

## Loneliness in the Middle of Connection: Adolescent Existentialism in a Digital Context

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### ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, advancements in digital technology have reshaped social structures and behaviors, particularly among adolescents navigating identity formation. This study explores the phenomenon of digital loneliness in adolescents through the lens of existentialism, a philosophy centered on life's meaning and individual freedom in social contexts. While digital communication offers convenience, many adolescents experience alienation due to superficial and shallow interactions. Although technology enables the creation of virtual identities, it often limits the authenticity of interpersonal relationships. This research reveals that reliance on social media can lead to feelings of loneliness and inauthenticity. However, with awareness of individual responsibility and mindful use of technology, adolescents can foster meaningful relationships and discover purpose in their digital existence, making existentialism both relevant and practical.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Entering the 21st century, the advancement of digital technology has significantly changed the social order of society. Easy access to information, instant communication, and a variety of digital lifestyle choices are the hallmarks of today's era. These changes can be seen from the development and changes in people's behavior patterns in social media. Problem after problem arises on the surface as a result of the use of social media (Putri and Jamhari, 2024). Adolescents in the period of self-identity formation become a community group that is vulnerable to the impact of digital technology advancements.

Adolescence is a period when individuals experience changes from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is a period of emotional turmoil, a period of transition or being on a rocking bridge that connects childhood that depends on adulthood (Suryana et al., 2022). WHO establishes that adolescence is the human life span at the age of 10-24 years. Meanwhile, based on Erik Erickson's developmental psychology in (Mokalu and Boangmanalu, 2021), it was conveyed that adolescence is in the age range of 12-18 years where the focus of developmental tasks in this period is identity search. Based on Don Tapscott's theory in (Kristyowati, 2021), in general, the age of adolescents in 2024 is included in the group of generation Z (born between 1998-2009) and generation alpha (born between 2010-present) who are also known as digital natives, namely the generation that communicates, behaves, works, and thinks as a digital society because their lives have been surrounded by the internet since they were in the womb (Supratman, 2018).

Based on a survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in (Sari and Prasetya, 2022) in 2019-2020, the penetration of internet users in Indonesia is dominated by the adolescent age group, namely 15-19 years old (91 percent), followed by the age group of 20-24 years (88.5 percent). On average, users access the internet to open social media (51.5 percent) and communicate (32.9 percent). This means that, in addition to dominating the population in Indonesia, adolescents also dominate the use of the internet, or more specifically the use of social media. On the positive side, young people have the ease of accessing and disseminating information, seeking entertainment, and learning through the internet.

Research conducted by (Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo, 2018) explains some of the negative impacts of using internet access in the digital world, such as dependence and feeling lonely. They use the internet as a way to escape from everyday problems, and show signs of withdrawal from association such as depression and discomfort when they try to reduce or stop using internet access. Beard and Wolf (2021) in the same study also presented a medical view that said that internet addiction can result in lost opportunities for jobs, education, careers, and damaged relationships. Damaged relationships are influenced by the dominant proportion of direct communication (face to face) which is replaced by media communication (online). He also presented literature reviews that showed a positive relationship between internet dependence and loneliness.

