

Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)

Journal Homepage: <https://pjssel.jehanf.com/index.php/journal> **ISSN**

2521-8123 (Print)

2523-1227 (Online)

Liminal Identities in a Digital Age: Hyperreality, and Erosion of Interpersonal Relationships in Keren David's *The Disconnect*

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Original Article

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Keywords

Hyperreality;
Identity Distortion;
Simulation; Digital
Identities; Virtual
World

Abstract

Literature comes alive with digital technologies and social media and their effect on human relationships and changing dynamics of identity have become a primary focus in the times of today. The study here explores the impact of digital disconnection on interpersonal relationships and the interaction between authenticity and mediated relationships. The Disconnect (2019) by Keren David is a compelling story about the relationship between characters and how social media dependence of any kind can lead to a lack of understanding of social communication. The Disconnect is analysed in this research paper using a qualitative approach to study the interpersonal relationships between the characters in the text when they are not connected to social media, identifying the complex ways in which technology affects inter-personal relationships. This approach enables a close reading of the text and a discussion regarding digital identity, hyperreality and interpersonal relationships. The theoretical framework for the study is based on Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which he described in the book Simulacra and Simulation (1981), and based on the fact that social media have the ability to distort the perception of the characters in the study with regard to their self and relationship. The ongoing research study will be beneficial when it comes to the relationship between literature, hyperreality and digital identities, as it will be useful in grasping how literature adds to the current social issues by exploring the changing relationship between authenticity and hyperreality in the digital age. The results demonstrate that the digital dissociation opens up a liminal space in which characters face the fragility of technology dependent relationships, in which authentic human relationships can potentially be reconstructed.

Introduction

The online environment poses both challenges and opportunities for the self-presentation and formation of human communication in the contemporary world (Merchant, 2006). In the current technological age

there is an increasing blurring between reality and fantasy, the real and the virtual (Marsh 2010). Such change makes it difficult for people to create their liminal identities in digital environments, and feeds into significant issues around authenticity of self-expression and the loss of meaningful interpersonal relationships. This research is an attempt to explore these ideas and to study how the love/deaddiction of technology affects identity crises among young adults in today's digital world, as depicted in the film *The Disconnect* (2019), by Keren David. The study is an intensive study of the characters who are identified as having a problem with excessive technology use particularly mobile phone use and who are asked to disconnect from mobile phones and social media for six weeks, in exchange for a monetary prize.

For this purpose, a post-modernist theory has been used engaging with hyperreality, and simulation. In an increasingly mediated world, the concept of hyperreality was introduced by the French sociologist, cultural theorists, and philosopher whose works are deeply associated with post-structuralism and early postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard in his work *Simulacra and Simulation*, explains that hyperreality is the blur of reality. Without origin or reality, "a hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1994, pg.3). However, this phenomenon is particularly common in the field of digital media, given societies' growing entanglement with digital technologies, it becomes indispensable to grasp the implications of hyperreality to understand changes in identity, relationships and cultural values.

For John Tiffin and Nobuyoshi Terashima, hyperreality is the state of deliberately merging the real and the fictional to the extent that there is no longer a clear demarcation (p. 8, 2001). The boundaries between the beginning and finishing points of the words are impossible to distinguish in the postmodern era since the real and the fictional melt together so uniformly.

The concept of hyperreality, as proposed by Jean Baudrillard, provides a powerful framework for understanding the ways in which simulation impacts identity. The world in which we live is one in which pictures, signs and symbols have taken the place of the things they represent and people are increasingly faced with a mediated, constructed and simulated reality. The prefix hyper means "more real than real" where in the real is produced based upon a model. Specifically, according to Baudrillard the world we live in has been replaced by a world of copies where we are searching for simulated stimuli only (Santoso & Wedawati, 2019).

In the past few years, many studies have been conducted on how social media affects identity distortion. The field of hyperreality, where the authentic self is simulated in a mediated world that affects personal identity and interpersonal relations through the characters in the novel selected, is not well researched. Furthermore, the previous research has been restricted in that it only considers the effect of digital screens on adolescent identity development on a very broad level – for example, we are living in a time of great change and change in the world, where digital screens have become much more than a source of entertainment and distraction. The digital and 'real worlds' are intertwined in the lives of adolescents today (Granic et al., 2020).

