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Research Paper

Digital Empathy and the Decline of Human Connection

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ABSTRACT

The rapid shift to digital communication has reshaped how people express care, read emotions, and maintain their relationships. While online interactions offer convenience, they may also reduce emotional depth and weaken genuine human connections. The paper discusses the emerging issues about the effects of digital communication on emotional responsiveness and relationship quality in modern society. The literature review examines how digital empathy and emotional understanding expressed through technology relate to social cognition and interpersonal closeness. The methodology and findings use a quantitative survey-based design. The study is based on a quantitative survey of more than 152-154 young adults in which the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and Relationship Closeness Inventory are used, and the correlation and regression analysis are conducted to evaluate the patterns of digital communication, perception of emotional connection, and satisfaction in relations. The results reveal that digital empathy does not exhibit a significant relationship with relationship closeness, weak correlations are found across all dimensions of relationships, and the regression model is not significant. That implies that digital empathy, as it is, might be ineffective to translate into significant relational interdependence in digitally mediated interactions. In results and findings, the study also measures levels of digital empathy, social responsiveness, and emotional fatigue to understand how these factors influence the experience of connection or disconnection. The findings aim to clarify whether digital communication supports emotional sensitivity or contributes to a gradual decline in meaningful human relationships. These results suggest the importance of interventions that would increase the emotional richness of digital communication, and mental health practice and digital well-being strategies should be informed by them to achieve a better quality of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: *Technology, Empathy, Digital, Communication*

Background of Digital Communication

Electronic communication has become a main point of social interaction. Online space, instant messaging, and social media have transformed the way people share feelings and maintain relationships. Although these technologies have enabled people to be connected at all times, scholars have expressed some issues concerning their capacity to affect emotional richness and the quality of relationships. According to Venter (2019), in digital communication, nonverbal communication, including tone, facial expression, and body language are usually not available to facilitate meaningful understanding between two

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people. In the absence of such cues, the interpretation of emotions can be restricted or can be misunderstood.

Empathy in digital space has also been investigated recently. According to Čekić (2025), virtual communication can bring changes to the experience of empathy and its manifestation in people. Online spaces can be used to interact across a distance, but it is possible that these societal spaces make interactions less rich in emotion and superficial. Hidayat (2024) continues by stating that digital disinhibition and overuse of phones can result in the loss of emotional responsiveness and emotional erosion. These trends indicate the need to explore the relevance of studying the role of empathy in digital communication and whether empathy remains a means of real human interaction.

Problem Statement

In spite of the unceasing online communication, numerous people have been complaining that their relationships have become emotionally detached and less close. Online communication can cause people to be in more contact, but it does not necessarily mean the depth of emotions. Venter (2019) stresses that computer-mediated communication may undermine the process of meaningful exchanges between people because of the lack of non-verbal characteristics, including physical or emotional cues.

Simultaneously, empathy is identified as one of the elements of maintaining healthy relationships. Nonetheless, it is not yet quite clear that empathy still fosters interpersonal proximity in the online setting. Although there is some research that empathy can adjust to technology-mediated communication, there are still some doubts regarding emotional burnout and superficial interaction (Čekić, 2025). Thus, it should be analysed whether empathy is correlated with relationship proximity in the context of the modern digital environment.

Research Aim and Objectives

This research is intended to analyse the connection between empathy and interpersonal proximity in the situation of online communication. The study aims to evaluate empathy as a multidimensional construct and determine the connection between the various components of empathy and relational interdependence.

The specific objectives are:

- To quantify empathy on a multidimensional scale.
- To quantify the interpersonal closeness through ordered indications of relation interdependence.
- The purpose of the analysis is to determine the relationship between empathy dimensions and relationship closeness.
- To assess the positive or negative relationship between some features of empathy and closeness.

Through these goals, the research seeks to explain whether empathy helps maintain meaningful contact in digitally mediated relationships.

Research Questions

The research questions that would be covered in this study include:

- Does cognitive empathy have a positive relationship with relationship closeness?

- Does empathic concern have a positive relationship with the closeness of the relationship?
- Does relationship closeness show a negative relationship with personal distress?
- Is there an overall empathy prediction of relational interdependence?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Empathy

Empathy is generally interpreted as having the capacity to put yourself in the position of other people and empathise with their emotional feelings. It is regarded as a multidimensional construct, and it entails both cognitive and affective dimensions. According to the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, empathy refers to responses of a person to what is shown to a different person (Self Report Measures for Love and Compassion Research: Empathy, 2022).

