and address the impact of loneliness. Objective measures of screen time activity could be incorporated to monitor the actual screen-time data rather than solely relying on self-report measures, which can lead to biases in reporting. Additionally, the importance of engaging in healthy and meaningful social interaction is highlighted. Organizations and educational institutions may bring in structured and controlled digital well-being programs and initiatives that foster meaningful offline social engagement. Social isolation could be measured through network-based indicators or behavioral indicators rather than self-report measures to objectively understand the reduction in social participation. Future studies may further explore cultural variations and potential protective factors that mitigate the impact of digital burnout on emotional functioning.

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