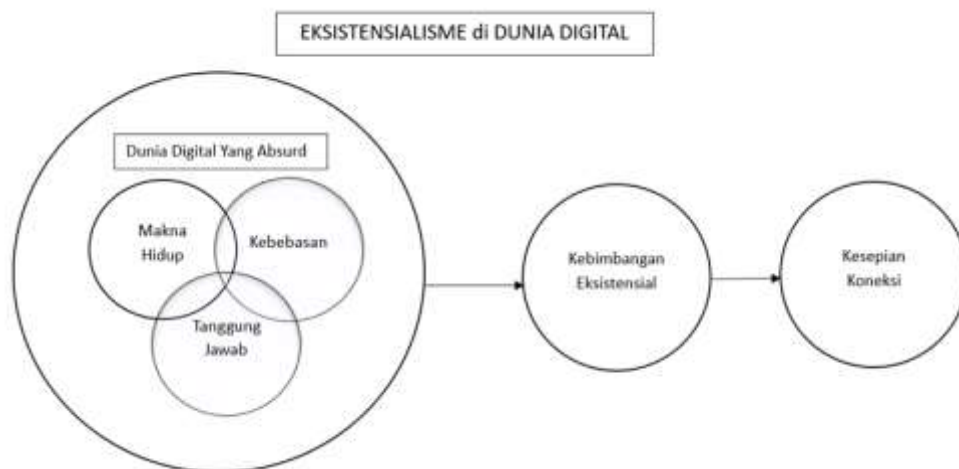
When linked to the task of adolescent development according to Erik Erickson's theory, the loneliness experienced by adolescents in the midst of digital connectivity raises deep existential problems. From a philosophical point of view, humans are creatures who are constantly searching for the meaning of their existence in an absurd world (Cheong, 2023). However, the digital age often narrows this search to self-image, focusing on external validation in the form of many "likes", "followers" and "comments" on one's social media accounts. As a result, many adolescents feel deprived of their self-authenticity, a condition that Sartre calls "inauthenticity" or "bad faith." Meanwhile, Kierkegaard said the inauthenticity was caused by individuals who were carried away by the flow of the masses in the digital world whose direction could not be predicted.

Based on this background, the formulation of the problem that will be discussed in this paper is how can existentialism explain the phenomenon of digital loneliness in adolescents? We also see whether digital interaction gives an authentic meaning of existence or actually reinforces alienation?.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW

### *Existentialism in the Digital World*

Existentialism is a school of philosophy that focuses on the human experience in seeking the meaning of life, freedom, and individual responsibility in the midst of the absurdity of existence. According to Sartre, (1943), human beings have radical freedom to determine the essence of their own life, even in limited conditions. In the context of adolescence, the period of identity search often involves existential indecision regarding self-meaning, social relationships, and feelings of isolation. Heidegger, (1927) emphasized the concept of "being-in-the-world," in which individuals understand themselves through their relationship with the world around them. In the digital world, relationships with technology create new spaces that also affect the way adolescents interpret their existence. Existentialism in the digital world and its relationship to connection loneliness can be seen in figure 1.



**Figure 1. Existentialism in the Digital World that Impacts Connection Loneliness**

Digital technology, especially the internet and social media, has changed the way humans live their lives. The presence of technology is making the world more connected, but human interaction is often mediated by devices, which reduces the authenticity of interpersonal relationships. The concept of "virtual presence" replaces physical presence, thus affecting the experience of being. Additionally, technology allows individuals to create virtual identities that are different from their real identities. While this gives the freedom to experiment, virtual identities often result in existential duality, where individuals experience the tension between the "virtual self" and the "real self." Existence becomes more complex because humans have to navigate between these two worlds.

Baudrillard's theory of postmodernism, (1981) of simulacra and hyperreality provides a framework for understanding how the digital world replaces "reality" with representations that are not entirely real. For example, social media produces an ideal representation of life, which often does not reflect reality. This can lead to alienation, where individuals feel disconnected from their authentic selves because they are trapped in the symbolic world that technology creates. Individuals who experience alienation due to digitalization will feel alienated from themselves, the social environment, and the real world.

Technology creates constant distractions, such as the use of social media, that hinders self-reflection. This exacerbates "self-alienation," where individuals lose a deep sense of who they really are. While technology promises global connectivity, excessive use of technology can replace in-person social interaction, exacerbating feelings of loneliness. Technology is shifting the human focus from real-world experiences to the digital world. For example, many people prefer to spend time in virtual worlds such as social media or gaming, which causes them to be disconnected from the authentic physical world experience.

