

# The Irony of Contemporary Loneliness: Confirmation, Disconfirmation, and Symbolic Solace within Ubiquitous Digital Connection

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***The Irony of Contemporary Loneliness: Confirmation, Disconfirmation, and Symbolic Solace within Ubiquitous Digital Connection***

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**Abstract:** This article explores the relationship between digital environments and adverse mental health effects. I begin by operationalizing key terms including *social media* and *loneliness*, before moving to relevant literature on social media use and mental health. Next, I unpack R.D. Laing's notion of confirmation and disconfirmation, which serves as a backdrop for thinking through online social interaction. Finally, putting Burke in conversation with Laing, I discuss the role that embodiment plays in social presence and argue that experiences of loneliness may be, contrary to claims by social media firms and techno-enthusiasts, heavily influenced by the inevitable disconfirmation that occurs in digitally mediated communication environments.

**Key Terms:** social media, loneliness, R.D. Laing, Kenneth Burke, confirmation

**"The Irony of Contemporary Loneliness: Confirmation, Disconfirmation, and Symbolic Solace within Ubiquitous Digital Connection"**

*"[I]t is the simplest and most difficult thing in the world for one person, genuinely being his or her self, to give, in fact and not just in appearance, another person, realized in his or her own being by the giver, a cup of tea, really, and not in appearance" (Laing, 89).*

*"The patient is saying that many cups of tea have passed from other hands to hers in the course of her life, but this notwithstanding, she has never in her life had a cup of tea really given her" (ibid).*

In *Literature as Equipment for Living* Burke (1941) argues that rather than being merely a genre of literature, proverbs serve as a symbolic form of "medicine" (p. 293). Toward these

ends, proverbs are a blueprint for *doing things* with language such as exhorting, consoling, admonishing, cautioning, etc. Proverbs are also strategies for naming situations that reoccur, which combined with their instructional elements, allow individuals and cultures to cope with common experiences within everyday life. That is, the “naming” of various social structures and situations has a material bearing on human wellbeing (for better and worse). Citing the multitude of names that Inuit have for ‘snow’, Burke highlights this material impact where he states, “A different name for snow implies a different kind of hunt. Some names for snow imply that one should not hunt at all. And similarly, the names for typical, recurrent social situations are not developed out of ‘disinterested curiosity,’ but because the names imply a command (what to expect, what to look out for)” (p. 294). Burke goes on to suggest that the symbolic-material purposes of proverbs can rightly be extended to literature writ large. Moreover, literature should not be thought of as separate from life itself but rather, as an environment within which people live (and as such when studied, capable of yielding insight into our sociological milieu). In response to his critics Burke states, “People have commented on the fact that there are contrary *proverbs*. But I believe that the above approach to proverbs suggests a necessary modification of that comment. The apparent contradictions depend upon differences in attitude, involving a correspondingly different choice of *strategy*” (p. 297).

At first glance his choice of the word *strategy* seems to imply more of an instrumental part played by literature, and a correspondingly functional (and agent-centered) view of those consciously *using* it toward some end. However, the relationship between agent and medium need not be conscious or unidirectional in nature. An example would be someone employing the colloquialism *YOLO* (You Only Live Once) as a dissonance reduction strategy to address irresponsible or otherwise self-destructive behavior. Note that the use of this proverb in such a context can be either intentional/conscious or, as is often the case, an unconscious impulse that bubbles up to the surface as we are moved to reduce the dissonance created by our problematic behaviors. Said otherwise, in the latter experience *I* am not consciously using it but rather, it exists within a shared proverbial environment ready-to-hand for just such predicaments.

Additionally, it would be inaccurate to assume that *strategy/attitude* are primarily cognitive in

nature. That is, the employment of various symbolic strategies via proverbs, or literature more broadly, is for Burke rooted more deeply in the body. As Hawhee (2009) deftly argues in *Moving Bodies*, Burke's connection to the writings of Sir Richard Paget firmly place him within a corporeal camp of language. Moreover, she contends that his most widely utilized concepts including dramatism, action and motion, identification, and attitude, were always already embedded within a somatic context. This is clear where Hawhee states, "Attention to Burke's Pagetian side will show instead that attitude both stems from and manifests in generative, connective, bodily movement...I consider this attitudinal revision...to show how Burke's addition of attitude brings with it the crucial mind-body correspondences that his theories honored all along." (p. 108). Crable (2006) outlines a similar approach to Burke where he situates dramatism as a symbolic-material process. He argues, "[A] vocabulary that separates bodily features and drives from the symbolic realm...is inadequate for the treatment of human life as a whole" (p. 5).