However, previous research suggests that the consequences of digitalization on human behavior and identity and the risk of dehumanization in the strive to achieve technological progress; when our understanding of technology becomes part of our own moral frame, we may end up being misaligned from our true self, and losing sight of the necessary work to understand ourselves. It also examines the link between personal identity and the constantly changing technological environment with particular emphasis on the impact of new technologies on human behavior and the distortion of personal identity (Razec, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The advent of technology in particular, social media, has radically altered how people build, define and imagine themselves, and sometimes it has made the distinction between their real and online selves difficult to discern. Although significant literature and research have been devoted to this subject, critical discussions of the ways in which the identity crisis can be reflected in a hyperreal digital world have been limited in scope. The novel written by Keren David, *The Disconnect*, exemplifies the difficulties in forming digital identities and their impact on interactions with others, but the study of the influence of hyperreality on the formation of liminal identity is still little developed in literary studies. The main focus is on the impact that the use of digital devices and online validation has on the experience of

authenticity, resulting in a fragmented sense of self and increasing disconnection from real-life interactions.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine Esther's liminal identity that was formed without digital influence, exploring their inherent and artificial identity.
- To explore how characters' interpersonal relations are affected by their disconnect from social media in *The Disconnect*.

Research Questions

Based on this, the following research questions were formulated for this study:

- How does the lack of digital influence affect Esther's liminal identity? How is this manifested in her journey of authentic vs constructed identities?
- What effects does disconnection from social media have on characters' interpersonal relationships in *The Disconnect*?

Significance of the Study

This research doesn't only add to the existing body of research on digital identity, it also fills a gap in social media research by exploring *The Disconnect* by applying the concept of hyperreality, by Baudrillard, to a better understanding of how technology influences adolescent identity. Taking a case study approach, the study illustrates how social media disconnection influences self-perception and relationality, especially as the two spheres cross over in the space of the liminal.

Literature Review

Today in the postmodern age, people are searching for the ecstasy of hyperreality and hyperreality's experience technology and media to replace the "desert of the real" (11). In this context, identities are fractured and lost, and a new space of experience is created (Kellner, 2005).

Hyperreality and Simulation

In his 2022 article titled, *From Reality to Hyperreality of the simulation*, Paulo Barroso explores the close connection between hyperreality and simulation. He hypothesises that these ideas are interrelated, and they generate and represent re-creations, copies, symbols and images that are not directly 1-1 with real life. Hyperreality in this case is a mimicked reality that in some ways seems more real than the actual reality. So there's a paradox here, because of the fear of the influence of media and mass culture, particularly that of virtual reproduction of object events or routine experiences, replacing the authenticity of real life. This concept is in line with the classical one that some times the copy replaces and looks more real than the original (Barroso, 2022).

With the era of digital interfaces, the role of social media has changed from being a platform for interactions to being a powerful shaping force of individual identities. This change is analyzed closely in the postmodern term "hyperreality" coined by the French sociologist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard (1994) describes hyperreality as the state in which one lives where reality and simulation merge. He calls it "the condition of the society in the production of something artificial that it thinks is real" (58). On social media, hyperreal environments are not just a reflection of real life, but a creation that creates a space between the real and the constructed. It is a state where fact and fiction are similar and the reality principle is diminishing, this is referred to as a simulation of hyperreality.

Communication becomes a problem when, in *Requiem for the Media*, Baudrillard is able to conclude that the media's fundamental task is the production of meaning, messages, and signs" (Baudrillard 1972, 279). Our world, he claims, is saturated with more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard 1994, 55), which means that there are no longer any direct communications, only simulations of them. This loss of meaning is something that the mass media, as 'a place of disappearance' as Baudrillard calls it, is directly responsible for (Baudrillard 2003, 85). Moreover, Baudrillard reasons, the hyperreal; therefore, fills the gap created by the lack of the original. He states: So, let's get straight to the point: the Real is not going anywhere because it is not missing, it is just too much Real. The collapse of reality is due to too much reality, as is the impossibility of meaningful

communication when there is too much communication, or the worthlessness of information when there is too much information. (Baudrillard & Witwer, 2001, p. 75)

This "plus" erodes the distinction between 'real experience' and 'simulation', and continually makes reality redundant, as he argues.