Cognitive empathy is the ability to place yourself into the position of another person, whereas affective empathy is the emotional interest and common emotional reactions. This multidimensional theory, suggested by Davis, subdivides empathy into four areas: perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress (Interpersonal Reactivity Index - Psychology | Eckerd College, 2015).

The multidimensional structure of empathy is advocated by recent psychometric studies. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index has its theoretical basis, as reported by Gaggero et al. (2025), as the index is shown to have different but closely connected dimensions. This strategy acknowledges that empathy is not a unitary emotional response, but is a multifaceted psychological process of meaning, emotional reaction and control.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index measures the degree of reactivity in interpersonal relationships (Carter, 2009).

Interpersonal Reactivity Index

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index is a 28-item self-report scale that is used to measure empathy in four subscales. There are seven items, and responses are noted in a Likert scale in each subscale (Self Report Measures for Love and Compassion Research: Empathy, 2022). The subscales have four items, namely perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress.

The perspective taking of other individuals assesses how willing one is to have the psychological point of view of another person. Fantasy evaluates the mental activity of interaction with imaginary characters. Empathic concern appraises empathy and a feeling of concern towards others. Personal distress gauges the anxiety and unease in interpersonal stressful circumstances (Interpersonal Reactivity Index - Psychology | Eckerd College, 2015).

The scale has psychometric properties that have been found to be acceptable. Gaggero et al. (2025) have indicated that the French versions of the IRI had consistent factor structures in samples. Melekhov et al. (2025) also define the IRI as a multidimensional empathy measure that is quite common and valid. This provides it with a structured format that is appropriate in quantitative research studies of interpersonal processes.

Relationship Closeness Theory

The Relationship Closeness Theory is a theory that describes the relationship between friends as well as the relationships among friends (Larson, 1986).

The interdependence theory forms the basis of relationship closeness in that close relationships entail mutual influence, activities and emotional integration. Intimacy will be achieved through patterned interactions and the interconnection of behaviour. The Relationship Closeness Inventory conceptualises the notion of closeness in terms of time spent together, activities that are performed together, and the impact of one another on the other (Self Report Measures for Love and Compassion Research: Empathy, 2022). This model focuses on the integration of behaviour as a sign of depth in relationships.

Emotional persuasion is also at the centre stage. Relational interdependence is enhanced when the partners have a strong impact on one another in terms of their thoughts, plans, and feelings. This view is parallel to the fact that proximity does not solely mean emotional love but also structural assimilation in the routine existence. Online communication can have an effect on these dimensions. Quality of behavioural and emotional integration may vary, though the frequency of interaction can also rise online. This leads to the necessity to consider the question of whether empathy still helps to maintain relational interdependence in digital forms.

Relationship Closeness Inventory

The Relationship Closeness Inventory is an inventory that determines the closeness in three major areas. The first is the time dimension, which captures the average time being spent alone with a partner in the morning, afternoon, and evening. This is an expression of frequency of behavioural interaction (Self Report Measures Love and Compassion Research: Empathy, 2022). The second element is the activity dimension. According to the participants, the collective activity performed together includes spending time together during meals, outings, or discussions. Relational engagement and integration are manifested in the number and nature of activities.

The influence dimension is the third one. The respondents are asked to evaluate the degree to which their partner affects their daily choices, financial strategies, social life, and aspirations. This dimension is an emotional and structural interdependence. The RCI measurement logic presupposes that the closer the time, activities, and influence are, the more significant their overlap. On integrating the behavioural and psychological measures, the RCI offers an overall measure of relational integration that can be quantified.

Empathy and Relationship Outcomes

Empathy has already been associated with good relationship outcomes. Perspective taking fosters understanding and conflict reduction, whereas empathic concern helps in emotional bonding. Individual distress, in turn, can disrupt good emotional management. According to the research on digital empathy, emotional responsiveness can decrease in the context of an online environment when the interactions become superficial (Čekić, 2025). Thus, the analysis of the relationship between various dimensions of empathy and closeness will give an idea about the role empathy plays in sustaining relational satisfaction in the digital era.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research paper is based on a quantitative and cross-sectional survey research design. Quantitative research pays attention to numerical data and statistical manipulation that is aimed at studying the dependence between variables (Ghanad, 2023). A cross-sectional design is a type of data collection that gathers data at any given time to examine relationships between measured constructs. Survey-based techniques are suitable where psychological constructs are measured by using structured tools. Limone et al. (2022) state that online quantitative surveys ensure standardisation of responses and systematic data collection at the same time. The design enables the study to investigate statistical relationships between empathy and interpersonal closeness.