Online life is often a space for searching for meaning that is cut off from real experiences, exacerbating existential alienation. This is in line with the opinion of Martin Heidegger (1954) in *The Question Concerning Technology* who criticized technology as something that is not only an instrument, but also an individual's perspective on the world (worldview). He argues that modern technology often reduces one's existential meaning by reducing the world to just an object or resource, so that humans risk losing their authentic relationship with nature, self, and others.

Technology creates comfort, but it also creates a crisis of meaning. In an increasingly automated and predictable world, many individuals feel that life is missing out on existential challenges. The presence of instant technology often replaces the need for humans to struggle to find meaning, as emphasized by Victor Frankl, (1985) in *Man's Search for Meaning*. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) could take over human work, which in turn raises the existential question: "What is the value of human existence if technology can replace us?"

Technology is not only changing how humans live, but also how humans understand their existence. According to existentialism, authentic existence can

only be achieved through conscious choice that reflects freedom and responsibility. However, technology often leads people towards inauthentic lives: digital conformity and technology dependence. Digital conformity occurs when social media encourages individuals to conform to digital norms, thus sacrificing their authentic expression. Meanwhile, dependence on technology can weaken human freedom to determine their own life.

Although it poses challenges, technology also opens up existential opportunities that humans can achieve, such as: the expression of creativity, global connections, and the fulfillment of new meanings. Platforms such as digital art, blogs, or vlogs provide a new way for individuals to express their creative potential. Another existentialist opportunity is to make previously hard-to-reach cross-cultural relationships easier, thus enriching the human experience of existence in the world. In the context of work, technology creates existentialist opportunities for new roles and jobs that are relevant to the needs of modern society, such as the development of AI or environmentally friendly technologies.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that technology has an ambivalent impact on human existence. On the one hand, technology expands the ability of humans to interact, create, and search for meaning. On the other hand, technology also creates alienation, loss of authenticity, and a crisis of meaning in modern life. To manage these impacts, humans need to use technology consciously and reflectively, maintaining a balance between the benefits of technology and the need to live an authentic life according to existential values.

### *Digital Loneliness in a Psychological Perspective*

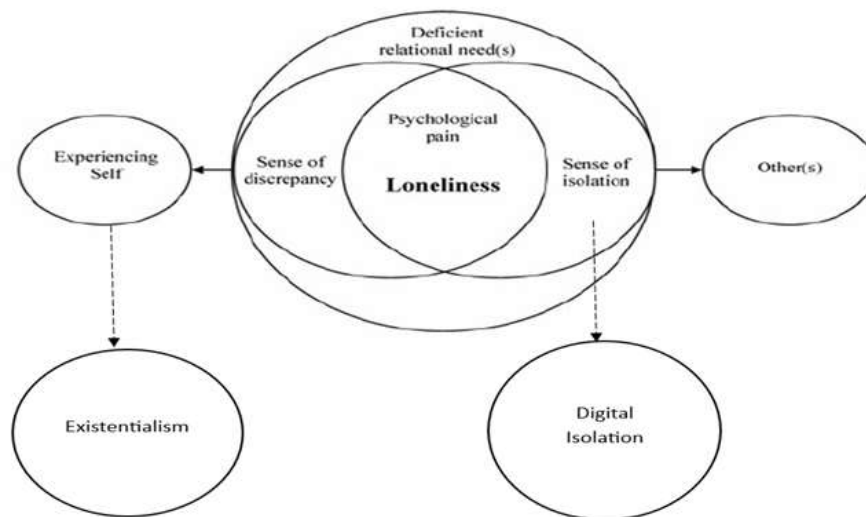
Loneliness is a subjective feeling that arises when there is a mismatch between the individual's need for social relationships and the quality of relationships they have (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). Identity crisis is a term introduced by his theory of psychosocial development. In the identity vs. role confusion stage (12-18 years old), adolescents are in an important phase to build their identity. They begin to ask "Who am I?" and look for the meaning of their existence in social, cultural, and personal contexts. If they fail to integrate different aspects of their experience, adolescents can experience role confusion that leads to identity instability, which ultimately leads to feelings of loneliness.