As both humans and machines are now programmed in the same way, it is hard to tell them apart, Haraways (1985) argues. The same as androids get programmed by their creator, humans are programmed by society and the media (Dick, 1972, p. 68). So every day it gets more complicated between these two extremes, every day people live a life according to the mediated world and not the real world, their lives are lived in the mediated world, they feel that they are part of the mediated world. Wolny (2017) draws on the ideas of hyperreality and simulacrum that are a part of the postmodernism in Europe, as seen through the work of other post-structuralists such as Lyotard, to explain the predominance of image and simulation in today's consumer society. In hyperreality, says Baudrillard, "the image of a product becomes more important than the actual product itself; there is a blurring of the line between image and product." The article also explores the notion of simulacra – which are representations with no reference to an actual reality – and the critique by Baudrillard of the way that media contribute to the creation and maintenance of this hyperreality, especially in the spread of images. The overall message is that the theories of Baudrillard are relevant to the postmodern condition, in which images reign supreme and traditional concepts of reality are being undermined.

(Image of the product is more significant than the product itself. An effacement of reality.

What is important in hyperreality is the other, the "original", which has no real value. It explores the notions of hyperreality and simulacrum of Jean Baudrillard in the context of European postmodernism and consumer culture. It focuses on the significance of images and representations over the "original" product/reality and a situation in which the distinction between reality and simulation disappears. Jean-François Lyotard's notions of the postmodern and the convergence of high and popular cultures are also mentioned. The critique of Baudrillard is extended to the role of media in making war and controlling reality, and the implications of simulacra on religion and society. The document ends with a consideration of the post-modern condition in which there is scepticism towards metanarratives, and diversity and heterogeneity have become prominent concerns.

Original self vs Social media: Liminal identity

Liminality, according to Van Gennep (1909), is associated with rites of passage that are linked to change in place, age or state. This notion was subsequently expanded by Turner (1967) who highlighted the 'interstructural' stage that people experience when they are changing, what he termed "betwixt and between" (p.4). Social media's liminal space has a strong influence on people's identity constructions, which are determined by the relationship between the social media community and the relationship between the social media communities (O'Connor & Mackeogh, 2007; Dessart et al., 2015). Such communities and the discourses which they bring to the surface have a unique impact on identity construction. For example, Madge and O'Connor (2005) point out that liveness of online communities allows new mothers to try out different forms of motherhood. Likewise, LaPoe et al. (2017) show that social media can be used as liminal space that allows academics to develop distinct academic and personal identities, and decide whether to knit them together or not. Furthermore, Hogue and Forrest (2018) state that social media is a liminal space in which students feel valued and able to communicate and share across cultures, leading to cultural competence.

Sharma (2023) believes that the original intent of social media was to bring people together from around the world, making it possible to cross boundaries, overcome distance and lack of contact and make connections, and has gone from simple interaction to something very powerful impacting on individual identity in the digital age of the interface. Gradually, It has transformed itself into a platform where people are more concerned about developing their online persona suffering from delusions rather than erasing barriers. It's more of a location where they can conceal their selves and their fears with the mask of filtered photographs, and their stories bring up the world that is far away from reality. As Jean Baudrillard (1994) has said, "Melancholic and fascinated such is our general situation in an era of involuntary transparency." (105) Because we are so engrossed to fully recognize people mainly through their filtered profiles and in doing so we totally ignore the fact that our curated social media profiles and

filtered photographs are merely illusions of who we are and should not consider ourselves as an entire being.