If strategies/attitude within the context of literature as equipment for living is firmly embodied, what other insights can we glean into the experience of everyday life regarding our digital environments? This article attempts to offer an answer. Thus, I have briefly worked my way from Burke's general concept of *literature as equipment for living* to its roots in somatic sensibilities regarding literature, to consider its possible implications for understanding social media (broadly conceived). More specifically, my goal is to explore the accompanying notion of symbolic solace (or, *easy consolation*) against the backdrop of contemporary research on depression and loneliness, and its potential relationship to social media use. Regarding symbolic solace Burke states:

The great allurements in our present popular "inspirational literature,"...is a strategy for easy consolation. It 'fills a need,' since there is always a need for easy consolation—and in an era of confusion like our own the need is especially keen. So people are only too willing to "meet a man [sic] halfway" who will *play down* the realistic naming of our situation and *play up* such strategies as make solace cheap... The lure for the book resides in the fact that the reader, while reading it, is then living in the aura of success. What he [sic] wants is easy success; and he [sic] gets it in symbolic form by the mere reading itself" (pp. 298-299).

The above concept is vital, but how to move from here to questions regarding widespread loneliness and social media use requires further exploration. Most broadly, I contend that many of the adverse impacts of social media are traceable to a gap in our understanding of ritual confirmation, biases of media, and the role of the body in social interaction. Burke's grounding in the latter is particularly relevant to digital environments given that it is the body that most frequently is erased/ignored in our experiences of online social interaction. Make no mistake, the body is irrepressibly present. However, given the various biases of digital media the body's simultaneous absence and presence requires a more thorough reckoning. I use the term *bias* here in its media ecological sense, which suggests that media are neither instrumental/neutral in character nor are the overly deterministic. Rather, they softly nudge human behavior in various ways through their distinctive modes of spatial and temporal organization.

My exploration into the above constellation of concepts will unfold along three primary lines. I begin by operationalizing key terms including "social media" and "loneliness", before moving to relevant literature on social media use and mental health. Next, I unpack R.D. Laing's notion of confirmation and disconfirmation, which serves as a backdrop for thinking through online social interaction. Finally, putting Burke in conversation with Laing, I discuss the role that embodiment plays in social presence, to demonstrate that experiences of loneliness may in fact be, contrary to claims by social media firms and techno-enthusiasts, heavily influenced by the inevitable disconfirmation that occurs in digitally mediated communication environments.

I think it important to acknowledge that critique of technology tends to ebb and flow according to various historical periods, academic fashions, and/or disciplinary proclivities. However, awakenings to the political economy of new media have tended to focus more critically on the adverse impacts of digital environments, for reasons both legitimate and sensational alike. While this article does focus on more detrimental consequences of online social interaction, I also recognize that experiences can differ radically across a variety of social contexts, bodies, and identity points. I return to this idea in the concluding section. For now, it is enough to note that my approach is more akin to that taken by media scholar and cultural critic Neil Postman who recognized that the creation and adoption of any technology is a kind of Faustian bargain.

Technology giveth, and it taketh away (Postman, 1998). That is, we must take care in our excitement for new technology that our solutions do not end up killing us in the process.

Hyperbole aside, when designed with ethical and inclusive principles, technology can play a positive role in a wide range of issues and experiences. However, when influenced by the ideologies of neutrality, efficiency, and/or determinism (often the hallmarks of an individual consumerist capitalism), technology also exacerbates existing problems and can create new ones. More accurately, even when guided by ethical and inclusive principles technologies and practices never exist in isolation. They always emerge within contentious and contested spaces and so their meanings are never quite fixed but rather, must be continuously struggled for and redefined. With this caveat provided, I move now to a brief discussion of two key terms that are useful for contextualizing the overarching issue.

### **Two Key Terms**

A 2018 Ipsos poll conducted on behalf of Cigna Health argues that more and more individuals are experiencing chronic loneliness. Using the UCLA Loneliness scale, the report shows that nearly 46% of Americans reported feeling lonely sometimes or always and 47% feel left out (Polack, 2018). Perhaps more importantly is the finding that loneliness among the presumed high-end digital media users, those ages 18 to 22, exceeds that of other generations.

