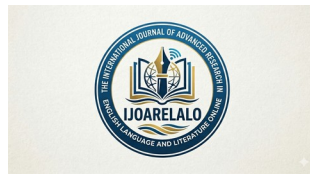


DIGITAL LONELINESS AND EMOTIONAL ALIENATION IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: A POSTHUMANIST READING IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM



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Abstract

The rapid growth of artificial intelligence, digital technologies, and social media has transformed the way people communicate, build relationships, and understand themselves. Although these technologies promise constant connectivity, they have also intensified experiences of loneliness, emotional alienation, and fragmented identities. This paper explores how contemporary literature portrays this paradox through the concepts of digital loneliness and emotional alienation. It employs Posthumanism as its primary theoretical framework, supported by Marxist perspectives on Digital Capitalism, to examine how technology and digital platforms reshape emotions and human relationships. While Posthumanism highlights the evolving relationship between humans and intelligent technologies, Digital Capitalism reveals how emotions, attention, and online interactions have become commodified in the digital economy. Focusing on *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro and *The Circle* by Dave Eggers, the paper analyses how these novels critique technological dependence, algorithmic control, and the commercialization of emotional life. It argues that digital loneliness extends beyond an individual psychological experience and reflects broader social and economic structures shaped by technology. By bringing literary analysis together with contemporary theory, this study contributes to current discussions in digital humanities and contemporary literary studies on the emotional consequences of life in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: Digital Loneliness, Emotional Alienation, Posthumanism, Digital Capitalism, Artificial Intelligence, Algorithmic Identity.

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), social media, and digital communication technologies has transformed the ways people communicate, work, and build relationships. Although these technologies promise greater connectivity and easier access to information, they have also created a paradox: despite being constantly connected, many individuals experience loneliness, emotional alienation, and psychological isolation. This contradiction has become a defining feature of contemporary digital society.

Digital culture has reshaped human relationships by replacing many face-to-face interactions with technology-mediated communication. Social media encourages users to construct online identities and seek validation through likes, comments, and followers, making emotional experiences increasingly dependent on digital visibility. While online communication is frequent and immediate, it often lacks the depth and intimacy of direct human interaction, giving rise to what scholars describe as **digital loneliness**—a state in which individuals remain socially connected yet emotionally unfulfilled.

Contemporary literature offers an important lens for examining these changes. Many twenty-first-century novels explore the emotional and ethical implications of artificial intelligence, surveillance, social media, and algorithmic systems. Rather than celebrating technological progress, these works reveal its complex impact on identity, relationships, and emotional well-being.

This paper examines digital loneliness through the framework of **Posthumanism**, supported by **Digital Capitalism**. Posthumanism argues that technology has become inseparable from human existence, shaping identity, communication, and emotional experience. As Donna Haraway observes, "*The cyborg is a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction*," highlighting the blurred boundary between humans and technology. Complementing this perspective, Digital Capitalism explains how digital platforms commodify users' attention, emotions, and behavioural data, transforming online engagement into economic value.

To explore these issues, the paper analyses *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro and *The Circle* by Dave Eggers. While Ishiguro explores artificial companionship and emotional dependence on intelligent machines, Eggers critiques surveillance culture, social media performance, and the commercialization of everyday life. Together, the novels demonstrate that digital loneliness is not merely an individual psychological experience but a socio-cultural

condition produced by the intersection of technological mediation and digital capitalism. By combining literary analysis with contemporary theory, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in digital humanities and contemporary literary studies on the emotional consequences of life in an increasingly digital world.

2. Review of Literature

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that contemporary literature plays a significant role in examining the emotional consequences of rapid technological transformation. Researchers working in posthumanism, digital humanities, media studies, and cultural theory argue that digital technologies have fundamentally altered human identity, emotional experience, and interpersonal relationships. These studies collectively provide an important intellectual foundation for analysing representations of digital loneliness in contemporary fiction.

Posthumanist scholars such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti challenge conventional humanist assumptions by demonstrating that contemporary identity is increasingly shaped through interactions with intelligent technologies. Haraway's concept of the cyborg dismantles rigid distinctions between humans and machines, while Hayles argues that information technologies have transformed traditional understandings of embodiment and subjectivity. Braidotti further develops these ideas by describing the posthuman subject as relational, technologically interconnected, and continually evolving. Their contributions provide an essential framework for understanding the blurred boundaries between humanity and artificial intelligence represented in recent literary texts.