In 2021 Sapino has discussed the importance of social networks in the construction of identity, the spatial perception and the relationship between the ephemeral and the permanent in 21st century French fiction in his article 'Ephemeral Identities, Blurred Geographies, and Social Media in Twenty-First-Century French Fiction'. With the aid of digital hypermnnesia and the delusion of a transient online persona, characters in two novels (*Un amour d'espion* and *Licorne*) dealing with identity crises in the context of social media suffer from disembodiment and ambiguity in their identity that ultimately hinders their psychological development (Sapino, 2021). The study, however, does not explore critically how technology is implicated in the production of liminal identities, in the production of fluid and unstable selves, in between the virtual and real. This confusion not only makes it hard to see how to perceive oneself in a digitally mediated world, but it also further fuels the loss of valuable interpersonal relations. The *Candy House* is a work that has been analysed by Hayyaw Abbar (2023) implementing Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality and simulation, by observing the perception of reality as being disjointed and influenced by the activities of society. The novel provides an example of how technology and social media can make people feel lonely, and that the virtual reality is more real than the actual reality, which creates an environment of hyperconnectivity and loneliness. The study notes that Egan's work is in the postmodern tradition of a society and culture that finds it difficult to distinguish between real and artificial experiences, with human identity being shaped by the abundance of simulacra. The *Candy House* is an image of a technologically driven society in which people are trying to preserve their freedom and authenticity amidst simulated environments, the paper argues. Using technology in modern society not only distorts the self but also weakens interpersonal relations, a point that is known as hyperreality.

Research Gap

Although a lot of debates have been held about hyperreality, there is still a lack of research on the particular effects of hyperreality on interpersonal relationships, liminality in a mediated world and identity crises. This research is mainly the study of the wider social consequences of hyperreality and largely ignores the individual and interpersonal aspects. In particular, the manifestations of hyperreality in the perception of self in close relationships, the degradation of transitional moments of identity and the distortion of identity are explored in limited ways. This study seeks to fill this void by examining the effects of hyperreality on the perception of reality and the subsequent relationship of young adults, which will help to provide a more complete picture of the social problems of today.

Research Methodology

Research Methodology has been defined by Kothari (2004) as "a way to systematically solve the research problem". It could be read as a science of the scientific study of research science (25). Devising Research Methodology is an attempt by the researcher to discover the answers to cover the gap in knowledge as the purpose of the research is basically to collect answers to the research questions. This research utilizes the theoretical framework given by Baudrillard mainly focusing on the broader perspective named as, hyperreality in the novel *The Disconnect* by Keren David. In this, qualitative Research Methodology is utilized:

The purpose of qualitative research is to uncover the reasons behind people's actions. Such research allows analysis of the diverse factors that influence people's actions, or that cause people to like or dislike a particular thing. (Kothari 20)

Research Paradigm

The data in this study was analyzed using the interpretation approach which is the post-positivist paradigm, and this approach is appropriate to analyze the subjective experiences and meanings in a literary work. It assumes that analysis should be performed within a context (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). It is a basic method used in humanities and social sciences, that is used to explain and understand human meaning, experiences and symbols, focusing on context and subjectivity of human behaviour and understanding. Moreover, qualitative research is interpretative and emphasizes the qualitative data, instead of approaches that are measurement and experimental. The interpretivist approach is congruous with the objective of exploring the liminal identities in a digital age, while relationships as

mediated through technology in *The Disconnect*, and the understanding of how hyperreality works in the novel are the topics aligned with the concept of postmodernism.

Research method

The method used in this research is qualitative in which the study will take the form of systematic study to describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate the messages that are concealed in the novels which are selected and taken for the study to represent hyperreal and distortion of identity through digital simulation. Close reading is an active process with both senses; sight and touch along with mind; it is an active process that requires conscious attention to the details of a text (Ane Ohrvik, 2024); textual analysis as a research method, is an encounter with the text by the researcher and a close examination of the text (Belsey, 2013). It is the most widely used kind of research method in qualitative research and predominantly on the underlying meanings and assumptions behind the text. Moreover, it is a process of uncovering meaning and has an interest in discoverable meanings not necessarily the right ones. Since the textual method is interpretative, it will be used as a guidance in the current research study. McKee (2003) describes textual analysis as: A means by which scientists can get to know other people's perspectives. It is a methodology- a process of gathering data- by researchers who would like to learn about how people in different cultures and subcultures make sense of themselves, and how they fit into the world they live in. (p. 1)

Based on the definition above, it can be inferred that textual analysis as a research method is a method that analyzes text information using words and symbols, then makes informed guesses about what might be the most probable interpretation of the text. The subjective method of close reading, coding of the text and referring to the hyperreality idea of Baudrillard produce patterns that can help to understand how the social media and digital interaction construct and deconstruct the characters' identity. The results will shed light on the issue of 'being together' in a hyperreal and digitalized world.