Regarding social media use I use the term akin to Cambridge dictionary, which defines it more broadly as “forms of media that allow people to communicate and share information using the internet or mobile phones” (“social media”, def 2). Thus, I refer here not only to more obvious platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc., but to video conferencing media like Zoom as well. (“social media,”)

Interestingly the report is quick to point out that social media use is not the sole or even primary predictor of loneliness. In fact, on a loneliness score range of 20-80 (20 being the least lonely, 80 being the loneliest) the study found no correlation between self-described *very heavy users* of social media (43.5%) and those who never use social media (41.7%). Thus, one might be led to conclude as the study does that digital media use has little to no bearing on one’s experience of loneliness. However, this view neglects to account for the ways that media as environments impact individual and social behavior in more seamlessly thorough ways. That is, media do not merely impact those who use them (or those near users) but

rather, as environments they shape organizing, interaction, and experience on a systemic scale.

When taking a closer look at additional findings of the loneliness study we can find a relationship between health-related issues and pervasive biases of digital life. Therefore, while a simple cause-effect relationship may not exist between loneliness and digital media use (such relationships are always more complicated), the structures upon which these technologies are built do bias relationships and behaviors that impact the other identified predictors of loneliness cited in the report. Take for instance the findings that individuals who have healthier in-person interactions, better overall mental and physical health, better balance of daily activities, and are gainfully employed, tend also to be less lonely. It seems somewhat clear that many experiences within our increasingly platform-heavy environments have a profound impact on the above-cited predictors of decreased loneliness. More recent research, pointing to unfavorable social comparisons as one leading mechanism, similarly show a correlation between the increased use of social media among young adults and a decline their mental health (Braghieri, Levy, & Makarin, 2022).

For example, regarding healthy in-person interactions, our digital devices seem to bias interaction of the disembodied variety. As of June 2017, it was estimated that roughly 26 billion text messages were sent every day in the U.S., which amounts to 781 billion per month and 9.3 trillion texts per year (request, 2018). Between 2012 and 2018 the percentage of teens who ranked communicating with others face-to-face (fff) as their preferred way dropped from 49% to 32% (Rideout & Robb, 2018). According to the same study roughly 54% of teen social media users in 2018 confirmed that social media distracts them from paying attention to the people they are physically with (up from 44% in 2012). Thus, while digitally connected to more people than we could feasibly manage in fff settings, we are essentially what Turkle (2012) refers to as being *Alone Together* (2012). The isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has only complicated our relationship to digital media. On one hand the sharp uptick in the use of Zoom and other platforms as a means of maintaining personal and professional relationships has further agitated many of the tensions and anxieties associated with digital environments. On the other hand, it (and similar platforms) did serve as important lifelines for

hundreds of millions of people during a time of great distress and uncertainty. I return to some of the implications of this later in this essay.

The above segues us to another key term that requires elucidation, which is *loneliness*. For the purposes of this article, we need not do a deep dive but rather operationalize the term and sketch the contours of some of its most widely agreed upon characteristics. However, even when providing a brief overview loneliness is a tricky concept to pin down given its variations across time, place, age demographic, and culture. As an initial approach it shares similarities, yet also differs from both *solitude* and *isolation*, both of which have their own histories and particularities. According to cultural historian Fay Bound Alberti (2019), loneliness emerges (at least in the West) in the 1800s and due to a shift in focus from the collective to the individual. This shift occurred in multiple social spheres including the philosophical, industrial, and scientific (Alberti, p. 16). Furthermore, this hyper-individualistic self was situated as over-and-against a separate (and often hostile) world. Perhaps most relevant to the current article, and in line with the role of embodiment in Burke's writings, Alberti stresses the importance of understanding loneliness as both a mental and physical experience. She states, "We tend, in the West, to regard loneliness as a mental affliction and to offer remedies that engage the mind—talking therapies, book groups, interventions based on combatting depression and anxiety through connectedness to others" (Alberti, p. 14). This neoliberal view of the individual and loneliness persists today and consequently, many tend to conflate digital presence (whether in audio or audio/visual form) with bodily presence, which I will argue may in part be correlational to the experience of loneliness despite our greater social reach (greater in terms of both distance and quantity, not necessarily quality). Thus, I prefer the socio-cultural and historical accounts of loneliness to evolutionary explanations given the latter's tendency to reduce the experience to neurobiological adaptive responses to adverse states. Consequently, from this perspective loneliness is, at the physiological level, no different from other adverse states such as hunger or thirst.

