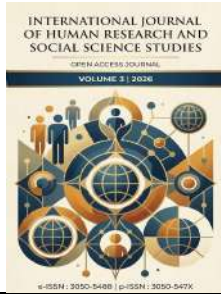
International Journal of Human Research and Social Science Studies

ISSN(p): 3050-547X, ISSN(e): 3050-5488

Volume 03 Issue 11 November, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55677/ijhrsss/04-2026-Vol03I11

Page No : 1026-1039



Disrupted Rituals: Curated Social Media Use During Family Meals and Loneliness among Gen Z

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ABSTRACT: Family meals have long served as a primary ritual for social bonding, emotional connection, and intergenerational transmission of values across cultures. However, the proliferation of curated social media engagement during these sacred communal moments has fundamentally altered the nature of family interaction for Generation Z. This qualitative phenomenological study explores how curated social media use during family meals contributes to loneliness among Gen Z young adults in Ghana. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 Gen Z participants (aged 18-25 years) recruited from three Ghanaian universities, the study employs interpretive phenomenological analysis to examine participants lived experiences of family meal disruption. Findings reveal four major themes: (1) the erosion of meal-time presence as algorithmic distraction fragments attention and diminishes relational depth; (2) the performance paradox where curated online identities obscure authentic self-presentation during family interactions; (3) the intergenerational technology gap as a source of misunderstanding, resentment, and emotional distance; and (4) the lingering guilt and awareness of disruption accompanied by perceived inability to disengage. Participants described family meals as "hollowed out" by the persistent presence of curated social media, where physical co-presence masked emotional absence. Loneliness emerged not from the absence of family members but from the felt absence of genuine connection during moments of togetherness. The findings extend the Displacement Hypothesis and provide culturally grounded insights for intervention. Recommendations include family-level digital curfews, intergenerational technology dialogue, and the restoration of meal-time rituals as sites of authentic connection.

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Published Online:
November 12, 2026

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KEYWORDS:
Family meals, social media, curation, loneliness, Gen Z, phenomenology, Ghana, family rituals, digital wellbeing, intergenerational relationships

Cite the Article: *Lomotey, J. N. A. A. (2026). Disrupted Rituals: Curated Social Media Use During Family Meals and Loneliness among Gen Z. International Journal of Human Research and Social Science Studies,3(11),1026-1039. https://doi.org/10.55677/ijhrsss/04-2026-Vol03I11*

I. INTRODUCTION

The family meal is one of humanity's oldest and most enduring rituals. Across cultures and millennia, the shared act of eating together has served functions far beyond biological nourishment. Family meals have been sites of storytelling, emotional exchange, cultural transmission, and the reinforcement of familial bonds. In Ghanaian culture, where communal living and extended family networks have historically structured social life, the family meal carries particular significance. It is a time when multiple generations gather, when elders impart wisdom, when children learn social protocols, and when the fabric of family connection is woven and rewoven through daily practice.

Yet this ancient ritual is being fundamentally transformed by the pervasive presence of curated social media. Generation Z the first cohort to grow up with smartphones as extensions of their bodies increasingly bring their curated digital selves to the family table. They scroll through algorithmically curated feeds, post carefully selected images of their meals, respond to notifications, and maintain parallel social lives while physically present with family members. The curated nature of this engagement is critical: unlike spontaneous conversation, social media activity is often performative, involving the deliberate presentation of an idealised self to an imagined audience.

The phenomenon of curated social media use during family meals raises profound questions about the nature of presence, connection, and loneliness. When family members sit together but are simultaneously engaged with curated digital content, what happens to the quality of their interaction? Can loneliness emerge not from the absence of others but from the felt absence of genuine connection in their presence? How do Gen Z young adults experience the tension between their curated online identities and their authentic selves in family settings? These questions lie at the heart of this study.

Loneliness among Gen Z has reached alarming levels globally. Studies consistently find that young adults report higher rates of loneliness than older generations, despite or perhaps because of unprecedented digital connectivity (Twenge et al., 2018; Cigna, 2020). In Ghana, where family cohesion has traditionally served as a robust buffer against social isolation, there are emerging signs that younger generations are experiencing new forms of disconnection (Acquah et al., 2021). The family meal, once a guaranteed site of connection, may be losing its protective function as curated social media intrudes upon this sacred space.

The choice to focus on *curated* social media use is deliberate and theoretically significant. Not all social media engagement is equivalent. Curated engagement involves the careful selection, editing, and presentation of content to manage self-image and social perception. It is inherently performative and other-directed. When family members engage in curated social media use during meals, they are not simply distracted; they are actively presenting themselves to an external audience while withdrawing from the immediate family audience. This dual orientation present physically but performing elsewhere may be particularly damaging to family connection and may produce a unique form of loneliness.

This qualitative study adopts a phenomenological approach to understand how Gen Z young adults experience curated social media use during family meals and how this experience relates to loneliness. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this inquiry because it prioritises lived experience and seeks to understand phenomena as they are subjectively perceived. By exploring participants' first-person accounts, the study aims to reveal the meanings, contradictions, and emotional textures of this increasingly common but poorly understood experience.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite growing recognition of the importance of family meals for adolescent and young adult wellbeing, and despite escalating concern about loneliness among Gen Z, the intersection of these two domains remains inadequately understood in several critical respects. First, the specific phenomenon of curated social media use *during* family meals has not been systematically examined. Prior research has examined general family meal frequency and quality (Fiese et al., 2006; Larson et al., 2013), and separate research has examined the effects of social media on family relationships (Coyne et al., 2020; Kushlev & Dunn, 2015). However, the intersection what happens when curated social media enters the family meal space has not been studied as a distinct phenomenon. This is a significant gap because the family meal is not merely another social context; it is a highly ritualised setting with particular norms, expectations, and emotional significance.