Digitalization has revolutionized the way individuals, including adolescents, interact and form social relationships. Research shows that while digital connectivity can facilitate social connections, it often exacerbates feelings of isolation due to shallow communication, social media pressure, and lack of in-person interaction (Twenge, Spitzberg and Campbell, 2019). In addition, digital platforms such as social media can provide space for self-expression, but also pose challenges such as: ideal representation, Hyperconnectivity phenomenon, and digital alienation.

Social pressures and ideal representation are seen in adolescents when they often compare themselves to digitally constructed social standards, thus affecting their self-esteem and mental health (Chou and Edge, 2012). While the

phenomenon of hyperconnectivity occurs even though connected all the time, the quality of the relationship is often not deep, thus reinforcing emotional loneliness (Turkle, 2011). The final challenge is the occurrence of digital alienation where technology creates an existential distance between individuals and direct experiences, causing alienation both from oneself and from others.

Digital loneliness is an increasingly relevant phenomenon in the modern era, where individuals feel lonely despite being connected virtually through digital devices and social media. In the context of psychology, loneliness is defined as subjective dissatisfaction with the quality or quantity of a person's social relationships. Digital loneliness is a special form of loneliness that is influenced by technology-based interactions, where the quality of interpersonal relationships is often compromised. Digital loneliness emerged as a result of the massive development of communication technology. Although technology offers easy access to interact, the relationships formed are often superficial and do not provide the emotional depth that humans need. This can exacerbate feelings of social isolation, especially in individuals who rely too much on digital relationships instead of face-to-face relationships. The phenomenon of digital loneliness can be illustrated through figure 2.



**Figure 2. Digital Loneliness in the Perspective of Existential Psychology**

Humans are basically social creatures who need face-to-face relationships to meet emotional needs. Digital loneliness can be understood as a consequence of the mismatch between the human biological need for a real emotional connection and superficial interaction through technology. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the need for love and belonging is at a basic level. However, digital media often fails to meet these needs in depth. Social media, for example, can create the illusion of an adequate relationship, but in reality, it often leaves users with a feeling of emptiness.

In practical terms, we can mention that digital loneliness occurs due to several factors, namely: social media addiction, lack of social skills, fear of missing out (FOMO) behavior, as well as social media algorithms. Excessive use of social media can replace face-to-face interactions, reducing opportunities to build meaningful interpersonal relationships. This is exacerbated when

individuals are unable to communicate effectively in the real world, exacerbating social disparities. The fear of missing out behavior also contributes to this digital loneliness through the feeling of fear of missing out on other people's information or experiences, which when the desired thing is not obtained, it actually increases loneliness because the feeling of not belonging to a certain social group. Ultimately, social media algorithms maintain the user's attention, but also reinforce the echo chamber that makes individuals feel more isolated from different views.

In the end, digital loneliness can have a psychological impact that is not a joke, because it affects mental, physical, and interpersonal health. Digital loneliness can lead to depression, anxiety, and even suicidal thoughts. Individuals who feel digitally lonely tend to have higher levels of stress, which also impacts physical health, such as an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and immune system disorders. In addition, individuals who feel lonely digitally often have difficulty building real interpersonal relationships, creating a vicious cycle of loneliness that is difficult to break.

Actually, there are several strategies that can be thought of to overcome this digital loneliness, such as: increasing face-to-face interactions, limiting screen time, digital literacy, and psychotherapeutic approaches. Face-to-face interaction can be improved by encouraging individuals to be more involved in community activities or direct social interactions. While limiting social media use and setting up gadget-free time can help individuals recover their real relationships. All of this is maximized by teaching individuals the skills to use social media healthily and manage their digital relationship expectations. Then, if loneliness becomes very disturbing, it can be helped with therapeutic techniques such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) that can help individuals overcome negative thought patterns associated with digital loneliness.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review method. The data sources are in the form of articles from various relevant scientific journals, covering the topics of existentialism, digital loneliness, and adolescents. The data analysis was carried out by emphasizing the synthesis between the theory of existentialism and the empirical findings related to digital loneliness from previous research.