Participants

The target of this study is young adults who are in a romantic relationship. The inclusion criteria involved the participants affirming their relationship status and ensuring that they made informed consent prior to filling out the survey. The demographic data gathered were gender, level of education, occupation and location. The subject participants were mostly urban residents. Male and female subjects were represented. The education was in the form of either undergraduate or postgraduate. Structured sampling of accessible populations is also typical in quantitative research when it is required to test associations and not to make a generalisation about whole populations (Saharan et al., 2024). The sample size is identified using survey answers that went through the inclusion criteria.

Instruments

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index is an evaluation of interpersonal attachment involving multiple items and a Likert scale.

- **Interpersonal Reactivity Index:** The Interpersonal Reactivity Index was used to measure empathy. The IRI is divided into 28 items that are represented in four subscales. The subscales consist of seven items (Self-report measures of love and compassion research: Empathy, 2022). The answers are put in a five-point Likert scale between does not describe me well and describes me very well. There is a reverse scoring of some items prior to the subscale total calculation. The four subscales include perspective taking, fantasy, empathic concern and personal distress. The psychometric validation has been applied to support the multidimensional structure (Gaggero et al., 2025).
- **Relationship Closeness Inventory:** The Relationship Closeness Inventory was used to measure interpersonal closeness. The RCI incorporates time with partner, activities together and perceived influence. The respondents were asked about the average amount of time that they spend time together with their partner daily, which was broken down into three intervals. The other ones they chose were common activities accomplished in the last week. The influence scale asked the participants to score the extent to which their partner impacted different spheres of life on a seven-point scale (Self Report Measures for Love and Compassion Research: Empathy, 2022). All these elements constitute the behavioural and psychological interdependence.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis includes the calculation of subscale scores on each of the empathy dimensions and composite scores on the elements of relationship closeness. Reverse-scored is coded back, and then totals are calculated. Means and standard deviations are summarised

by descriptive statistics. Correlation analysis is used to analyse the relationships between empathy subscales and the closeness indicators. Predictive relationships are evaluated through regression analysis, if appropriate. With the help of quantitative analysis, statistically significant associations between variables could be identified (Ghanad, 2023).

RESULTS

The statistical analyses show the connection between digital empathy and relationship interdependence dimensions in this section. The research team analyzed the survey data which contained between 152 and 154 complete responses through descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis.

Correlation Analysis

Through the quantitative survey data that was collected, a correlation analysis was conducted. This Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to study how Digital Empathy and Emotional Sensitivity related to different relational impact metrics which measured their impact on personal life and social life and relationships and career and happiness and home and future plans interdependence.

Digital empathy did not show any significant relationship with relational closeness variables according to the study results. Digital empathy demonstrated weak correlations with personal life influence ($r = .095$, $p = .241$) and social life and relationship influence ($r = -.041$, $p = .617$) and career influence ($r = .024$, $p = .768$) and happiness influence ($r = -.007$, $p = .934$) and home influence ($r = .098$, $p = .226$) and future plans interdependence ($r = -.102$, $p = .211$). The study found that all p-values exceeded the .05 significance threshold which demonstrated that there were no linear relationships between digital empathy and any closeness dimension.

Digital empathy demonstrated no significant relationship with relational interdependence variables. However, the analysis revealed multiple significant interrelationships between the various closeness indicators. The study found that personal life influence had a positive correlation with social life and relationship influence ($r = .288$, $p < .01$) and career influence ($r = .315$, $p < .01$) and happiness influence ($r = .263$, $p < .01$). The study discovered that social life and relationship influence positively affected career influence ($r = .374$, $p < .01$) and happiness influence ($r = .259$, $p < .01$) and home influence ($r = .307$, $p < .01$). The study revealed that career influence had a positive relationship with happiness influence ($r = .358$, $p < .01$).