Second, the qualitative experience of this phenomenon remains unexplored. Quantitative studies can establish correlations between family meal frequency and outcomes, or between social media use and loneliness, but they cannot capture the lived texture of how curated digital engagement disrupts family interaction. We do not know how young adults experience the intrusion of curated content into family meals, what emotions accompany this experience, how they reconcile competing demands on their attention, or what loneliness means in this specific context.

Third, the Ghanaian cultural context has been largely absent from this literature. Research on family meals, social media, and loneliness has predominantly been conducted in Western, individualistic societies. Ghanaian culture, with its emphasis on extended family, collectivism, and intergenerational respect, provides a contrasting context that may illuminate how cultural factors moderate the effects of digital disruption. For instance, the expectation that younger family members show respect to elders may make meal-time social media use particularly conflictual or guilt-inducing. Conversely, Ghanaian young adults may maintain stronger family ties despite digital engagement, or the disruption of family meals may have more severe consequences because of the central role of family in Ghanaian social organisation.

Fourth, the role of *curation* as a distinctive feature of social media engagement has not been examined in relation to family meals. Curated social media use is fundamentally different from passive consumption or casual browsing. It involves active self-presentation, audience awareness, and impression management. When Gen Z individuals curate content during family meals, they are engaged in a form of identity performance that may heighten the contrast between their online and offline selves, potentially intensifying feelings of disconnection.

Fifth, the relationship between curated social media use during family meals and loneliness requires theoretical and empirical explication. Loneliness is not simply the absence of people; it is the perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social connection (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). The presence of curated social media during family meals may create precisely such a discrepancy: the desired connection is with the family audience, but the actual connection is fragmented, inauthentic, or superficial because attention is divided. Understanding this dynamic requires attention to the subjective experience of loneliness in the context of disrupted family rituals.

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of curated social media use during family meals and its relationship to loneliness among Gen Z young adults in Ghana, using a qualitative phenomenological approach.

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

General Objective

To understand how Gen Z young adults experience curated social media use during family meals and how this experience relates to feelings of loneliness.

Specific Objectives

- To describe the nature and patterns of curated social media use during family meals among Gen Z in Ghana.
- To explore how Gen Z participants perceive the impact of curated social media use on the quality of family interaction during meals.
- To understand the emotional and relational consequences of divided attention during family meals.
- To examine how participants reconcile the competing demands of curated online engagement and face-to-face family interaction.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical frameworks: the Displacement Hypothesis (Kraut et al., 1998), Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, and the Family Ritual Theory (Fiese et al., 2002).

Displacement Hypothesis. The Displacement Hypothesis posits that time spent engaging with digital media displaces time that would otherwise be spent in face-to-face social interaction, reducing the quality of offline relationships and increasing negative psychological outcomes. Originally proposed to explain the effects of early internet use, this hypothesis has been extended to social media and is particularly relevant to the family meal context. When Gen Z individuals curate content during meals, they are displacing attention and engagement from the family audience to their online audiences, potentially reducing the quality of family interaction.

Self-Presentation Theory. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework conceptualises social interaction as a performance in which individuals present curated versions of themselves to various audiences. This framework is directly applicable to curated social media, which is inherently performative and audience-aware. Goffman argued that individuals engage in "impression management" to control how others perceive them. During family meals, Gen Z individuals may experience a conflict between the self presented online (curated, idealised, peer-oriented) and the self presented to family (authentic, familiar, historically known). This conflict may produce a sense of fragmentation or inauthenticity that contributes to loneliness.

Family Ritual Theory. Family Ritual Theory (Fiese et al., 2002; Imber-Black et al., 1988) posits that family rituals including meals serve essential functions for family cohesion and identity formation. Rituals provide structure, predictability, and a sense of belonging. They transmit family values and create shared meaning. When rituals are disrupted or impoverished, families lose these protective functions. The intrusion of curated social media into the family meal ritual represents a disruption that may undermine the ritual's capacity to foster connection and buffer loneliness. Fiese and colleagues (2006) demonstrated that the quality of family meal rituals not just their frequency is associated with child and adolescent wellbeing.

Integration of Frameworks. These three theories are complementary and together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation. The Displacement Hypothesis explains the mechanism (digital engagement displaces family interaction), Self-Presentation Theory explains the nature of the engagement (curated, performative, audience-aware), and Family Ritual Theory explains the significance of the context (the family meal as a site of meaning-making and belonging). The integration of these frameworks allows for a nuanced understanding of how curated social media use during family meals contributes to loneliness.

Conceptual Review

Curated Social Media Use. Curated social media use is defined as the intentional, audience-aware engagement with social media platforms that involves the selection, editing, and presentation of content to manage self-image and social perception. This includes: (a) posting photos or updates about one's life, (b) commenting on others' posts, (c) sharing content that reflects one's identity or values, (d) responding to messages, and (e) scrolling through feeds while being aware of one's own presentation and the impressions being formed by others. Curated use is distinguished from passive browsing or instrumental use (e.g., checking the news) by its performative character and its orientation toward self-presentation.

Family Meal Rituals. Family meal rituals are defined as the recurring, patterned practices surrounding shared family meals that carry symbolic meaning and contribute to family identity and cohesion (Fiese et al., 2002). Key features of family meal rituals include: (a) regular occurrence, (b) shared space and time, (c) the sharing of food, (d) conversation and interaction, and (e) the

transmission of values. The "quality" of family meal rituals is determined by factors such as the extent of positive interaction, the presence or absence of conflict, the degree of engagement, and the emotional tone of interactions.

Loneliness. Loneliness is defined as the subjective distress arising from a perceived discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). This definition distinguishes loneliness from social isolation: one can have many social contacts yet feel lonely if those contacts lack emotional depth, and one can have few contacts yet not feel lonely if those few contacts are emotionally meaningful. Loneliness has both emotional components (feelings of sadness, emptiness, longing) and cognitive components (appraisals of one's relationships as inadequate). The present study focuses on the lived experience of loneliness in the specific context of disrupted family meals.