The validity test of the data was carried out through source triangulation. This process involves comparing and re-checking the degree of confidence in the information obtained, by comparing different articles based on the time of publication, type of research, subject, and the results and discussions presented. This approach aims to ensure the validity and reliability of the data used.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The relationship between face-to-face interaction and feelings of alienation in adolescents***

The reduced frequency of face-to-face communication due to the shift to digital communication has a significant impact on individual behavior,

especially in adolescents who are known as digital natives. Face-to-face communication is categorized as direct interpersonal communication, while communication through digital media is referred to as mediated communication. If digital communication is aimed at a wider audience, then it is classified as mass communication.

According to Marlina, (2011), face-to-face communication is the most effective form of communication in changing attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and behaviors of communicators. This is because communicators can capture expressions and emotions directly, as well as provide immediate feedback during the interaction. In contrast, the research of Winstone et al., (2021) shows that mediated communication also has advantages, especially as a cross-geographical collaboration tool, making it efficient in time and cost. This media is now used for various purposes, such as online lectures, remote work, and health consultations.

However, the correlation between mediated communication and adolescent loneliness showed mixed results. Nie et al. (in Nowland et al., 2018) stated that mediated communication can increase loneliness if it replaces face-to-face communication to avoid reality. However, Valkenburg & Peter, (2010) argue the opposite, that digital communication can reduce loneliness if used as a complement to strengthen relationships that already exist in the real world.

Research by Mutiarrama et al., (2024) adds that generation Z uses digitalization, including artificial intelligence (AI), to overcome loneliness. Loneliness in adolescents is often triggered by a gap in expectations in relationships, a lack of words of affirmation from those closest to them, and the loss of a loved one. However, the use of digital platforms such as Character.AI can have a negative impact if there are high expectations that AI can replace human interaction. On the other hand, if used for specific purposes, such as helping with tasks or obtaining emotional support, the platform is considered beneficial.

Lou (in Nowland et al., 2018) stated that the high frequency of Facebook use without meaningful interaction was positively associated with the level of loneliness. However, Lemineux (in the same article) found that the large number of friends on Facebook, especially those that include online and offline friends, is negatively associated with loneliness. In conclusion, the impact of social media on loneliness depends largely on how it is used: meaningful interactions can reduce loneliness, while passive use tends to increase it. A study from the University of Michigan (Abdullah et al., 2021) also found that the more lonely a person feels, the higher the intensity with which they access social media. Although social media is not the main cause of loneliness, the consumption of content that showcases other people's ideal lives can increase feelings of unhappiness.

In addition to how it is used, age also affects the relationship between social media and loneliness. According to Nowland et al., (2018) social media users in early adolescence have a low correlation with loneliness levels. In contrast, in late adolescence to young adulthood, this correlation tends to be stronger. The main factor is social comparison, especially in the context of the

transition period to adult life, such as the end of college or the beginning of a career, which triggers alienation.

*Existentialism as a tool to understand the challenges of adolescents in building the meaning of life in the virtual world.*

Digitalization has presented convenience as well as new challenges for adolescents in building the meaning of life. If in the previous era character formation and morality took place in a limited physical space, such as family, school, and community, technological developments have expanded the scope of interaction infinitely. Digital content is now influencing individual self-concept and value through a variety of lifestyles and interaction patterns. In this context, existentialism offers a relevant perspective to understand these dynamics.

According to Heidegger, human beings as *dasein* ontological live in the context of being-with others, that is, existence that is connected to others. When these relationships are disrupted, such as in dominant communication through digital media, loneliness arises as a manifestation of the absence of deep connections. Heidegger emphasizes that loneliness is not just a subjective emotion, but a reflection of a rift in social relationships (Spiegel, 2023). This phenomenon is relevant in the digital world, where mechanized communication often replaces face-to-face interaction, reducing the intimacy of interpersonal relationships.