If loneliness can be better understood as socio-cultural and historical, then understanding how the word itself came into use and evolved over time is instructive. Alberti argues that the term loneliness was barely visible prior to the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, in the post-industrial West its use steadily climbed reaching its peak towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to its wider use, loneliness was absent of its contemporary, psycho-emotional



understanding and referred simply to the state of being physically alone. Moreover, this “oneliness”, as it was referred to, evoked predominately positive connotations as it allowed for “communion with an ever-present God” (Alberti, p. 19). Thus, prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century *lonely* or *loneliness* more closely resembled what we might today call *solitude* (only with more religious undertones). In terms of a working contemporary definition, Alberti defines loneliness as “a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person’s place in the world” (p. 5). This aligns with other conceptualizations such as the one offered by Gloria, (2020) where she defines loneliness as “a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one’s social relationships” (p. 6).

Given the heavy *social* emphasis of these definitions, it would be reasonable to conclude that social media would be ameliorative for the present loneliness epidemic (as some refer to it). Yet, a closer look reveals this does not seem to be the case. In an exploration of these apparent ironies the following sections provide a deeper dive into the numbers surrounding social media use, as well as highlighting some of the key findings related to social media use and mental health. To reiterate, this is not to suggest a linear cause-effect relationship between digital environments and loneliness but rather, to show how the biases of our digital environments shape human experiences and relationships in complex ways. Thus, my main contention is that the biases of our digital environments, when not deliberately mitigated by ethical, and well-informed design, diffusion, and use, can have detrimental impacts on our lives in sometimes direct and other times indirect ways. Moreover, one of the main reasons for this is the role of the body in social interaction, and the neglect of embodiment within communicative contexts.

## **Social Media Use & Mental Health**

Little shock is likely elicited by stating that since its inception, social media use has risen sharply across the U.S. population. Thus, we need not waste too much digital ink in proclaiming the ubiquity of social media within the lives of various demographics. Yet the acceleration of this increase in use is nonetheless eye-opening. According to the Pew

Research Center, in 2005 only 5% of American adults used social media. That number jumped to 50% in 2011. At the time the study was published in 2021, roughly 72% of all U.S. adults reported using one or more social media platforms ("Pew," 2021). Of those surveyed the 18–29-year-old demographic far outpaced older cohorts for much of the reported time range. For example, by 2022 it was estimated that 95% of teens reported that they used at least some social media (and 33% claim to use it *constantly*) (Doucleff, 2023). Only more recently has the 30–49-year-old demographic substantially narrowed their lead, which as of February 2021 reflected a mere 3% difference in usage (ibid). In terms of general digital media engagement, by around 2016 U.S. adolescents spent an average of 6 hours per day engaged in Internet related activities including texting, general online activities, and more specifically, social media (Twenge, 2020).

Numbers surrounding social media use of video conferencing platforms like Zoom, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, are even more jaw-dropping. By some estimates the rate of Zoom downloads between February 22, 2020 to March 22, 2020 alone increased by 1270%. During this span it was being downloaded roughly 2000 times per day (Bellan, 2020). Again, much of that growth was directly related to closures and lockdowns resulting from the pandemic, but Zoom had already started to gain a larger market share over comparable platforms such as Google Hangouts, Webex, and Skype.

With this snapshot in place, I turn now to a brief highlight of some of the findings on social media use and potential detriments to mental health. Given space constraints I attend primarily to research conducted on Facebook, but it is important to note that the variety in both user experience and affordances of various social media continue to change. And while Facebook has undoubtedly declined (if not vanished) in popularity among younger populations for a variety of reasons, their portfolio of platforms, which includes Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus VR, still owns an enormous market share. Moreover, many of the same algorithmic features controlling the behaviors of social media platforms are similar across brands. Thus, it is reasonable to expect similar impacts across the various applications such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok.