Empirical Review

Family Meals and Wellbeing. A substantial body of research demonstrates that regular family meals are associated with positive outcomes for children and adolescents, including lower rates of depression and substance use, higher academic achievement, and better dietary habits (Fiese et al., 2006; Larson et al., 2013). Eisenberg et al. (2004) found that more frequent family meals were associated with lower rates of disordered eating and substance use in a large adolescent sample. Musick and Meier (2012) found that family meals were associated with higher life satisfaction among adolescents, with the effect mediated by the quality of family interaction during meals. However, these studies were conducted primarily in Western contexts and did not examine the role of social media in disrupting family meals.

Social Media and Family Relationships. Research on social media and family relationships has produced mixed findings. Some studies suggest that social media can facilitate family communication, particularly when families are geographically separated (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2016). However, other studies find negative associations between social media use and family cohesion. Coyne et al. (2020) found in a longitudinal study that adolescent social media use predicted decreased family communication and increased parent-child conflict over time. Kushlev and Dunn (2015) found that smartphone use during family interactions reduced the quality of those interactions and decreased emotional connection. In the Ghanaian context, Ankomah and Agyei (2020) found that smartphone use was perceived by adolescents as a source of family conflict, particularly during shared family activities.

Social Media and Loneliness. The relationship between social media use and loneliness has been extensively studied, with findings that depend on the type of use and the quality of offline relationships. Meta-analyses (Liu et al., 2019; Song et al., 2020) find a small but significant positive correlation between general social media use and loneliness, but this relationship is moderated by age, culture, and type of use. Passive use (scrolling, consuming content) consistently shows positive associations with loneliness, while active use (direct communication with known others) shows null or negative associations (Verduyn et al., 2017; Frison & Eggermont, 2016).

Family Meals and Loneliness. Fewer studies have examined the direct relationship between family meals and loneliness. However, evidence suggests that family meals protect against loneliness by providing regular opportunities for social connection. A study by Seo and Lee (2017) found that family meals were associated with lower loneliness among adolescents in South Korea, with the effect partially mediated by family communication quality. In the Ghanaian context, no published study has examined the relationship between family meals and loneliness.

Curated Social Media and Loneliness. Research specifically examining curated social media use as opposed to general social media use and loneliness is limited. However, studies on the effects of self-presentation on social media provide indirect evidence. Users who engage in curated, performative self-presentation may experience loneliness because of the contrast between their curated online selves and their authentic offline selves (Gilbert & Horenstein, 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2021). This "self-discrepancy" may be particularly pronounced during family interactions, where the curated self-encountered on social media contrasts with the authentic self-known to family members. Furthermore, the pursuit of external validation through curated content may paradoxically reduce the internal validation derived from authentic family relationships (Toma, 2017).

The Ghanaian Context

The Ghanaian context is characterised by several features relevant to this study. First, extended family networks and communal living are central to Ghanaian social organisation (Nsamenang, 1992). Unlike the nuclear family structures typical in Western research, Ghanaian families often include multiple generations and extended relatives who provide mutual support. Family meals in this context may involve a broader circle of participants and carry particular cultural significance.

Second, Ghanaian culture is collectivist, emphasising group harmony, interdependence, and respect for elders (Gyekye, 1996). The intrusion of curated social media into family meals may be particularly disruptive in this context because it violates norms of respect and presence. Young adults may experience guilt or anxiety when they engage with curated content during family meals, aware that such behaviour may be perceived as disrespectful.

Third, mobile phone ownership and social media use in Ghana have grown rapidly, particularly among young adults (Pew Research Center, 2021). WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok are widely used platforms where curated self-presentation is common. The prevalence of curated social media use during family meals is likely increasing, making the present study timely and relevant.

VII. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of lived experience and the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. It is particularly suited to understanding complex, subjective phenomena such as the experience of curated social media use during family meals and its relationship to loneliness. The phenomenological approach prioritises participants' first-person accounts and seeks to identify essential themes that characterise the experience.

Research Approach

The study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a qualitative approach that is both phenomenological (focusing on lived experience) and interpretive (acknowledging the role of the researcher in making sense of participants' experiences). IPA emphasises the detailed exploration of personal experience and the idiographic analysis of individual accounts before moving to cross-case themes.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in three public universities in Ghana: the University of Ghana (Legon), Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Kumasi), and the University of Cape Coast. These institutions were selected to ensure regional and cultural diversity among participants. University settings were chosen because they concentrate Gen Z young adults who have regular access to both family meals (during holidays and home visits) and curated social media platforms.

Study Population

The study population comprised Ghanaian Gen Z young adults aged 18-25 years who: (a) are currently enrolled in a Ghanaian public university, (b) regularly use social media platforms where curated self-presentation is common, (c) have experienced family meals as the context for social media use, and (d) are willing to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. The age range is consistent with definitions of Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and captures the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, a period when family relationships are being renegotiated.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who could provide rich, detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Specifically, criterion-based purposive sampling was used: participants were required to meet all inclusion criteria and to have actively reflected on their experiences of social media use during family meals. Additional strategies included:

- **Maximum variation sampling** to ensure diversity across gender, family composition, year of study, and social media platform preference.
- **Snowball sampling** whereby initial participants referred other eligible participants.

Recruitment was conducted through student associations, social media platforms, and classroom announcements.