Meanwhile, Kierkegaard, (1946) underlined the importance of subjective reflection and authenticity in building the meaning of life. In the digital world, individuals are often trapped in cultural homogeneity driven by social media trends, which obscure authentic identities. Kierkegaard encourages individuals to commit to noble values as the foundation of authenticity, not just following the flow of digital norms. This is important for teenagers who are often exposed to online cultural pressure. Deep reflection on self-worth is an essential step to avoid alienation in the midst of digital homogeneity (Putri and Jamhari, 2024).

Jean-Paul Sartre added a perspective on radical freedom as the core of existence, including in the digital world. This freedom includes access to information, global connectivity, and self-expression. However, Sartre emphasized the importance of responsibility for individual choices and actions. In the digital world, freedom must be used wisely to create a unique meaning, without losing authenticity. Sartre invites individuals to embrace the absurdity of the digital world while maintaining integrity and authentic contribution to culture (Hameed, 2018).

Existentialism proposes that the digital world, despite its potential to be an arena of alienation, also offers opportunities for reflection and the formation of the meaning of life. For teenagers, cyberspace can be a space to build a healthy community, strengthen their identity, and find authentic meaning. Thus, existentialism is not only relevant as a philosophical framework, but also as a practical tool for dealing with moral and social challenges in the digital age.

## ***How Technology Is Creating "Artificial Togetherness" That Fails to Replace Authentic Connections***

Digital technology has created a form of artificial togetherness that often fails to replace authentic connections between individuals. Various literatures show that the existence of adolescents in digital media is often characterized by the following behavior patterns:

### *Braggadocian Behaviour*

The term is derived from the word braggart, which means bragging or bragging, and describes the behavior of individuals who flaunt personal activities, status, or achievements on social media to attract attention or be perceived as "cool." This pattern includes narcissism, self-image, and a desire to exist in the eyes of others. This behavior is often accompanied by fear of missing out (FOMO) as motivation to share personal information, location, activities, and how to get work done (Nurudin, 2018; Andary and Khairullah, 2023).

### *External Validation*

Teens seek self-recognition through digital responses such as likes, comments, number of followers, or direct messages on social media, specifically Instagram. Social media is not only a tool to obtain information or establish relationships, but also as the main means to obtain social rewards, create a sense of attention, and build digital identity (Montag, Yang and Elhai, 2021; Cheong, 2023)

### *Popularity and Social Networks*

Features like For You Page (FYP) on TikTok facilitate the virality of user content, providing access to popularity and a wider social network. This virality creates social opportunities in the real and virtual world, but often instills a competitive mindset based on external validation (Montag, Yang and Elhai, 2021).

### *Personal Branding*

In addition to pursuing popularity, social media users are leveraging the platform to create a specific and distinctive self-image. This personal branding makes it easier for followers to identify themselves and is often used as capital to become an influencer or online businessman (Mettasatya Afrilia, 2018).

### *The Courage of Anonymity*

The flexibility of digital identity allows users to express themselves freely according to trends without facing immediate consequences. However, this anonymity often leads to patterns of behavior that eliminate individual responsibility, such as in the cancel culture phenomenon (Cheong, 2023).

According to Kierkegaard, crowds are a symbol of "unrighteousness" because they reduce individual responsibility. Social media, with its ability to shape the crowd mentality, often facilitates excessive anonymity and creates patterns of sensationalism. This phenomenon shows how social media is

designed for commercial purposes, attracting attention through sensational content to support ad-based algorithms (Cheong, 2023).

Digital sensationalism also creates a blurred line between fact and entertainment, creating a distortion of truth. Without critical reflection, individuals are easily trapped in braggadocian behaviors that are often false. This behavior is dominated by pretense and commodification, such as showing off assets, utilizing filters, lip-syncing videos, or participating in challenges to obtain validation in the form of likes or comments. This proves that technology, instead of building authentic connections, often results in a society that lives behind a digital mask (Nurudin, 2018; Cheong, 2023).

