

The Loneliness in Our Pockets: Rethinking Digital Isolation in Pakistan

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A strange new ritual has quietly taken root in the capital. At a handful of cafés in Islamabad, customers are asked to do something that would have seemed absurd a decade ago: hand over their mobile phones at the door. In exchange, they get a locker token, a cup of tea, and — perhaps for the first time in weeks — the undivided attention of the person sitting across from them. These “phone-free” cafés are small, almost experimental spaces. But they are also a quiet verdict on how we live now, and a modest attempt to undo some of its damage.

We call this condition digital isolation: the peculiar modern experience of being constantly connected to the world through a screen while growing steadily more disconnected from the people physically around us. It is a paradox that anyone who has sat at a family dinner scrolling through Instagram, or watched a room full of friends stare at four different phones instead of at each other, will recognise instantly. Pakistan is not immune to this shift — in many ways, it is living through it at high speed. Mobile broadband penetration has expanded dramatically over the past decade, and smartphones have gone from luxury items to near-universal fixtures of daily life, even in smaller towns and rural areas. This has brought genuine benefits: access to information, connection with family working abroad, opportunities for online learning and small businesses. But the same device that lets a mother in Multan video-call her son in Dubai is also the device that keeps her scrolling past midnight, increasingly withdrawn from the people asleep in the next room.

In university settings, where I spend much of my working life, the symptoms are easy to spot. Students sit together in canteens, physically inches apart, yet each locked into a separate digital world. Group study sessions dissolve into parallel phone use. Even casual conversation — the kind that once filled hostel corridors and tea stalls for hours — is increasingly rationed, interrupted every few minutes by a notification that seems to matter more than the person mid-sentence. Faculty rooms are not much different. We have more “connections” than any generation before us and, if surveys and clinical reports are any guide, more loneliness to match.

This is the cruelty of digital isolation: it does not look like isolation. There is no visible withdrawal, no obvious absence. A person can be surrounded by hundreds of online friends and thousands of followers

while feeling almost no one truly sees them. Psychologists have long noted that the quality of face-to-face interaction — eye contact, tone of voice, shared silence — carries a kind of emotional nourishment that text and emojis simply cannot replicate. When that nourishment is chronically missing, the effects show up as anxiety, poor sleep, shortened attention spans, and a diminished capacity for the patient, unglamorous work of maintaining real relationships.

The phone-free cafés of Islamabad are, in this light, a small but telling act of resistance. They recognise something important: that solving digital isolation is not really about technology at all, but about intention. Depositing a phone at a counter for an hour does not erase the habits built over years of scrolling, but it does something psychologically useful — it removes the option, and with it, the compulsion to check. What fills the resulting silence, more often than not, is conversation. Actual, unhurried, occasionally awkward conversation, the kind that used to be the default setting of human life. This idea deserves to travel well beyond a few trendy establishments in the capital. Universities could experiment with “phone-free hours” in common rooms and libraries. Families could revive the old, unfashionable habit of a shared meal with devices left in another room. Employers could rethink meeting culture, where half the room is visibly elsewhere. None of this requires banning technology or pretending smartphones are the enemy; it requires rebuilding small pockets of undivided attention into daily life, deliberately, because they will not happen by accident anymore.

There is also a policy and institutional dimension worth taking seriously. Schools, colleges, and universities across Pakistan could incorporate digital wellbeing into student orientation and counselling services, much as they already address other aspects of student welfare. Employers and public institutions could be encouraged to model healthier boundaries around after-hours messaging. None of this is radical; it simply acknowledges that connectivity, unmanaged, has costs that are as real as its benefits.

The irony of digital isolation is that its cure is almost embarrassingly simple: put the phone down, and look up. What the Islamabad cafés have understood, and what the rest of us would do well to learn, is that sometimes the most meaningful upgrade to our lives is not a new app or a faster connection, but the deliberate, old-fashioned decision to be fully present with the people in front of us.

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