Sample Size

A sample of 28 participants was recruited. This sample size is consistent with IPA recommendations, which typically range from 6 to 30 participants (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation: data collection continued until no new themes emerged from interviews.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 28)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male	12
	Female	15
	Non-binary/Other	1
Age (years)	18-20	8
	21-22	10
	23-25	10
University	University of Ghana	10
	KNUST	9
	University of Cape Coast	9
Year of Study	1st Year	6
	2nd Year	8
	3rd Year	7
	4th Year	7
Living Arrangement	With family (during breaks)	28
	University hostel (during semester)	28

Family Composition	Two-parent household	16
	Single-parent household	8
	Extended family household	4
Primary Social Media Platforms	WhatsApp	26
	Instagram	24
	TikTok	18
	Snapchat	10
	X (Twitter)	8

Data Collection Method

In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews. Each participant completed one 60-90 minute individual interview. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (Twi, English, or a combination). A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework and research objectives. The guide was flexible, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words while ensuring that key topics were addressed. The interview guide addressed:

- **General social media use**: What platforms do you use and how do you engage with them?
- **Curated social media use**: Do you post content on social media? How do you decide what to post? How do you think about how others might perceive your posts?
- **Family meal experiences**: What are family meals like in your home? Who is present, what happens, what is the tone?
- **Social media during family meals**: Do you use social media during family meals? Can you describe a typical experience? How does it feel to be on social media during the meal?
- **Impact on family interaction**: How does your social media use affect the meal? Do you feel present with your family when you are on social media? How do your family members respond?
- **Emotional experience**: How does it make you feel to be on social media during the meal? Do you ever feel lonely during family meals? Can you describe that feeling?
- **Coping strategies**: Are there times when you try not to use social media during meals? What helps you to be more present?
- **Cultural norms**: Are there expectations in your family or culture about being present during meals? Do you feel guilty when you use social media during meals?

Interviews were conducted in private settings (university meeting rooms, participants' homes during breaks, or quiet coffee shops). All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Participant Journals. To complement interview data, participants were asked to maintain a brief journal for one week, recording their experiences of family meals and social media use. Journal prompts included: "Describe a family meal where you used social media what happened, what did you feel?" and "Describe a family meal where you stayed off social media what was different?" Journals provided in-the-moment accounts that complemented retrospective interview narratives. Journal entries varied in length from brief notes to detailed descriptions.

Family Member Interviews (Optional). As an additional data source, participants were asked to identify one family member (parent, sibling, or grandparent) who would be willing to be interviewed about their perspective on the family meal phenomenon. This triangulation provided multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon. Nine family member interviews were conducted.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following the six-stage process outlined by Smith et al. (2009):

Stage 1: Reading and Re-reading. All interview transcripts and journals were read multiple times to gain an overall sense of participants' experiences. Initial impressions and observations were recorded.

Stage 2: Initial Noting. Transcripts were closely examined line-by-line. Three types of notes were made: descriptive (what participants described), linguistic (how they expressed themselves), and conceptual (interpretive observations about meaning).

Stage 3: Developing Emergent Themes. Initial notes were transformed into emergent themes that captured the essential aspects of participants' experiences. These themes were grounded in participants' words but represented analytic interpretations.

Stage 4: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes. Emergent themes were clustered, and patterns were identified. Superordinate themes were developed that captured higher-level patterns.

Stage 5: Moving to the Next Case. Each transcript was analysed individually before moving to cross-case analysis. This idiographic approach ensured that the uniqueness of each participant's experience was respected.

Stage 6: Looking for Patterns Across Cases. Individual case analyses were compared to identify shared and unique themes across participants. This stage culminated in the development of the final thematic structure.

Table 2: Analytic Process: From Data to Themes

Stage	Activity	Output
1	Reading and re-reading transcripts, journals	Familiarity with data
2	Line-by-line coding	Descriptive, linguistic, conceptual notes
3	Theme identification	Emergent themes for each participant
4	Theme clustering	Superordinate themes per case
5	Cross-case comparison	Shared and unique themes
6	Final thematic structure	Master themes with subthemes

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

Credibility.

- **Prolonged engagement**: The researcher spent extended time in the field, building rapport with participants through multiple contacts.
- **Triangulation**: Data were collected from multiple sources (interviews, journals, family member interviews), enabling cross-validation.
- **Member checking**: Preliminary findings were presented to 10 participants, who confirmed that the themes accurately captured their experiences.
- **Peer debriefing**: The research was discussed with a qualitative research group who provided critical feedback.

Transferability. Thick description of participants, contexts, and experiences was provided to enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts.

Dependability. An audit trail documented all decisions made during the research process, including sampling, data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Confirmability. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal that documented assumptions, biases, and how they were managed. Direct quotations are used extensively to ground findings in participants' voices.

Reflexivity

The researcher acknowledged her position as a young adult researcher who herself engages with curated social media. This shared experience with participants facilitated rapport but also required reflexive attention to avoid imposing her own experiences on participants' accounts. The reflexive journal documented how her assumptions about social media and family relationships evolved throughout the research process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Institutional Review Boards at all three participating universities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (and from family members for the optional interviews). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were offered resources for counselling if the interviews evoked distress. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices.

VIII. FINDINGS

The analysis revealed four major themes, each with associated subthemes. Direct quotations from participants are used to illustrate each theme. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Theme 1: The Erosion of Meal-Time Presence Algorithmic Distraction Fragments Attention and Diminishes Relational Depth

Participants consistently described how curated social media use during family meals fragmented their attention and eroded the quality of presence. The family meal, which had once been a time of focused, uninterrupted engagement, had become a site of divided attention where the family audience competed with the imagined online audience for cognitive and emotional resources.

Subtheme 1.1: Physical Co-Presence and Emotional Absence

Participants described a paradox of being physically present at the table while being emotionally and cognitively absent, engaged with curated content and imagined audiences.