Selected Texts

Keren David's book, *The Disconnect*, is the main text used for this study. Analysing this novel, we learn how liminal identities are formed and managed in the digital world and how technology and hyperreality has affected personal authenticity and interpersonal relationships. The secondary text consists of critical essays, journal articles, digital identity, hyperreality and the representation of technology in modern texts. The following secondary materials serve as a theoretical base on which to place and enrich the interpretation of the novel.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Jean Baudrillard, especially his work *Simulacra* and simulation, is used as the theoretical backbone of the study. *The Disconnect* is very relevant to the concept of hyperreality, which Baudrillard developed, in which representations or simulations come to replace and become indistinguishable from reality, in this instance, the world of social media and digital spaces influencing and often altering characters' sense of themselves and their relationships. This will afford an opportunity to discuss how simulated identities on social media produce a liminal and fragmented self for Esther and others, highlighting the novel's exploration of the distinction between real and constructed identities in a hyper-connected world.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation is an essential part of postmodern theory, an analysis of the postmodern ties between reality and representation in the modern society. Baudrillard (1994) identified four types of simulacra as a description of this phenomenon; the third type is related to this research. The first phase Reflection (Antony and Trambo, 2020) is a faithful copy or image of reality. The second phase, Mask, is the distortion of reality; in the depiction here the reality is not authentic and may appear as an unfaithful imitation. The third phase, Illusion, means that absolute reality is absent; the sign seems to be the real sign and is not original. Lastly, Pure Simulacrum denotes something which is not even representative but is an independent object. As Baudrillard explains:

It's a deep truth.

It's camouflages and lies about a deep truth.

It hides the absence of a profound reality.

It isn't real in any way, it's just a copy. (p. 6) In the Third-stage, simulacra conceals the absence of substantial reality; these imply that there is only the abyss underneath the image. That is, the reality may no longer exist from its simulations in this stage (Durani & Eckhardt, 2024). In the third stage of simulation, reality is not a reality anymore, as Baudrillard (1994) puts it, but rather something that exists only in relation to its representation. Rather, reality is not created in the real, it's created in the simulacrum, without having any reference point. The production of hyperreality occurs at this stage of simulation, when the signs or symbols are produced via a process that is not anchored in the real world. Here too identity is up for simulation and is mediated by the hyperreal worlds in which people live. Thus, it takes the shape of a simulation which contains more truth than reality.

Discussion and Analysis

Disconnect (2009) is a thought-provoking young adult novel written by Keren David that addresses the issues of social media addictions, destruction of family bonds and self-discovery. Esther embarks on a huge challenge when a billionaire phone-tech entrepreneur offers £1000 to the pupils of her old school if they turn off their phones for six weeks. Esther's brother, her sister, and her baby nephew are all American and she's eager to make the journey to see them, and excited to break free from all the pressure to keep a clean online image. The quest is by no means a simple one, though. Esther's FOMO (fear of missing out) gets to "emergency levels" (35) when she has to deal with the uncertainty of what her friends are doing without her. Rather than this, Esther and some others who have joined the contest establish a support group at her mom's café to get by. As she goes through her non-digital life, Esther starts to experience the pleasures and difficulties of human interaction, reconnect with her family, and consider her reliance on the digital sphere.

The Disconnect instantly puts readers inside its main character's conflicted mind and his sense of self in a technologically mediated world. The photographer's discomfort with her image is indicative of the power of hyperreality in the formation of identity, even in the act of taking a self-portrait. As she snaps after herself, the lens of the camera isn't only a mirror of self, it's a lens of distortion, reflecting self in a fantasy reality, by means of digital image. Her true self has been replaced by the hyperreal, where beauty and self-value are defined by fabricated and idealized online images. Baudrillard (1994) is right, as the protagonist's efforts at capturing a more convincing version of herself are all a reflection of her deeper surrender to a real that is produced by simulation: "It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Chapter 1). This moment symbolizes the protagonist's transitional state, as she exists between her real physical self and the virtual self she imagines herself to be.