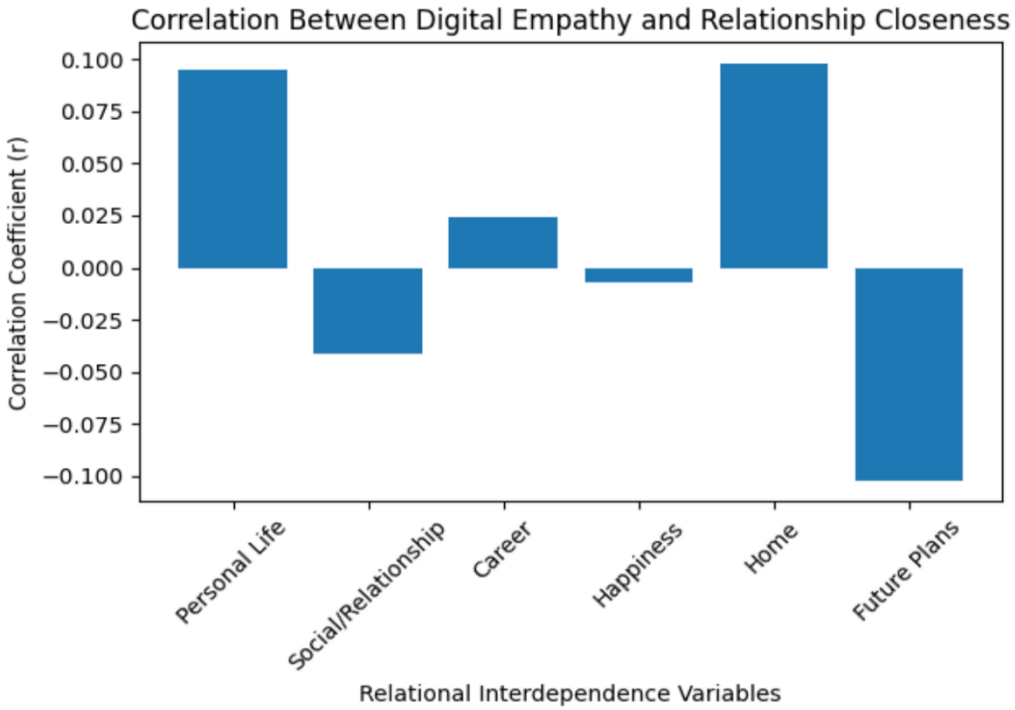

Figure 1: Correlation between Digital Empathy and Relationship Closeness

The study found that career influence showed a weak yet statistically meaningful connection with home influence ($r = .180$, $p < .05$) and happiness influence demonstrated the same connection with home influence ($r = .164$, $p < .05$). The results demonstrate that relationship closeness dimensions establish moderate interconnections which cause behavioral and emotional interdependence elements to form clusters. The study found that future plans interdependence exhibited no significant relationships with any other variables.

Correlations

		Digital Empathy & Emotional Sensitivity	Influence on Personal Life	Influence on Social Life & Relationships	Influence on Career	Influence on Happiness	Influence on Home	Future Plans Interdependence
Digital Empathy & Emotional Sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	1	.095	-.041	.024	-.007	.098	-.102
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.241	.617	.768	.934	.226	.211
	N	153	153	153	153	152	153	153
Influence on Personal Life	Pearson Correlation	.095	1	.288**	.315**	.263**	.063	.101
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.241		<.001	<.001	.001	.436	.214
	N	153	154	154	154	153	154	153
Influence on Social Life & Relationships	Pearson Correlation	-.041	.288**	1	.374**	.259**	.307**	.115
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.617	<.001		<.001	.001	<.001	.157
	N	153	154	154	154	153	154	153
Influence on Career	Pearson Correlation	.024	.315**	.374**	1	.358**	.180*	.062
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.768	<.001	<.001		<.001	.026	.448
	N	153	154	154	154	153	154	153
Influence on Happiness	Pearson Correlation	-.007	.263**	.259**	.358**	1	.164*	.084
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.934	.001	.001	<.001		.043	.304
	N	152	153	153	153	153	153	152
Influence on Home	Pearson Correlation	.098	.063	.307**	.180*	.164*	1	.006
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.226	.436	<.001	.026	.043		.938
	N	153	154	154	154	153	154	153
Future Plans Interdependence	Pearson Correlation	-.102	.101	.115	.062	.084	.006	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.211	.214	.157	.448	.304	.938	
	N	153	153	153	153	152	153	153

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2: Correlation Results

Multiple Regression Analysis

The research team carried out multiple linear regression analysis to study the predictive links between six relational interdependence variables and emotional sensitivity. The study included six predictors which measured personal life impact and social life and relationship impact and career impact and happiness impact and home impact and future plans interdependence.