Ama, a 21-year-old female from the University of Ghana, described this experience vividly:

"My mother sets the table. She calls everyone. We sit down. And then I take out my phone. I'm scrolling. I'm looking at Instagram stories. I'm thinking about what to post. My mother is talking about her day, but I'm only half-listening. I'm there my body is there but my mind is somewhere else. I can see that she notices. Sometimes she stops talking in the middle of a sentence. She just looks at me. And I know what she's thinking. But I don't put the phone down. I don't know why."

Similarly, Kwame, a 23-year-old male from KNUST, reflected:

"My sister is studying in Germany. She calls during our Sunday lunch. We are all physically together my parents, my younger brother, me. But we are also not together. We are all checking our phones. My mother gets upset. She says, 'When your sister came for the holidays, you were all looking at your phones. Now she's far away, and you still look at your phones.' She's right. But it's like a habit. You don't even know you're doing it until someone points it out."

Participants described this eroded presence not as deliberate neglect but as an automatic, habitual response. The pull of curated content notifications, updates, the opportunity to curate and present was described as almost irresistible.

Subtheme 1.2: The Fragmentation of Family Conversation

Participants reported that curated social media use fragmented family conversation, breaking the continuity of shared narrative and reducing the depth of relational exchange.

Esi, a 20-year-old female from the University of Cape Coast, explained:

"Before everyone had smartphones, meals were a time when we talked. We would share stories from the day. My father would tell us about his work. My mother would talk about the family. I would tell them about my school. It was continuous. Now, people are on and off. Someone starts telling a story, and then someone else gets a notification and looks at their phone. The story stops. By the time they look up, the conversation has moved on. Or they missed part of it and ask, 'What did you say?' You have to repeat yourself. The whole flow is broken."

This fragmentation was experienced as a loss not only of information but of the relational quality of shared storytelling. Participants mourned the loss of uninterrupted family narrative.

Subtheme 1.3: The Algorithmic Interruption

Participants specifically identified algorithmically generated notifications not merely voluntary checking as a source of disruption. The AI-driven nature of notifications and recommendations made curated engagement feel both irresistible and intrusive.

Yaw, a 22-year-old male from KNUST, described:

"I will be eating. I will be trying to be present. And then my phone vibrates. It's not even a message from someone I know. It's a notification from Instagram: 'So-and-so posted a story. Check it out.' Or 'People you might know: follow these accounts.' The algorithm knows what I like. It shows me content that interests me. And I can't help it. I look. And then I am gone. I'm no longer at the table. I'm in the algorithm's world. This happens maybe five, six times during a meal."

The active, AI-driven nature of these interruptions designed to capture and hold attention was perceived as a force that participants felt powerless to resist.

Theme 2: The Performance Paradox Curated Online Identities Obscure Authentic Self-Presentation During Family Interaction

Participants described a fundamental tension between the curated selves they presented online and the authentic selves they presented to family. This tension created a sense of inauthenticity and disconnection during family meals.

Subtheme 2.1: The Contrast Between Curated and Authentic Selves

Participants engaged in deliberate curation of their online identities selecting, editing, and presenting versions of themselves to specific audiences. During family meals, the contrast between this curated self and the authentic self known to family became pronounced.

Adjoa, a 19-year-old female from the University of Ghana, described:

"On Instagram, I am put together. I post photos where I look beautiful. I write captions about my achievements. I show my life as exciting and successful. My family knows me differently. They know when I am sad. They know when I am struggling. They know about the things I don't post. When I am with them, I feel this tension. I want to be the person they know, but I also want to be the person online. During meals, I sometimes post about the meal. I take a photo of the food, or a photo with my siblings. But the photo is curated. It shows the happy family. It doesn't show the tension, the silences, the things we don't talk about."

Participants described the curated online self as "polished," "controlled," and "performative," while their family interactions were seen as "messy," "unpredictable," and "authentic." The coexistence of these two modes of self-presentation created a sense of fragmentation.

Subtheme 2.2: The Inauthenticity of Parallel Engagement

The act of curating content during family meals was experienced as particularly inauthentic. Participants described a "double performance": performing curated self-presentation online while simultaneously performing the role of the engaged family member.

Kofi, a 24-year-old male from the University of Cape Coast, reflected:

"It's strange. I will be at the table with my family. And I will post something on Instagram about family. Maybe a picture of the food, with a caption like 'Blessed to be with family.' But I am not really engaged with them. I am engaged with my phone, with the people who will see my post. I am presenting this image of a good family, but I am not actually having a good moment with them. It's a paradox. I am curating an image of connection while actually being disconnected."

This paradox performing connection online while experiencing disconnection offline was a source of discomfort for many participants. They described feeling like "frauds" or "hypocrites."

Subtheme 2.3: The Felt Invisibility of the Authentic Self

Participants described how the curated online self-received attention and validation likes, comments, shares while the authentic self-presented to family was, at times, invisible or unacknowledged. This asymmetry contributed to feelings of loneliness.

Akua, a 22-year-old female from KNUST, explained:

"On social media, people see my posts. They like them. They comment. They validate me. I get this external recognition. It feels good. With my family, it's different. I can tell them something important, and they might not respond. Or they might not understand. They are busy with their own lives. The engagement online is immediate. The engagement offline is not. So I start to rely more on the online validation. But that validation is shallow. It doesn't fill the emptiness. It makes me more lonely, actually."

The perceived external validation available through curated content contrasted with the often-unspoken, routine nature of family recognition. This contrast intensified the appeal of curated engagement while simultaneously deepening the experience of loneliness.

Theme 3: The Intergenerational Technology Gap Misunderstanding, Resentment, and Emotional Distance

Participants described a significant intergenerational divide in attitudes toward technology, social media, and family presence. This divide created misunderstanding, resentment, and emotional distance during family meals.

Subtheme 3.1: Parental Frustration and Attempts at Control

Participants described parents' frustration with meal-time social media use and the strategies parents used to control or limit this behaviour strategies that were often perceived as authoritarian or out of touch.