### *The role of individual responsibility in dealing with existential alienation in the digital world*

The high distortion of reality in the digital world makes individual existentialism an ideal wall of defense. The existence of the individual requires an awareness of responsibility as well as a readiness to accept the risks of every choice and action. The choice to be part of a digital society (netizens) includes various risks that must be faced. For adolescents, the task of developing and forming an identity requires strong internal values and a supportive environment. Without this, excessive involvement in the digital world has the potential to lead to a loss of identity, an inability to love oneself, and a desire to imitate others who are considered superior (Nurudin, 2018).

Alienation is often felt by teenagers when they appear different from the crowd trends. From an existential point of view, this is a logical risk that must be faced. Focusing on personal values and meaningful contributions, such as sharing authentic experiences or disseminating useful information, can be the first step to addressing alienation. Self-authenticity is not the ultimate goal that must be exhibited, but rather an ongoing process of development. The existence of adolescents can be formed both in the real world and virtually, provided that the two contexts are constructive and interconnected. On the other hand, if the identity displayed in the virtual world is very different from the real world, the teenager will experience alienation, first towards himself, and then towards his social environment.

Media literacy is the main capital for teenagers as digital natives. Sari & Prasetya, (2022) emphasized the importance of adolescents' analytical skills in using social media, such as verifying news accuracy, identifying reliable sources, and sorting out information that is worthy of being disseminated. Furthermore, Nurudin, (2018) emphasized that adolescents must understand that the digital world is not a true reality, but a world of illusions and imaginations full of fabrication and pretense.

Self-regulation and emotional skills are also key in limiting adolescents' dependence on social media, both in terms of seeking pseudo-self validation and excessive duration of use. Research shows that this dependence often triggers loneliness, loss of identity, and various other negative impacts on adolescents (Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo, 2018; Nurudin, 2018; Mutiarrama et al., 2024).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The digital world, which is currently the main space for youth interaction, often creates distortions of the true existence of individuals. With the increasingly dominant search for external validation and identity engineering through social media, adolescents are trapped in the illusion of "artificial togetherness" that leads to self-alienation. In the existentialist view, this alienation occurs when an individual feels alienated from himself or herself and loses authenticity in their actions and life choices. Social media, with all its features and challenges, has led teenagers to build a self-image that does not fully reflect who they really are, but rather an image that is accepted or adored by others.

However, existentialism also offers a way out through an awareness of individual responsibility. Adolescents who are aware of and accept the choices they make, as well as aware of the risks of every action they take, can rediscover meaning in their existence, both in the digital and real world. With a more conscious approach, they can use social media not just to seek recognition, but to share authentic experiences and build meaningful relationships. Therefore, existentialism teaches that while the digital world can exacerbate alienation, deeper self-awareness, responsibility, and the search for meaning can help adolescents overcome their dependence on social media, while maintaining an authentic existence in this increasingly connected world.

## **FURTHER STUDY**

The study is conceptual and literary exploration and prioritizes a philosophical framework in interpreting adolescents' experiences of digital loneliness. As a result, these findings are not directly supported by empirical data and limited generalizations in diverse populations. In addition, the study focuses primarily on existentialist principles, which may ignore other psychological, sociological, or cultural factors in influencing digital loneliness. The rapid evolution of digital technology also presents challenges, as the findings can quickly become outdated or fail to cover emerging digital trends and platforms.

Future studies can build on this conceptual foundation by using empirical research methodologies both quantitatively and qualitatively, such as longitudinal surveys or in-depth interviews. This is to validate and expand the insights presented. Cross-cultural research can also shed light on how different social contexts shape adolescents' experiences of digital loneliness. Additionally, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives—such as neuroscience, digital anthropology, or cyberpsychology—can provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, exploring intervention strategies that combine technological design with existentialist principles can offer practical solutions to reduce digital loneliness and promote authentic connections in the digital age.

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