Alongside posthumanist theory, scholars of Digital Capitalism examine how digital platforms convert human attention, emotions, and behavioural data into economic value. Shoshana Zuboff's theory of Surveillance Capitalism demonstrates how technology corporations commodify everyday human experience through continuous data extraction and algorithmic monitoring. Similarly, Nick Srnicek explains how platform capitalism relies upon data accumulation and digital participation as primary sources of economic power. These theoretical perspectives reveal that contemporary technologies are not merely communication tools but also mechanisms through which economic systems reshape emotional and social life.

Literary critics have increasingly applied these theoretical frameworks to contemporary fiction dealing with artificial intelligence, surveillance, and digital culture. Studies on Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* primarily explore questions of artificial consciousness, empathy,

ethics, and posthuman identity, highlighting the novel's interrogation of the relationship between humanity and intelligent machines. Research on Dave Eggers' *The Circle* has largely focused on surveillance culture, social media, algorithmic governance, privacy, and the commercialization of personal identity. Although these studies provide valuable insights into each novel individually, comparative research examining both texts through the combined perspectives of Posthumanism and Digital Capitalism remains relatively limited.

The existing scholarship also tends to discuss artificial intelligence, surveillance, or digital identity as separate concerns. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to **digital loneliness** as a shared emotional condition emerging from both artificial companionship and digitally mediated social interaction. Addressing this gap, the present study offers a comparative reading of *Klara and the Sun* and *The Circle* to demonstrate how contemporary literature reveals digital loneliness as a socio-cultural consequence of technological mediation and capitalist digital structures rather than merely an individual psychological experience.

3. Research Objectives

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of digital loneliness and emotional alienation in *Klara and the Sun* and *The Circle*.
2. To analyse the selected novels through the theoretical perspectives of Posthumanism and Digital Capitalism.
3. To investigate how artificial intelligence, surveillance, and digital platforms reshape human identity and emotional relationships.
4. To demonstrate how contemporary literature critiques the emotional consequences of technologically mediated life.

4. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- How do *Klara and the Sun* and *The Circle* represent digital loneliness in contemporary society?
- In what ways does Posthumanism explain the changing relationship between humans and intelligent technologies in the selected novels?

- How does Digital Capitalism contribute to emotional alienation and the commodification of human relationships?
- How do the selected novels critique the emotional consequences of technological dependence in the digital age?

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on close textual analysis. The primary texts selected for analysis are Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* and Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. The study employs Posthumanism as its principal theoretical framework while incorporating Marxist perspectives on Digital Capitalism to interpret the emotional and social implications of technologically mediated life. Primary textual evidence from the novels is examined alongside relevant theoretical and critical scholarship to analyse the representation of digital loneliness, emotional alienation, artificial companionship, surveillance culture, and algorithmic identity. Through a comparative literary approach, the research demonstrates how contemporary fiction critiques the complex relationship between technological innovation, capitalist digital structures, and human emotional experience.

6. Literary Analysis

Klara and the Sun: Artificial Companionship and the Posthuman Condition

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* explores the emotional consequences of a technologically mediated society through Klara, an Artificial Friend created to provide companionship to lonely children. Although she is a machine, Klara displays empathy, care, and emotional intelligence that often surpass those of the human characters, challenging conventional assumptions about consciousness and companionship.

Donna Haraway argues that "*The cyborg is a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.*" Klara embodies this idea by existing between machine and emotional companion. Her careful observation of human behaviour and unwavering concern for Josie demonstrate that artificial intelligence can participate in emotional life rather than merely imitate it. Ishiguro thus blurs the boundary between the human and the artificial, presenting technology as an integral part of contemporary relationships. At the same time, Klara's role exposes the limitations of artificial companionship. While she offers comfort and loyalty, her presence also highlights the emotional distance among the human characters, suggesting that technology can ease loneliness but cannot replace genuine intimacy.

This idea is reinforced by N. Katherine Hayles' observation that "*The posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation.*" Klara's emotional intelligence becomes more significant than her non-human identity, yet the novel ultimately suggests that authentic companionship depends on mutual human relationships rather than technological simulation. Ishiguro therefore portrays digital loneliness as a consequence of relying on artificial substitutes for emotional connection.

The Circle: Surveillance, Digital Capitalism, and Emotional Alienation

Dave Eggers' *The Circle* examines how social media, surveillance, and platform capitalism reshape identity and human relationships. The novel presents a society where privacy disappears as visibility, data sharing, and online participation become social expectations.