### ***The Struggle***

Despite the need for more research on the benefits and detriments of heavy social media use, some very important findings have already begun to emerge over the past decade. Using the *Needs Satisfaction Following Ostracism Scale* a 2015 article by Stephanie J. Tobin and colleagues made several interesting findings that paint a complex picture of the role that social media plays in our emotional wellbeing. Their first main finding was that those participants who were not allowed to share information with their contacts had lower levels of both belonging and feelings of meaningful existence (Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2015). This seems to contradict a major premise of this article in that if social media were indeed leading to more negative mental health outcomes, active users should not be experiencing high levels of loneliness or depression. However, a second major finding by the authors of the study complicates this. They found that while sharing information did seem to produce some positive affect, users who received no feedback on their shared information had much lower levels of self-esteem (“I feel good about myself”), control (“I feel powerful”), and meaningful existence (“I feel important”) (ibid). In an observation somewhat prophetic of the social media age, 19<sup>th</sup> century psychologist and pragmatist William James noted that, “No more fiendish punishment could be devised, even were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof.” (qtd. in Laing, 82). It seems we have arrived at a moment in history where, by means of our technological extensions, James’ fear is indeed physically possible.

Despite this, the correlation between the sharp rises in both digital engagement and mental health decline are striking. Alongside the previously discussed spike in digital media use, research has found that between 2011-2018 an equally sharp rise occurred in rates of self-harm, rates of depression, and suicide attempts among the U.S. adolescent population, with depression alone increasing by over 60% (Twenge):

In several large studies, heavy users of technology are twice as likely as light users to be depressed or have low well-being. Cohort declines in face-to-face social interaction may also impact even non-users of digital media. Thus, although technology use is not the cause of most depression, increased time spent on technology and the technological environment may be causes of the

sudden increase in depression since 2011 (ibid, 89).

These findings are instructive here given the trajectory that some research has traced of state/momentary loneliness to trait/prolonged loneliness, which can, if left unaddressed lead to major depressive disorder (van Winkel et al., 2017).

While individual users can moderate, to varying degrees, the exposure to various forms of social media, we are unable to fully extract ourselves from the digital veldt. This is because as previously mentioned, media are more than passive/neutral tools. In short, they are the environments within which we live. Thus, it is not simply about social media use per se but rather, our neglect of the role of the body in social interaction (whether online or in person). If we assume that the mere inclusion of audio and video is equivalent to embodied interaction, we open ourselves to greater potentials for communication misfires, which may be partially responsible for the more recent detriments to mental health. I want to be clear that I am not making an ethical argument as to which form of communication is *better* or *worse*, whatever that might mean. However, by conflating digital interaction through social media with embodied interaction in a fff environment, the problems of communication are not so much created as they are exacerbated. Again, the insecurities and anxieties of miscommunication are as old as culture itself and are not limited to digitally mediated spaces. Thus, attempting to address communication problems through the technological, e.g. through greater bandwidth, finer resolution, more clear/robust audio, or more greatly enhanced VR environments, etc., will ultimately fail to address the communication issues that ail us. Moreover, in their often indifference and/or hostility towards the body these technological solutions can compound these issues.

In the following section I zero in on one such issue to show how this bodily disregard can contribute to greater loneliness and anxiety. To make my case I focus on a concept that is more obscure within contemporary communication theory and comes to us by way of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century psychiatry. The concept in question, and its related correlate, is confirmation and disconfirmation and was first introduced by R.D. Laing. Laing was a British psychiatrist who rose to broad cultural fame in the 1960s and 70s, most notably for his outspoken criticism of strict biological models of mental illness. Instead, Laing argued that much of what was

diagnosed as a “sickness of the brain” was more often than not traceable to problematic or otherwise unhealthy communication patterns (Mantel, 2008). Thus, rather than unreflectively defaulting to conventional pharmaceutical interventions Laing talked with his patients and more importantly, he listened. He conversed with the patient not through technical psychiatric vocabulary, but through direct language that acknowledged the individual on their own terms. This act of *confirmation* is the subject of the following section and serves as the main backdrop for our inquiry into the relationship between social media and loneliness.

### **Confirmation/Disconfirmation: The Underpinning of an Interactional Rhetoric**

Highlighting a main impetus for the development of his theory of confirmation, Laing (1969) recounts an experience of observing a nurse attend to a usually catatonic and hebephrenic patient. While receiving a cup of tea from the nurse the patient suddenly remarked, “This is the first time in my life that anyone has ever given me a cup of tea” (p. 89). Laing suggested that this random remark about a seemingly trivial event was richly laden with the intricacies of ritualistic interaction. Commenting on the many different motives and possible interpretations of such an act, he noted that someone who gave him a cup of tea could be showing off their tea set, or they could be trying to soften him up to get something from him. The tea-giver could even be attempting to sway him, he surmised, to their side of an interpersonal conflict. Likewise, we could simply be offered tea unreflectively or out of habit, never actually being acknowledged in our own identity in the process. I think of the worker who walks to my table and refills my drink while never making eye contact or acknowledging my presence. Thus, one could be given a cup of tea without having *actually* been given a cup of tea. Antithetical to psychiatric fashion of the time, rather than dismissing the remark as the ramblings of an “unwell” patient Laing listened to her as she described her experience. He observed over the course of several subsequent visits that indeed the patient was largely unacknowledged by most of the attending medical staff. Laing concludes:

[I]t is the simplest and most difficult thing in the world for one person, genuinely being [their] self, to give, in fact and not just in appearance, another person, realized in [their] own being by the giver, a cup of tea, really,

and not in appearance (p. 89).