I take a selfie.

And another.

I look awful. I can't go out like this. (David, 2009, p. 1)

It's a simple act of taking a selfie, but it is an existential challenge, exposing the power of simulated ideals that have superseded true expression. The protagonist's reluctance to go out into the world stems from her inability to interact with others, for her digital personae, as seen in the camera, do not match the hyperreal expectations that she has internalized. The contrast between the real and the simulated is the heart of the novel's central theme: the prevalence of technology in the way people think of themselves and how they continue to relate in an increasingly virtualized world. These lines are at the beginning of the novel and therefore establish the tone for the work, which will examine the larger themes of hyperreality. They demonstrate the ways in which technology leads to self-surveillance and alienation, as the main character's obsession with her online appearance prevents her from connecting with the truth of real-life relationships. This is a universal need in the digital age, viewing oneself through a digital perspective, a struggle that is synonymous with the simple act of looking at oneself in a hyperreal lens of social media. The opening scene is an excellent set-up for the novel's attack on the use of technology to diminish the importance of interpersonal relationships, while placing a spotlight on the struggle to align one's self with the simulated ideals that digital culture projects on people.

Esther's digitally mediated world is so engrossing that she can't seem to get along with her father without communicating digitally through social media. She is ignoring her father's call for which he says "it takes too long," which is indicative of the evolving nature of her relationships. She decides not to talk to her father about her life, but rather to converse with her friends at a more superficial level.

I'm immediately notified on my phone that it has a message from my dad. Ignore it. I'm not in the mood for a lengthy conversation at this moment. Message from Natalie: Gorgeous as per, babe, but what is that top? I respond, "Just another one of Rosa's old ones. Not going to wear it ... Panic. What can I wear? From Shaquilla: So what do you think about that black one from H&M that you bought last week? She has my thoughts in her head. It's the one I had first of all. I message back: (2)

In this scene, the protagonist turns down advice from her father in favor of spending time with her friends, emphasizing the changing nature of interpersonal relationships: the importance of family relationships is secondary to instant validation and feedback from peers online. This change is a warning sign of the demise of deeper connections as the protagonist's attention narrows to maintaining digital image and reputation. Furthermore, Natalie's comment about her outfit leads to a series of doubts and anxiety as the protagonist starts questioning herself. Her fear of what she should wear reflects the hyperreal expectations of appearance, that are reinforced through digital interactions, which shape her sense of self, and cause her to live in a liminal space where her identity is constantly in flux, following the opinion of others. The protagonist is still not entirely on their own to make their decisions, since even Shaquilla's suggestion of a previous outfit is presented as mind-reading, with a call to her friends for reassurance and direction.

"My challenge is this," says Dame Irene. "You have to give up your mobile phone." Each one of us gasps in fear. Well, everybody that I can see, at least. For six weeks the challenge will be in effect, Dame, Until half term, Irene goes on to say." Anyone who manages to go 6 weeks without their phone will win £1,000 and become a member of my task force.(11)

The radical challenge is by Dame Irene: Mobile phone fast for 6 weeks! When students gather in groups, the collective gasp at the sight of the students' devices is proof of their need and reliance on mobile technology for their daily lives and identity. Dame Irene's idea isn't just about avoiding smartphones, it represents a challenge to the dominant influence of digital presence in their lives, relationships and identities.

The money and the symbolism of the challenge set the stage for the story right away, as both the idea of a reward for disconnecting, and the fear of being separated from their device, were immediate to the story. Now, the students' visceral response shows their fear of losing the connectedness, validation and digital avatars they have cultivated online. Dame Irene's proposition invites the characters, as well as the readers, to think about the implications of a hyperconnected world, as it is surfaced by her framing the challenge as an opportunity to regain agency of their own lives and a chance to redefine their priorities. It feels like the challenge is almost impossible as Esther realizes how she relies on her phone to comfort herself with meditation apps, word games and kitten videos. It shows how technology has evolved into more than just a medium of entertainment and also a method of coping with stress and feelings.

