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THE PATHOLOGIES OF CONNECTION: MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL DECAY IN THE DIGITAL LEXICON

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1. Introduction

The invention of the Internet was once perceived as the advent of the technological wonder and the ultimate remedy for ignorance. It used to be characterized by metaphors like “global village” and “information superhighway” [1]. However, a survey of the current digital lexicon reveals a significant shift. The digital lexicon of the third decade of the 21st century is rich in terms that pathologize the human-technology relationship. We are, in fact, witnessing the emergence of a “clinical sociolect” – a vocabulary that describes the digital experience as a source of physiological stress, cognitive atrophy, and social disintegration.

This paper states that these neologisms are not merely slang but diagnostic tools used to describe a collective crisis. We examine three domains of “digital pathology”: the somatic rebellion of the body against the device, the metabolic crisis of information processing, and the subtle decay of emotional intimacy.

2. Somatic Rebellion: The Medicalization of Device Usage

The integration of the smartphone into the daily life has diminished the distance between the biological and the technological. This merger is linguistically marked by terms that describe the body’s physical rejection of the interface.

One of the most vivid examples is “screen apnoea”, defined as the unconscious suspension of breathing while reading or answering an email or scrolling through feeds. Linguistically, this term borrows from sleep medicine (sleep apnea) to describe digital engagement as a dangerous disruption of autonomic functions. It suggests that the user is so preoccupied with the consumption of information that this preoccupation interrupts even such a fundamental biological process as breathing:

“The lack of movement that comes from sitting in front of a screen might also be a contributor to screen apnoea, says Dr David Spiegel. Disrupted breathing is the result

of “a combination of not just what you’re doing but what you’re not doing,” he says, adding that he noticed screen apnoea among patients who worked high-stress jobs for long hours without getting much exercise or sleep.” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 29 August 2023)

Similarly, the lexicon records physical deformities resulting from device usage. “Gameboy disease”, “text neck”, and “smartphone slump” describe spinal curvature disorders in children and adults caused by prolonged downward gazing at handheld devices. These dysphemisms serve a sociolinguistic function: they mark the technology as a pathogen that warps the developing skeletal structure.

One of the most profound psychological pathologies is “phantom vibration syndrome” (also known as “ringxiety”). This phenomenon, where a user hallucinates the tactile sensation of their phone’s vibration, indicates a blurring of the boundaries between the self and the device [2]. The term “ringxiety” (ring + anxiety) linguistically encodes the state of hyper-vigilance required by the attention economy, suggesting that the user’s nervous system has been “taught” to anticipate digital stimuli even in their absence.

3. Cognitive Metabolic Disorders: Infobesity and Brain Rot

If the body is physically warped by the device, the mind is often depicted as being “poisoned” or “stuffed” by the content it consumes. The metaphor of consumption is central to how users describe information processing.

The term “infobesity” (information + obesity) transforms the information overload into a metabolic disorder. The same way the consumption of processed calories leads to physical obesity, the consumption of “processed” data leads to a paralysis of decision-making and a degradation of focus. This metaphor implies that information is no longer a healthy food to be consumed and digested but a caloric excess to be managed through “digital diets” or “digital nutrition”.

This metaphor reaches its peak with the concept of “brain rot”. Originally a critique of intellectual laziness, this term has been repurposed and popularized by Generation Alpha to describe the cognitive fog induced by short-form, algorithmic content (e.g., TikTok loops or YouTube shorts). The term suggests a decomposition of the intellect, linked to the consumption of “slop” – low-quality, AI-generated content meant to maximize engagement rather than understanding:

“Your email inbox is full of spam. Your letterbox is full of junk mail. Now, your web browser has its own affliction: slop. “Slop” is what you get when you shove artificial intelligence-generated material up on the web for anyone to view. Unlike a chatbot, the slop isn’t interactive, and is rarely intended to actually answer readers’ questions or serve their needs.” (The Guardian, 19 May 2024)

Associated with this decay is “digital amnesia” (or the “Google Effect”), where the brain loses the ability to retain information because it outsources memory to external digital archives. Research by Ward [3] demonstrates that “thinking with Google” causes people to mistake the Internet’s knowledge for their own, weakening their ability to save information internally.

4. The Decay of Intimacy

The terminology surrounding digital relationships reveals a shift toward connections mediated by screens. There are multiple terms describing the termination of relationships via digital channels. Zumping (Zoom + dumping) denotes the act of ending a relationship over video conference, a term born during the pandemic that highlights the emotional distance created by the medium. "Ghosting" (abruptly ceasing romantic communication and avoiding further contact) has evolved into more specific forms of cruelty such as "breadcrumbing" (sending sporadic messages to keep a partner interested without actual commitment).

The economy of attention encourages the commercialization of emotions. "Sadfishing" (sad + catfishing) refers to the practice of exaggerating emotional distress online to garner sympathy. A study by Ceballos et al. [4] identifies sadfishing as a maladaptive coping mechanism often linked to denial and attention-seeking behaviors, where emotional expression becomes a performance for "likes" rather than a genuine request for support. Similarly, "vaguebooking" (posting ambiguous, dramatic status updates) is a linguistic strategy to solicit questions, while withholding information to maximize engagement time.

The concept of dexting (dating + texting) describes a relationship that exists entirely within text messages without any face-to-face interaction. This reflects a broader trend of "disembodied intimacy," where the linguistic aspect of the relationship becomes a substitute for the relationship itself:

"If you've ever found yourself in a back and forth texting marathon with a potential partner only to wind up with no actual in-person date to show for your time, you've probably been a victim of dexting. A combination of "dating" and "texting", dexting is when people form strong bonds over text after meeting on a dating app but never actually arrange a real date." (Glamour, 7 September 2023)

5. Social Decay and Tribalism

Finally, the digital lexicon reflects the fragmentation of the social fabric into hostile, hermetically sealed enclaves, the so-called "information bubbles" or "media bubbles". The "manosphere" refers to a network of misogynistic online communities, while the "edgelords" use shock value (shitposting) to disrupt meaningful discourse. The rise of "algospeak" (coded language used to evade the algorithmic moderation, for example, "unalive" for "dead") demonstrates how content policies force users to create new dialects to discuss controversial topics [5].

Conclusion

The sociolinguistic landscape of the digital age is defined by a lexicon of distress. From the screen apnoea that takes our breath away to the brain rot that disrupts our cognitive abilities, the language we use to describe our digital existence has inconspicuously changed into a language of pathology. These new words warn us that the infrastructure that was supposed to provide connection is currently dismantling the biological and social resources required for genuine human interaction.

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