The overall regression model did not achieve statistical significance with its results F(6, 145) = 0.921 and p = .482. The model produced an R value of .192 and an R^2 value of .037 which showed that the predictors only account for 3.7% of the digital empathy variance. The adjusted R^2 value of −.003 indicated that the model failed to explain any additional information beyond random chance occurrences in relation to the number of predictors.

The evaluation revealed that none of the relational influence variables managed to predict digital empathy according to the individual regression coefficients. Six variables failed to achieve statistical significance (p > .05) according to their personal life influence (β = .119, p = .180) and social life and relationship influence (β = −.104, p = .265) and career influence (β = .026, p = .785) and happiness influence (β = −.032, p = .720) and home influence (β = .125, p = .148) and future plans interdependence (β = −.092, p = .267).

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.192[a]	.037	-.003	1.06980

a. Predictors: (Constant), Future Plans Interdependence, Influence on Home, Influence on Personal Life, Influence on Happiness, Influence on Social Life & Relationships, Influence on Career

Figure 3: Model Summary of Regression Analysis

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	6.327	6	1.054	.921	.482[b]
	Residual	165.948	145	1.144		
	Total	172.275	151			

a. Dependent Variable: Digital Empathy & Emotional Sensitivity

b. Predictors: (Constant), Future Plans Interdependence, Influence on Home, Influence on Personal Life, Influence on Happiness, Influence on Social Life & Relationships, Influence on Career

Figure 4: ANOVA Table of Regression Analysis

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.456	.467		7.398	<.001
	Influence on Personal Life	.108	.080	.119	1.348	.180
	Influence on Social Life & Relationships	-.084	.075	-.104	-1.119	.265
	Influence on Career	.018	.066	.026	.273	.785
	Influence on Happiness	-.020	.055	-.032	-.359	.720
	Influence on Home	.081	.056	.125	1.455	.148
	Future Plans Interdependence	-.069	.062	-.092	-1.115	.267