Then there's everything on my mobile phone that I do to keep myself calm. Meditation apps. Mindfulness apps. Word games. Film and Netflix and magazines and...kitten videos. Sometimes a cute cat is just what you need, after a bad day. What would it be like if you couldn't get instant access to YouTube? (20)

Emotional regulation and coping mechanism is the deep reliance upon her phone, especially by Esther. Her incorporation of meditation apps, games, even the kittens video, is reflective of the role technology plays in her stability and comfort. Talking about TV shows such as Netflix and YouTube brings up the point that digital media offers instant gratification and distraction, allowing her to escape real-life situations that might involve her feeling or confronting uncomfortable emotions or challenges. Her concern over the loss of connection with the digital world has become part of her. She is torn between technology's ability to help her regulate her emotions and the fact that she is dependent on it. Jean Baudrillard's idea that signs no longer represent a system, but a system where signs simulate all things and mask the absence of reality (1994, Chapter 1). The idea of technology simultaneously as remedy and crutch serves as a reflection of the protagonist's feelings of self-reliance and estrangement from the world, making it challenging to determine where she is self-indulgent and where she is genuinely taking care of herself. This too is connected to the novel's examination of the way that technology affects interpersonal relationships, as the use of virtual comfort can sometimes supplant real-world

relationships. Rather than relying on family or friends to help and support them, the protagonist resorts to mediated interactions and curated content, which are shown to erode authentic human relationships. As with social media, digital world is making it difficult to distinguish the truth from the fiction. River's father, who has taken a new identity, is an extreme case of what can be done in a world in which personal data and identities are increasingly at risk.

"That there are those who steal other people's identities, River continues. "And we make it easy for them." He pauses. Oh, Esther, you don't know this, but my father, my true father, is not the father that I knew. He was impersonating another person. He assumed this pseudonym and he spied on my mum and her friends. (53)

Social media platforms promote the development of fake, curated identities. River's opinion on identity theft is not only theoretical, it's personal as he admits to having been victim of identity theft by his own father! It demonstrates the fragility of identities in today's society. His father has used deceiving people for his benefit, much like users of social media may deceive others for personal gain, or corporations for financial gain. This reflects Esther's experience of FOMO and the fear of missing out on having authentic connections, as social media may create skewed and superficial views of reality. This moment is an added layer for Esther to her understanding of identity. She is worried about FOMO and her image on the internet, but River's tale makes her consider the authenticity of her digital image. What parts of her identity are real, what parts are influenced by outside factors (algorithms, expectations, etc.) and what parts are outside of her control? The dynamic between self-representation and other regard is at the heart of the story, as Esther and her peers engage with technology and the identities it creates or undermines.

Social media can give people a habit of being divided in their focus between online and offline environments, with an emphasis sometimes on the latter. The mom's apology suggests that her smartphone addiction might be hurting her real job as a mom. The mum's apology implies that her attention to the tech world may be taking away from her "real" job, as a parent.

"Me, I'm happier hearing your side of things than if I was there and you were bottling it all up." Mum kisses me on my forehead. Sorry I'm on the phone so much, maybe I should take a dose of The Disconnect as well?" No, not necessarily all the time, I explain. "When the experiment is over, I think I might try to switch my phone off one day a week." "A day off for rest," Mum says. "That would be an excellent thing to do," I said." (100)

Social media is warping an individual's perception of himself through replacing his physical duties. The mother's apology for spending too much time on the phone indicates that her online activities have perhaps been in conflict with her role as a parent, pointing to the online/offline duality of social media in terms of attention and identity. Esther's joy in hearing her mother's feelings rather than hers own suggests a desire for emotional honesty and the opposite of that in our digital culture. A suggestion to let Esther do a "day of rest" from receiving messages on her phone each week is a possibility for a more balanced approach and a way to focus on in-person relationships. This conscious attempt to disconnect is due to an increasing awareness of the importance of boundaries in an electronic world. The mother's positive reaction reinforces the importance of physical proximity, indicating that intentional disconnection might be beneficial to re-establish intimacy and authenticity in interpersonal relationships. Overall, it is a microcosm for exploring the impact of social media on identity building and relationship development as well as solutions that can be put in place to reduce the impact of social media.