Samuel, a 21-year-old male from the University of Ghana, recounted:

"My father cannot stand phones at the table. He thinks it's disrespectful. He has rules: no phones at the table. But I need my phone. I have group chats for school assignments. I have messages to respond to. I get notifications. So I keep my phone on the table, facedown. He doesn't like it. He says, 'When I was young, we respected family meals. We talked to each other.' But things have changed. He doesn't understand that my social world is online. He thinks I am being rude. I think he is being old-fashioned."

This intergenerational tension was a recurring theme, with participants perceiving their parents as unable to understand the centrality of social media in their lives, and parents perceiving participants as disrespectful and disengaged.

Subtheme 3.2: The Silence of Disengagement

Rather than overt conflict, some participants described a more passive response from parents and grandparents: a withdrawal, a retreat into resignation, or a silence that communicated disappointment.

Abena, a 20-year-old female from the University of Cape Coast, described:

"My grandmother lives with us. She is very traditional. She grew up in the village. When I am on my phone during meals, she just looks at me. She doesn't say anything. She just sighs. Her silence is worse than yelling. It says more than words. It says, 'I am disappointed. I am sad. I don't understand what is happening to our family.' I feel her silence. It makes me guilty. But I still don't put the phone down. I don't know why."

The silence of older family members was experienced as a powerful form of communication an expression of loss, grief, or resignation that intensified participants' feelings of guilt and disconnection.

Subtheme 3.3: The Accusation of Disrespect

In more traditional or hierarchical families, meal-time social media use was interpreted not merely as distraction but as a direct violation of respect norms.

Nana, a 23-year-old male from KNUST, explained:

"In my culture, you must show respect to elders. At the table, you listen. You don't interrupt. You don't show disrespect. My grandfather says that using a phone at the table is disrespect. It says, 'What you are saying is not important. I have better things to attend to.' He is right, but I can't stop. I try, but the phone is always there. It's like an addiction. I know it's wrong. I know I am disrespecting my elders. But I do it anyway. And I feel bad. I feel like a bad grandson. But I also feel like I can't help it."

This theme reveals how cultural norms of respect and presence intensify the moral and emotional weight of curated social media use during family meals. Participants experienced not only loneliness but also guilt and shame.

Theme 4: The Lingering Guilt and Awareness of Disruption Participants' Perceived Inability to Disengage

Despite their continued use of curated social media during family meals, participants described a persistent awareness of disruption and guilt about their behaviour. This awareness coexisted with a perceived inability to disengage a powerful sense of being caught between competing demands.

Subtheme 4.1: The Recognition of Loss

Participants described a reflective awareness that something important was being lost the quality of family connection, the depth of conversation, the feeling of being truly together.

Selina, a 22-year-old female from the University of Ghana, reflected:

"I think about the times when we were all at the table and no one was on their phone. Maybe at the beginning of the meal, before the first notification. There is this moment maybe five, ten minutes where we are all talking, all laughing, all present. It feels good. It feels like family. And then someone's phone goes off. And then everyone checks. And the moment is gone. I notice it happening. I

know it's happening. But I am part of it. I check my phone too. And when I think about it later, I feel sad. I miss the moments that we used to have. I miss the connection."

This recognition of loss was often accompanied by a sense of nostalgia for a past that participants had experienced only partially or at earlier stages of their lives.

Subtheme 4.2: The Automaticity of Engagement

Participants described curated social media engagement during meals as automatic and habitual something they did without conscious intention, often against their own better judgment.

Emmanuel, a 24-year-old male from KNUST, described:

"I don't plan to use my phone during meals. It just happens. I sit down. I put my phone on the table. I tell myself I won't look at it. Then there is a moment maybe after thirty seconds and I am checking it. I don't even think about it. It's like my hand moves on its own. It's automatic. I am aware that I shouldn't do it. I tell myself, 'Emmanuel, put the phone down.' But I don't. It's stronger than me."

This automaticity was described as a form of "compulsion" or "habit" that participants felt powerless to control. The curated content designed to attract and hold attention seemed to operate at a level below conscious decision-making.

Subtheme 4.3: The Guilt-Shame Spiral

Participants described a cycle of behaviour and emotion: they used social media during meals, felt guilty or ashamed, but continued to use it, intensifying their negative feelings.

Gifty, a 19-year-old female from the University of Cape Coast, described this pattern:

"I feel bad. I know my mother is watching me. I know she wishes I would put the phone down. But I don't. So I feel guilty. But I also feel frustrated. I think, 'Why can't I just put it down?' So I feel ashamed of myself. And the guilt and the shame make me want to escape more. So I go on my phone more. It's a spiral. The more I use it, the more I feel disconnected, and the more I want to use it."

This spiral suggests that curated social media use during family meals is not only a cause of loneliness but may also be a response to the discomfort that loneliness produces a way of escaping the very feelings it generates.

Subtheme 4.4: Occasional Resistance and the Experience of Connection

A minority of participants described moments when they successfully resisted curated engagement and experienced deeper family connection. These moments were described as rare but powerful.

Daniel, a 23-year-old male from the University of Ghana, described:

"One time, I left my phone in my room. I came to the table with nothing. At first, I felt anxious. What if someone is trying to reach me? What if I miss something? But then I started talking with my family. We had a real conversation. We laughed. We talked about things that mattered. It felt different more real. When I went back to my phone after the meal, I felt like I had done something good. I had been present. I had been there with them."

These moments of resistance, while exceptional, revealed the potential for restored connection and highlighted the negative effects of routine curated engagement.

IX. DISCUSSION

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experience of curated social media use during family meals and its relationship to loneliness among Gen Z young adults in Ghana. The findings reveal a complex, emotionally charged phenomenon in which the family meal a traditional site of connection has become a site of fragmentation, performative tension, intergenerational conflict, and profound loneliness.