Of course, for Laing confirmation and disconfirmation occur in interactions far wider than the giving and receiving of tea. In terms of its scope and general characteristics, he suggests a few. He notes that confirmation occurs or is at least implied to some degree within any human interaction. It can be both partial and varying in its episodes, but it can also be global and absolute. I take this to mean that while the need for confirmation is potentially universal, its manifestations may vary substantially across cultures, time periods, or other demographic differences. It might be more productive to think of confirmation and disconfirmation not as an either/or but rather a *more-or-less*. That is, one is not simply confirmed or disconfirmed, one can be *both* confirmed and disconfirmed within the same interaction (and to varying degrees). This is clear where Laing states, “By reacting ‘lukewarmly’, imperviously, tangentially, and so on, one fails to endorse [disconfirming] some aspects of the other, while endorsing [confirming] other aspects (p. 82). For example, in an argument with a significant other I might reply, “I get that you’re angry [confirming], but you only *think* you’re angry at me [disconfirming].”

One underacknowledged aspect of confirmation that is of particular importance to this article deals with the range of sensory modalities across which confirmation and disconfirmation occur. Laing himself seems to underplay its importance by offering only a few words about what he referred to as *modes* of confirmation or disconfirmation, e.g. “a responsive smile” (visual), “a handshake” (tactile), “an expression of sympathy” (auditory), etc. (p. 82). As I will further unpack later in the article, it is the lack of shared embodied space within contemporary digital, social interactions that lead to tensions in confirmation and hence, more frequently contribute to loneliness and negative mental health outcomes.

However, in order for confirmation to satiate this symbolic-material need for recognition and stave off the deleterious effects of disconfirmation, it must be relevant to the evocative action. In meeting this criterion, we accord recognition to the individual seeking confirmation. The further implication here is that acts of confirmation and disconfirmation are a joint affair. How could they be otherwise? Note Laing’s assertion that, “Some areas of a person’s being may cry out for confirmation more than others. Some forms of disconfirmation may be more destructive of self-development [for certain people] than others” (p. 83). To “cry out for confirmation” is an emotional appeal to an audience, an attempt to elicit a confirming response from a real or

imagined social partner. This aligns well with Crable's insightful articulation of *Burkean interactional rhetorics*, which "[l]nduce a relational other to cooperate in the rhetor's identity project, to confirm her in a desired self, in order to sustain her vital character armor" (2006, p. 13). That is, social partners are rhetorical partners, and they are required to confirm or otherwise acknowledge our performed identities. Only then do we have the necessary socio-symbolic capital needed to confidently continue in our performances and other identity projects. Yet the role of confirmation runs deeper still. As Crable (2006) writes,

Without others' validation of my self, I am unable to sustain my character armor, which not only leaves me exposed to my own fragile mortality, but it brings me face to face with the collapse of meaning itself...If my efforts are successful, I provide myself with an anxiety tonic, symbolic medicine for the anguish of human existence (p. 11).

Furthermore, the play never reaches its final act as the process of confirmation is ongoing. Our audiences can at any time revoke their approval, or our performances may be less convincing depending on the audiences and/or the identities for which we are auditioning.

Given the complexities of confirmation discussed above, how do digital environments such as social media impact our social identity projects? Again, I want to move away from a linearly casual (and universal) explanation and argue that the lack of shared, physical space makes confirmation more difficult a process while online. Confirmation is already fraught with uncertainties, some of which I explore momentarily, but the added interpretive weight within digitally mediated spaces can compound these uncertainties in profound ways. In the following section, I make some final connections between practices of confirmation through social media, and the role that disembodied interaction plays in contemporary experiences of loneliness.