While Esther and her friends are grappling with what it means to be offline during their social media detox, they are also facing the challenge of coping with the implications of their experiment. In this activity, they will have to consider how digital tools can affect their relationships, particularly when there is suspicion or misunderstanding. Technology can help reveal the truth, as one character says: and it has the ability to invade other people's lives: *From that I thought you'd learn how difficult it is to provide proof of cheating, unless you have your camera phone in hand. But also, how much easier it's to spy on others when you have a phone. Privacy is becoming a thing of the past!" (112)*

Technology can be used to expose and invade privacy. It presents the irony of our times, with technology such as mobile phones, that can hold us accountable yet can also be means of surveillance. The lack of a camera phone to provide "proof of cheating" points to the transformation of interpersonal

trust and evidence, and how technology has changed it. This dependence on digital records to prove the truth raises an element of doubt in interactions that are now digital.

But anything that can be used to give people transparency can also be used to invade their privacy. It reflects a larger social issue, the breakdown of distinctions in a world in which there are no longer any clear separations between public and private life. This disquieting sense of tension poses certain ethical concerns and questions about the nature of personal ties with respect to surveillance, and about the definition of trust, autonomy and respect for boundaries in a world where smartphones are everywhere. The experiment gives Esther the opportunity to discover a new version of herself that isn't linked to the way she looks online, and as she thinks twice about herself, she changes her perspective. In the absence of social media, Esther is a borderless figure, not fully integrating into her past, her online existence, or her emerging, more authentic, self. The liminality speaks to her internal struggle with balancing the two identities, embodying a space of self-discovery and growth. Without the influence of digital, she can question the validity of her online self and get closer to understanding her true wants and values, beyond the pressures of social media validation.

Not one bit concerned when someone takes a picture and doesn't post it on social media. If I don't look good, what does it matter? I'm ignoring all of the snarky comments. I'm never going to value myself as a like again. (118)

The initial disconnection is loneliness, Esther has FOMO (fear of missing out) and anxiety about what she might be missing. But as time goes on, the lack of distractions in the digital world creates more genuine relationships. In the absence of online selves and digital performances, she starts to connect to deeper and more authentic relations. Instead of going through an online platform, the relationships are being tried out in their original, unmediated form.

Living in mediated world it is impossible to stay away from technology and social media. Finally, the fact that Esther's first response to her happiness is to take a selfie on her phone demonstrates the link between emotions and social media validation. The act of taking a selfie is more than just about capturing a moment of a picture, it is about sharing it with other people, getting approval from the outside, strengthening a sense of identity through digital space.

I'm so happy, I feel like I'm going to burst. I grab my phone. Dad, Rosa, let me hold-Zack... it's time to take a selfie.. (120)

Esther is so joyful that she has to share her joy. This is a logical reaction to this emotional rush, but it also shows how digital tools have become a part of people's ways to celebrate - and share - their happiness. In this moment Esther shows the value of outside validation and feeling connected, even in intimate moments, with those others who are special to her, such as her father, Rosa, and Zack. It reflects the difference between real joy, while it's happening, and the fabricated kind of joy that occurs in public spaces. While the selfie may help to document the memory, it also turns the moment from an individual feeling into a public show. Her wish to "hold" the moment on the phone implies that the distinction between real-life experience and a representation of it in a virtual domain has grown fuzzier. This is a crucial detail in the larger context as it opens up how social media is influencing the way emotions are expressed and experienced, encouraging people to externalise and share every feeling they have – including in times of personal joy.

Conclusion

To conclude this research, the complex relationship between hyperreality, identity distortion and the impact of the digital age has been extensively analyzed in the context of *The Disconnect*. The study has shown, through the use of hyperreality and the insights into digital identities given by Baudrillard, how social media has brought into question the boundaries between reality and the virtual world, resulting in the liminality of their identities, which are unable to bridge their authentic and online identities. The analysis of the text has made it clear that the fictional stories are significant in interpreting how digital device interfaces affect one's self-concept and aspects of the destruction of personal and family relationships. This work continues the discussion of the depiction of identity crisis in literature, with a particular emphasis on the influence of social media on identity of both individuals and groups. In conclusion, it highlights the importance of literature in providing more in-depth understanding of the complexities of identity in the era of digital transformation.

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