The Erosion of Presence and the Paradox of Co-Presence

The first major theme, the erosion of meal-time presence, extends the Displacement Hypothesis (Kraut et al., 1998) by specifying the mechanism and context of displacement. Participants were not simply "on social media" instead of interacting with family; they were engaged in a specific form of activity (curated, performative engagement with online audiences) that displaced attention and emotional availability from the family audience. The Displacement Hypothesis has typically been tested at the aggregate level (overall time spent online displacing offline interaction). This study demonstrates displacement occurring within a specific interactional moment, with algorithmic interruptions fragmenting attention second-by-second.

This finding also extends Family Ritual Theory (Fiese et al., 2002) by identifying a specific threat to family meal rituals: the algorithmic interruption that disrupts the flow and continuity of shared interaction. Participants described fragmented conversations, missed information, and repeated stories all symptoms of the erosion of ritual coherence. The family meal, as a ritual, depends on shared attention, narrative continuity, and mutual engagement. Algorithmically-curated social media disrupts all of these elements.

The Performance Paradox and the Inauthenticity of Connection

The second major theme, the performance paradox, illuminates a mechanism by which curated social media use during family meals contributes to loneliness. Self-Presentation Theory (Goffman, 1959) posits that social interaction involves impression management the presentation of curated selves to different audiences. However, Goffman did not anticipate the possibility of simultaneous,

multiple audiences or the conflict between online and offline performances. Participants in this study experienced themselves as performing for two audiences simultaneously their online audience (who saw curated, polished, "best-self" representations) and their family audience (who saw a more authentic, unfiltered version).

This double performance produced a sense of inauthenticity and fragmentation that, according to participants, contributed to loneliness. The curated self-received external validation (likes, comments) while the authentic self-remained unvalidated or invisible. This asymmetry resonates with Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), which posits that discrepancies between the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self-produce emotional distress. Participants experienced a discrepancy between their curated ideal self (presented online) and their actual self (presented to family), generating discomfort that manifested as loneliness.

The Intergenerational Gap and the Cultural Dimensions of Disruption

The third major theme, the intergenerational technology gap, reveals the cultural dimensions of meal-time social media disruption. In Ghanaian culture, where respect for elders and family harmony are paramount (Gyekye, 1996; Nsamenang, 1992), curated social media use during meals was not merely a matter of attention; it was a violation of cultural norms. Participants described guilt, shame, and perceived disrespect emotional experiences that intensified their loneliness and disconnection.

This finding suggests that the effects of digital disruption are culturally moderated. In individualistic Western contexts, meal-time phone use may be seen as a matter of personal choice or social etiquette. In collectivist Ghanaian contexts, it is also a matter of respect, obligation, and family honour. The intergenerational gap between older family members who view meal-time presence as a sacred obligation and younger members who view digital connectivity as a necessity created a relational distance that participants experienced as both lonely and guilt-inducing.

The silence of parents and grandparents the sigh, the glance, the withdrawal was described by participants as particularly painful. This silence functioned as a form of communication that expressed disappointment and grief, intensifying participants' awareness of their disruption and their felt distance from family.

The Guilt-Shame Spiral and the Paradoxical Intensification of Loneliness

The fourth major theme, the guilt-shame spiral, reveals the dynamic process through which curated social media use during family meals may paradoxically intensify loneliness. Participants were aware of the negative effects of their behaviour, experienced guilt and shame about their inability to disengage, and then used social media as an escape from these negative feelings a pattern that deepened their disconnection and loneliness.

This pattern resonates with the "social compensation" hypothesis, which posits that lonely individuals may use social media to compensate for deficient offline relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). However, this study suggests a more complex dynamic: social media use during family meals is not merely a compensation strategy but a behaviour that simultaneously reflects and creates disconnection. The curated content provides a temporary distraction from the discomfort of loneliness but also prevents the authentic engagement that could alleviate it.

The involuntary, automatic nature of this engagement described by participants as a compulsion or habit is consistent with research on the addictive qualities of social media (Andreassen et al., 2017). AI-driven platforms are designed to maximise user engagement through algorithmic optimisation, and participants described feeling "hooked" by notifications, recommendations, and the need to curate content. This automaticity suggests that individual-level solutions (personal willpower) may be insufficient to address the problem.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it extends the Displacement Hypothesis by demonstrating that displacement occurs not only at the aggregate level of time allocation but also at the interactional level of moment-to-moment attention. Second, it integrates Self-Presentation Theory with research on digital loneliness, demonstrating the role of the curated self in creating feelings of inauthenticity that contribute to disconnection. Third, it extends Family Ritual Theory by identifying algorithmic disruption as a specific threat to family rituals, and by examining how cultural norms shape the experience and meaning of disruption. Fourth, it provides a culturally situated understanding of loneliness in the Ghanaian context, highlighting the role of intergenerational tension and respect norms in shaping the experience of digital disruption.

Implications for Intervention

The findings have several implications for intervention. First, interventions should address not only individual behaviour but also family dynamics. Family-level strategies such as establishing meal-time digital curfews, engaging in family media use agreements, and creating tech-free zones may be more effective than individual-level strategies.

Second, interventions should address the intergenerational gap through dialogue and education. Parents and young adults need opportunities to understand each other's perspectives parents to understand the centrality of digital connectivity to young adults' lives, and young adults to understand the meaning and importance of presence to their families.

Third, interventions should address the design of social media platforms. AI-driven notifications and content recommendations are engineered to maximise engagement, and this design may be incompatible with sustained family presence. Policy-level advocacy for "wellbeing-by-design" approaches may be warranted.

Fourth, interventions should address the guilt-shame spiral by helping young adults to disengage with self-compassion rather than self-criticism. The experience of guilt may paradoxically drive further engagement as an escape mechanism. Shame reduction and self-compassion interventions may be helpful.

X. LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from university students, limiting generalisability to non-student Gen Z populations. Non-students may have different family structures, social media usage patterns, and experiences of loneliness.

Second, the study relied on self-report data. While the phenomenological approach values participants' subjective accounts, self-report may be subject to memory bias, social desirability, and limited self-awareness. Future research could incorporate observation of family meals and objective measures of social media use.

Third, the study did not include participants from the full range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Socioeconomic status may shape both family meal patterns and social media usage, and future research should examine these intersections.

Fourth, the sample was limited to the Ghanaian context. Cross-cultural research is needed to assess the cultural specificity of findings, particularly whether similar dynamics operate in other collectivist contexts or whether they differ in individualistic Western settings.

Fifth, the study focused on Gen Z participants and their experiences; family members' perspectives, while represented through optional interviews, were not the primary focus. A family systems approach with multiple family members could provide a more comprehensive picture.

Sixth, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits understanding of developmental trajectories. Longitudinal research could examine how these dynamics evolve as young adults enter different life stages and family structures.

XI. CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experience of curated social media use during family meals and its relationship to loneliness among Gen Z young adults in Ghana. The findings reveal that curated social media engagement during meals produces a form of loneliness that is not caused by the absence of family members but by the felt absence of genuine connection in their presence.

The erosion of presence, the performance paradox, the intergenerational technology gap, and the guilt-shame spiral together constitute a complex phenomenon in which the family meal a traditional site of connection and belonging has become a site of fragmentation, inauthenticity, and emotional distance. Participants described themselves as physically present but emotionally absent, performing curated selves for online audiences while failing to authentically engage with family.

The loneliness experienced by participants was not the loneliness of isolation but the loneliness of connection interrupted the loneliness of being in a room full of people who are, at the same time, elsewhere. This form of loneliness may be particularly insidious because it is experienced in the very context (family) that is supposed to protect against loneliness. The protective function of family meals, documented in previous research, may be undermined by the intrusion of curated digital engagement.

The study also revealed the cultural dimensions of this phenomenon in the Ghanaian context. The violation of cultural norms of respect and presence intensified participants' guilt and shame, and the intergenerational gap created misunderstanding and resentment that contributed to family distance.

The findings suggest that addressing loneliness among Gen Z requires attention to the quality of family interactions, the role of technology in disrupting family rituals, and the intergenerational dynamics that shape family life. Restoration of the family meal as a site of genuine connection may require not only individual behaviour change but also family-level strategies, design-level reforms, and cultural dialogue about the meaning of presence in an age of pervasive connectivity.

XII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed.

For Families

1. **Establish meal-time digital boundaries.** Families should negotiate and agree upon tech-free meal times or zones. These agreements should be collaborative rather than imposed, with input from all family members.
2. **Create tech-free meal rituals.** Families can reinforce the significance of meal time by creating rituals that mark it as special e.g., saying grace together, each person sharing one positive moment from their day, or engaging in a shared activity before and after the meal.

3. **Engage in intergenerational dialogue.** Families should create space for parents and young adults to share their perspectives on technology use, presence, and family values. These conversations can build understanding and reduce conflict.
4. **Model desired behaviour.** Parents who want their children to put down their phones should model this behaviour themselves. The "do as I say, not as I do" approach is unlikely to be effective.

For Educational Institutions

5. **Integrate digital wellbeing education.** Schools and universities should include digital wellbeing in their curricula, helping young people understand the psychological effects of curated social media use and develop strategies for intentional engagement.
6. **Promote media literacy.** Digital literacy programmes should address not only the mechanics of social media but also the psychology of curation, the effects of algorithmic content delivery, and the importance of digital boundaries.
7. **Include family engagement in programmes.** Educational programmes on digital wellbeing should include family components, encouraging dialogue between generations about technology use and family presence.

For Social Media Platforms and Policymakers

8. **Design for wellbeing.** Platform designers should consider modifying algorithms to reduce engagement-maximisation features that disrupt meaningful interactions. This could include implementing "digital curfews" (features that limit notifications during certain hours) or "presence prompts" (features that encourage users to focus on offline interactions).
9. **Support user agency.** Platforms should provide tools that help users manage their engagement not only limiting screen time but also managing the types of content they are exposed to during significant family moments.
10. **Research on platform effects.** Independent research on the effects of AI-driven features on family relationships and loneliness should be supported and funded.

For Clinicians and Counsellors

11. **Assess digital engagement in therapy.** Clinicians working with young adults and families should routinely assess digital engagement patterns, particularly in the context of family interactions. The disruption of family rituals may be a significant but overlooked source of loneliness.
12. **Include family sessions.** Family therapy may be appropriate for families experiencing conflict around technology use. Sessions can address intergenerational understanding, communication, and shared strategies for digital management.
13. **Address shame and guilt.** Clinicians should help young adults manage the guilt and shame associated with technology use, using self-compassion approaches rather than shaming strategies.

For Future Research

14. **Conduct longitudinal research.** Studies that track participants over time are needed to understand developmental trajectories and the causal direction of relationships.
15. **Include diverse populations.** Research should include non-student populations, diverse socioeconomic groups, and other cultural contexts.
16. **Use multi-method approaches.** Observation of family meals, objective measurement of social media use, and interviews with multiple family members would provide a more comprehensive understanding.
17. **Test interventions.** Experimental studies should test the effectiveness of different intervention strategies family-based, individual, and design-based.
18. **Examine moderators.** Research should examine how family structure, cultural values, and individual differences (e.g., personality, attachment style) moderate the effects of curated social media use on family cohesion and loneliness.
19. **Explore positive cases.** Research on families where technology use does not disrupt connection could reveal protective factors and strategies.
20. **Conduct cross-cultural replication.** Research in other cultural contexts would assess the generalisability of findings and identify culture-specific moderators.

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