### **Pseudo-confirmation, Collusion, & Symbolic Solace**

When discussing disconfirmation Laing argues that the hallmark of a lack of genuine

confirmation is an active confirming of an illegitimate or *false* self. Consider the following, “One finds interactions marked by pseudo-confirmation, by acts which masquerade as confirming but are counterfeit.” (p. 83). Recall Laing’s suggestion that, “It is not so easy for one person to give another a cup of tea...The action could be a mechanical one in which there is no recognition of *me* in it. A cup of tea could be handed me without *me* being given a *cup of tea*” (88-89). I argue that the difficulty of giving another person a metaphorical *cup of tea* while online is increased within digital environments such as social media. This is due largely to the absence of shared physical space, which is an often underacknowledged aspect of social or co-presence (Oh, Bailenson, & Welch, 2018). I move now to discuss this more directly, but by way of another Laingian concept, *collusion*. The act of collusion within social interaction is, for Laing, a kind of game played between or among two or more people. Recall that confirmation requires our audiences/social partners to *buy into* or at least acknowledge the legitimacy of our identity performances or appeals. If those entreaties are recognized by our social partners and in turn, if we then recognize what was recognized, confirmation can occur. However, what seems like a straightforward process is fraught with ambiguities and potential peril. As Crable noted, “Problems may arise if my audience is recalcitrant or unwilling...However, more significantly, confirmation may not be provided for the simple reason that others may not necessarily recognize *which* of my attributes calls out for their approval” (p. 13). Moreover, my audience may indeed recognize my needs and nonetheless, frustrate or sabotage my efforts to address them.

Thus, ongoing collusion with our social collaborators is required if we are to meet our confirmation needs. Laing illustrates this process with an extended quote from Martin Buber. Note that the bracketed notation is Laing’s. Despite the layered complexity, the following is applicable to even the simplest of social interactions (such as conversing over a cup of tea). The main interactants in Buber’s inquiry are Peter [p] and Paul [o]. First, we have Peter as he wishes to appear to Paul [ $p \rightarrow (o \rightarrow p)$ ], and Paul as he wishes to appear to Peter [ $o \rightarrow (p \rightarrow o)$ ]. Second, we have Peter as he *really* appears to Paul (Paul’s image of Peter), which may or may not coincide with what Peter desires Paul to think [ $o \rightarrow p: p \rightarrow (o \rightarrow p)$ ]. Conversely, we have Paul as he really appears to Peter (Peter’s image of Paul), which also may or may not coincide with what Paul desires Peter to think [ $p \rightarrow o: o \rightarrow (p \rightarrow o)$ ]. Third, we have Peter as he appears to himself [ $p \rightarrow p$ ], and Paul as he appears to himself [ $o \rightarrow o$ ] (the question of self-reflection/analysis is fascinating but exceeds the current article. E.g. Who is the analyzer and



the analyzed in this experience?). “Lastly, there are the bodily Peter and the bodily Paul, two living beings and six ghostly appearances, which mingle in many ways in the conversations between the two. Where is there room for any genuine interhuman life?” (qtd in Laing, p. 91).

What Buber and Laing were highlighting were the intricacies of what would later become theorized as *social presence*, or as Biocca et al. (2003) tersely defined it, the experience “of being with another” (p. 456). What we are considering then are the ways that various forms of mediation impact our ability to engage in confirmation (via social presence) and other identity related projects. To be clear, I do not suggest that embodied/face-to-face interaction is inherently *better* or somehow *easier* than other forms of communication (whatever those qualifiers might mean). The example of Peter and Paul have demonstrated that all forms of interaction are both mediated and complicated. However, it is plausible to contend that in certain contexts and for many people, digitally mediated environments can complicate our quests for confirmation even further. Said directly, all interaction is mediated, but some forms (for some people) make more room for confirmation than others.

Research in social robotics has confirmed the importance of physical embodiment to the experience of social presence. According to Jung and Lee (2004) the following key findings were found (84):

1. Physically embodied social robots (PESR) are more attractive social partners. People prefer interactions with physical social actors compared to virtual social actors such as chatbots or similar disembodied AI.
2. Social robots are more socially attractive to lonely people.
3. Physical embodiment yields higher social presence of artificial social robots than physical disembodiment.
4. Lonely people are more sensitive to PESR than non-lonely people.
5. PESR without touch-input capability causes negative effects.

The authors attribute this to Mashiro Mori’s “uncanny valley” effect, whereby the subtlety of the robot’s imperfection (i.e. looked human, but couldn’t interact or touch), became disturbing (p. 86).