Shoshana Zuboff argues that "*Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material.*" Eggers illustrates this through the Circle's continuous collection of personal data and online behaviour. As Mae Holland becomes increasingly dependent on ratings, followers, and public approval, her identity is shaped by algorithmic visibility rather than authentic selfhood. Emotional expression and social interaction become valuable economic resources, reflecting the commercial logic of digital capitalism.

Karl Marx's concept of alienation further illuminates the novel. Although users appear to participate voluntarily, they continuously produce content and behavioural data that sustain the platform's economic success while becoming increasingly detached from genuine relationships and personal autonomy. Eggers therefore portrays digital loneliness as a structural consequence of surveillance and digital capitalism, where constant connectivity replaces meaningful human intimacy with digital performance.

7. Comparative Discussion

Although *Klara and the Sun* and *The Circle* portray different technological realities, both examine how digital technologies reshape human relationships and contribute to emotional alienation. Ishiguro explores artificial companionship through artificial intelligence, whereas Eggers critiques surveillance, social media, and platform capitalism. Together, the novels demonstrate how Posthumanism and Digital Capitalism complement one another in explaining the emotional realities of the digital age.

From a posthumanist perspective, both texts blur the boundary between humans and technology. Klara functions as an emotional companion whose empathy challenges conventional ideas of humanity, while *The Circle* shows how digital platforms increasingly shape identity, communication, and social behaviour. In both novels, technology becomes an active force in defining emotional experience rather than a passive tool.

The novels also expose the influence of Digital Capitalism. *The Circle* explicitly portrays surveillance and data-driven platforms that commodify attention and emotional engagement, whereas *Klara and the Sun* presents companionship itself as a technological product. Despite these differences, both narratives suggest that digital loneliness arises not from a lack of connectivity but from relationships mediated by technological and economic systems.

Taken together, the novels argue that technological progress does not necessarily produce emotional fulfilment. Instead, they reveal digital loneliness as a socio-cultural condition shaped by the intersection of technological innovation and digital capitalism, encouraging readers to reflect on the value of authentic human relationships in an increasingly digital world.

8. Findings

The study yields the following major findings:

1. **Digital loneliness emerges as a defining condition of contemporary digital society**, where constant technological connectivity coexists with emotional isolation and fragmented interpersonal relationships.
2. **Posthumanism provides an effective theoretical framework** for understanding the evolving relationship between humans and intelligent technologies. Both novels demonstrate that technology has become deeply integrated into human identity, communication, and emotional experience.
3. **Artificial intelligence in *Klara and the Sun* functions as both a source of companionship and a reminder of emotional absence**. Klara's empathy and devotion challenge conventional definitions of humanity while revealing the limitations of technological substitutes for genuine human intimacy.

4. ***The Circle* exposes the mechanisms of Digital Capitalism**, illustrating how surveillance, algorithmic governance, and social media platforms commodify human attention, emotions, and personal identity for economic gain.
5. **Both novels demonstrate that technological advancement does not necessarily produce emotional fulfilment**. Instead, they reveal how digitally mediated relationships often intensify alienation despite increasing opportunities for communication.
6. **The comparative analysis establishes that digital loneliness is not merely an individual psychological experience but a broader socio-cultural condition** shaped by the intersection of technological innovation, surveillance, and capitalist digital structures.

9. Conclusion

This study argues that digital loneliness is a defining paradox of contemporary society, where technological connectivity often coexists with emotional isolation. Drawing on Posthumanism and Digital Capitalism, it demonstrates that loneliness is not merely a personal experience but a socio-cultural condition shaped by technology and capitalist digital structures.

Through *Klara and the Sun* and *The Circle*, the paper reveals two complementary dimensions of this condition. While Ishiguro questions the limits of artificial companionship, Eggers critiques surveillance culture and the commercialization of identity and relationships. Together, the novels show that technology can facilitate communication but cannot replace the empathy, trust, and emotional depth that sustain meaningful human connection.

By bringing literary texts into dialogue with contemporary theory, this study highlights the relevance of literature in understanding the emotional and ethical challenges of the digital age. As artificial intelligence and digital technologies continue to evolve, contemporary fiction remains an important space for critically examining their impact on human identity, relationships, and emotional well-being.

10. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to a comparative textual analysis of *Klara and the Sun* and *The Circle*. It primarily employs the theoretical perspectives of Posthumanism and Digital Capitalism and does not examine the selected texts through other critical approaches such as

psychoanalysis, feminism, ecocriticism, or reader-response theory. Furthermore, the study is interpretative in nature and does not incorporate empirical data or audience-based research.

11. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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