a. Dependent Variable: Digital Empathy & Emotional Sensitivity

Figure 5: Coefficient Table of Regression Analysis

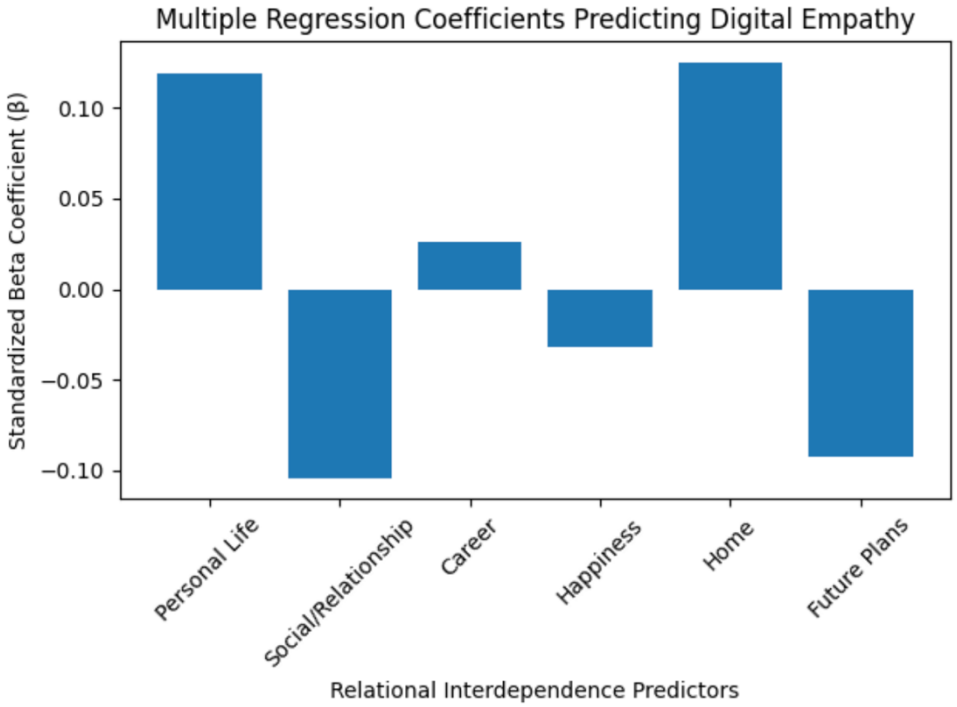

Figure 6: Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Digital Empathy

Summary of Findings

The study results showed that digital empathy and emotional sensitivity had no relationship with relationship closeness markers in this sample. The study found that the different relational influence dimensions showed moderate positive interrelationships. However, these dimensions could not predict digital empathy. The regression model demonstrated minimal explanatory power and was not statistically significant.

The study results show that digital empathy does not function as a significant relationship partner with relational interdependence variables in this dataset. The following section contains a detailed interpretation of the findings.

DISCUSSION

Digital Empathy and Relational Interdependence

The results showed that the digital empathy had no significant relationship with any of the dimensions of relationship proximity. In particular, personal life influence (r =.095, p =.241), social life and relationship influence (r = -.041, p =.617), career influence (r =.024, p =.768), happiness influence (r = -.007, p =.934), home influence (r =.098, p =.226), and plans interdependence (r = -.102, p =.211) demonstrated weak and non-significant correlations with digital empathy. Besides, the regression test was statistically insignificant, F(6,145) = 0.921, p =.482, R 2 =.037 and adjusted R 2 = -.003, which indicated that the relational variables only explained 3.7% of the variance in digital empathy. All the individual predictors were not statistically significant, and all the p values were larger than.05.

These findings imply that digital empathy (in the sense that it was assessed in this study) does not correspond to quantifiable behavioural or structural interdependence. This result is contrary to the classical empathy theory. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index theorises empathy as a multidimensional variable comprising perspective taking and empathic concern, both of which are generally associated with positive relational outcomes (Gaggero et al., 2025). But the lack of meaningful relationships is consistent with the work of Čekić (2025), who claims that digital communication can diminish the emotional richness and cause superficial interaction between parties. Equally, regarding the erosion of authentic responsiveness, Hidayat (2024) recommends that digital disinhibition and emotion erosion may undermine it. Thus, empathy, although theoretically linked to proximity, its digital manifestation might not be good enough to enhance behavioural integration.

Internal Structure of Relationship Closeness

Even though digital empathy was not predictive, some relational dimensions were found to relate to each other significantly. The influence of personal life was found to have a positive correlation with social life and relationship influence (r = .288, p <.01), career influence (r =.315, p <.01), and happiness influence (r =.263, p <.01). Career influence (r =.374, p <.01), happiness influence (r =.259, p <.01) and home influence (r =.307, p <.01) were greatly affected by social life and relationship influence. Influence of career was also associated with influence of happiness (r =.358, p<.01).

Such average positive relationships are evidence of Relationship Closeness Theory, which describes closeness as behavioural and psychological interdependence in the various spheres of life (Self Report Measures for Love and Compassion Research, 2022). These variables are clustered, suggesting that the variables are structurally integrated in line with the literature. Nevertheless, the interdependence of plans did not demonstrate any significant linkages, indicating that long-term commitment can be independent of daily influence in relations. Broadly, the results contribute to improving the current theory by suggesting that relational interdependence is consistent, and the strength of digital empathy in its own right does not determine its strength.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine the hypothesis of empathy predicting interpersonal closeness in the digital communication setting. The aims were achieved through the quantitative measurement of empathy, the measurement of relational interdependence, and testing the statistical relationship between them. The results showed no significant connections between digital empathy and any proximity dimension, and

regression analysis showed that very little is explained. Nevertheless, interrelationships among the variables of proximity were significant and thus the theoretical framework of relational interdependence.

The article is also constrained by its cross-sectional nature, self-report measures and narrow sample size. These make causal interpretation and generalisability restricted. Future studies ought to address single subdimensions of empathy and do a direct comparison of digital empathy and offline empathy. The inclusion of longitudinal designs and more diverse samples would contribute to clarity of the theory, as well as gain more insight into the functioning of empathy in digitally mediated relationships.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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