What we find then is that embodiment and/or haptics are not simply about touching a social partner (which can of course be both unwanted and inappropriate), but rather, about sharing a range of physiological experiences with a social partner including but not limited to, handshakes, light touches, hugs, navigating/experiencing similar spatial dimensions, temperatures, passing objects to one another, etc. This is all currently impossible within social media and thus, social presence is strained online. Whether virtual reality will get us to a point where confirmation can consistently be given and received remains to be proven.

Where and whom (sometimes even, *when*) then are our rhetorical audiences and/or social partners within social media environments? Zoe as they appear to... $[z \rightarrow (?? \rightarrow z)]$ ? I think of my students turning off cameras and/or not responding to vocal prompts while conducting classes through Zoom. Are they even there (many in fact are not, but they are logged in nonetheless and thus, *feigning* presence)? There are a multitude of possibilities for why their cameras are off or why they are not responding to my rhetorical entreaties, but the fact remains that I am often left in limbo while interacting in this environment. Confirmation is perpetually deferred. In a very real sense, all our online audiences and/or social partners are imaginary, but the degrees of disconnect between the actual and desired audiences are much more ambiguous. Yet we desperately need meaningful forms of confirmation to maintain our “identities-in-relation”, thereby staving off the angst that emerges among beings who are both finite and self-aware (Crale, 2006). It is against this backdrop that the reasons for our broader experiences of anxiety, loneliness, and depression, within digital environments becomes clearer. Much of our experiences with social media then, might be helpfully understood as forms of *symbolic solace*. Like Burke’s imagined readers of inspirational literature participation in social media environments provides not so much the means for *living* but rather, *equipment for coping*. People, while in social media environments, are seeking the comforts of confirmation. However, for reasons discussed throughout this article, and ones that far exceed its scope, these environments too often fall short for too many people (as is partly evidenced by the sharp, parallel increases in loneliness and depression). Thus, the irony is twofold: We are more “connected” than ever, but simultaneously lonelier and more depressed. Second, given the ghosts we all are on the screen and in our audio devices, social media may be exacerbating these negative effects.

## **A Longing for Connection**

I wish to conclude with a couple of important caveats. First, not all communication/social interaction is desirable, nor is all confirmation necessarily *good* or *ethical*. For Laing confirmation can even arise within a deadly interaction where one person is physically assaulting another. "The slightest sign of recognition from another at least confirms one's presence in *his* [sic] world" (p. 82). Second, digital media can play an important role in addressing inequality and access issues for underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities and many neurodivergent populations. However, as social beings we still require varying degrees of ritualistic confirmation. It is not that miscommunication does not occur in embodied, face-to-face interaction, nor is it that confirmation cannot occur within social media environments. However, given the characteristics of the latter it is fraught with even more miscues and misfires.

Thus, we might codify all digitally mediated interaction under the category *social media*, as a way of grappling with the fact that miscommunication is inevitable (even through embodied interaction). The primary problem is not that we can never really communicate per se, it is that we believe we can and thus, assume that digital media can accomplish the impossible. Maybe all mediated communication is a kind of coping with the longing induced by loneliness (which is complicated and historical itself). I recall here the paradox of speaking on the phone with loved ones. While it is a gift to speak with them if we have been physically separated for an extended time, in some ways speaking with them intensifies the longing. As it was with the first telephone message from New York to Chicago, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you" (Congress, 2022). Regardless, it seems contemporary social media have complicated this relationship. "Zooming, Skyping, Facebooking, Tweeting, etc." are named strategies for communication and doing work (whether in the professional or interpersonal realms), but they could never be sufficient because *communication* is such a precarious endeavor to begin with (if by communication we connote some telepathic means of sharing identical thoughts and emotions with others). The problems of communication are simply exacerbated in digitally mediated contexts. The grainy-ness, the intermittent connection, subpar audio, and lack of embodied presence are main contributors, but again, the anxieties of communication would not simply vanish in their absence. However, I have often heard it said that these media are "better than nothing". Said otherwise, they are *symbolic solace* (equipment for coping) and serve as

easy consolation for the fact that we can never truly know whether we have been confirmed or have confirmed the other. In the end it is an extraordinary leap of faith. Yet through embodied interaction we are at least able to give another a cup of tea, which is perhaps in the Burkean sense a fine form of compensation for the fact that all communication, and thus confirmation, is a potential misfire.

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