



Digital absence and youth belonging

Smartphones, identity, and inequality in young people's lives

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Abstract

Background: Debates about young people and smartphones often begin with use: screen time, distraction, social media exposure, or problematic dependence.

Purpose: This conceptual article shifts attention from use to absence. It argues that the missing, dead, confiscated, unaffordable, disconnected, or silent phone is a revealing object in youth life because it exposes the relational, developmental, and institutional roles smartphones now perform.

Approach/Methods: Drawing on youth studies, adolescent digital media research, attachment theory, extended-self and self-continuity theory, and digital inequality scholarship, the article develops a conceptual model of digital absence and youth participation.

Findings/Argument: It identifies four overlapping pathways through which phone absence may become consequential: as a belonging threat, when peer contact and social visibility are interrupted; an identity-continuity threat, when access to photographs, messages, music, notes, and platforms is severed; an autonomy threat, when everyday navigation, schooling, work, transport, authentication, or caregiving are disrupted; and a vulnerability threat, when access to trusted adults, services, information, or support networks is weakened. The article also emphasizes absence as ambivalent, sometimes offering relief, privacy, resistance, or protection from constant availability.

Implications: Youth phone dependence should not be individualized too quickly, especially where institutions increasingly require continuous connectivity. The four pathways are offered as a guide for more precise questions in research, policy, and youth-facing practice.

Keywords: youth; digital absence; smartphones; belonging; identity; digital inequality

Introduction: from smartphone use to smartphone absence

The social meaning of the smartphone in youth life is commonly debated through the language of excess. Young people are described as being on their phones too often, too late, too emotionally, or too dependently. These concerns are not meaningless. There is substantial scholarship on screen time, sleep, peer relations, cyberbullying, social comparison, and adolescent wellbeing (Keles et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Yet a focus on excess can narrow the sociological and developmental question. The more revealing question is not only what young people do with phones, but what is interrupted when the phone is absent.

Digital absence refers here to the temporary or sustained loss of access to the smartphone and its connected functions. The phone may be lost, dead, broken, confiscated, unaffordable, out of data, disconnected from Wi-Fi, unavailable because of family control, or silent at the moment when a young person expects contact. Absence is therefore not a single event. It may be technical, relational, economic, disciplinary, or situational. Nor is it reducible to one emotion. A young person may experience absence as annoyance, relief, disorientation, exclusion, vulnerability, or a loss of practical agency.

In this article, youth refers broadly to adolescents and emerging adults, approximately 13 to 24 years of age, while recognizing that youth is not only a biological or chronological category (Arnett, 2000). The meaning of smartphone access differs across early adolescence, later adolescence, and emerging adulthood, and it is shaped by family rules, schooling, employment, housing, disability, culture, class, geography, gender, sexuality, migration, and access to other forms of support. A younger adolescent may experience phone absence through parental rules, school discipline, peer inclusion, or access to a separated caregiver. An older adolescent or emerging adult may experience it through work shifts, transport, banking, housing services, health appointments, or independent mobility. The article uses youth as an analytic category while preserving these developmental differences.

This article argues that smartphone absence deserves attention because it reveals how deeply contemporary youth life is organised through digital connection. The smartphone is not merely a media device. For many young people, it is a communication channel, identity archive, map, calendar, music library, payment tool, school portal, care coordination tool, safety device, and gateway to peer worlds. Its absence can therefore disrupt belonging, self-continuity, autonomy, and access. These disruptions are unevenly distributed. A young person with multiple devices, secure housing, reliable transport, and stable family support may experience a dead phone as inconvenience. A young person whose phone is their primary route to school updates, employment shifts, transport coordination, health appointments, or trusted adults may experience the same absence as a collapse in practical and relational infrastructure.

This argument matters for youth studies because it shifts the debate from individual dependence to social organization. Public discourse often asks why young people cannot put their phones down. A youth studies approach should also ask why schools, employers, services, families, transport systems, and peer cultures have made continuous reachability so consequential. Young people are often criticized for relying on smartphones while being simultaneously expected to use smartphones to receive institutional updates, coordinate care, manage mobility, authenticate accounts, and remain available to others. Digital absence therefore exposes a contradiction: youth are told that phone dependence is a problem at the same time that participation is increasingly organized through phone access.

The central claim is not that phones are inherently good for young people, nor that distress at phone absence is always adaptive. The central claim is that phone absence is a sociologically revealing event. It shows what social, developmental, and institutional functions have been delegated to a fragile personal device. When that device is missing or unavailable, the question should not only be whether the young person is overdependent. The question should be what has become unavailable, for whom, under what conditions, and with what alternatives.

The article proceeds in six steps. First, it defines digital absence and clarifies the conceptual approach. Second, it critiques nomophobia and screen-time discourse for naming distress without adequately explaining its social object. Third, it develops four pathways through which phone absence can become meaningful in youth life: belonging threat, identity-continuity threat, autonomy disruption, and access or safety disruption. Fourth, it addresses the ambivalence of absence by considering relief, resistance, privacy, and chosen disconnection. Fifth, it integrates the pathways into a developmental model and foregrounds digital inequality. Finally, it offers implications for youth-facing institutions and future research. The central claim is that the missing phone matters not because the device itself is sacred, but because it reveals the forms of social participation, identity work, and care access that have been placed inside it.

Conceptual approach

This article is a critical conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review or empirical study. Its purpose is to build a theoretical account of digital absence in youth life by integrating bodies of literature that are often discussed separately. The article draws on five intersecting areas of scholarship: youth studies and youth identity; adolescent digital media and peer relations; attachment and relational availability; extended-self and self-continuity theory; and digital inequality. These literatures were selected because each explains a different function smartphones may perform in young people's lives. Youth studies foregrounds the social organization of youth participation. Adolescent digital media research explains how peer relations and identity work are digitally mediated. Attachment theory clarifies why interrupted contact can feel relationally significant. Extended-self and self-continuity theories explain why the loss of device access may feel like a disruption of memory, identity, and practical selfhood. Digital inequality scholarship clarifies why the burden of absence is unevenly distributed.

The article does not claim that these literatures exhaust the topic. Rather, they provide a conceptual vocabulary for resisting two overly simple interpretations: that distress at phone absence is merely irrational dependence, or that phone absence is always harmful because smartphones are always beneficial. The conceptual task is to hold together ambivalence, development, and inequality. Digital absence can be a problem, a relief, a punishment, a safety risk, a privacy opportunity, an institutional barrier, or an act of resistance. Its meaning depends on what the phone was doing in the young person's life before it became unavailable.

The model developed below is therefore not a diagnostic tool. It is an analytic framework for asking more precise questions. The four pathways are analytically distinct but empirically overlapping. In lived experience, one episode of phone absence may activate several pathways at once. A confiscated phone may interrupt peer belonging, remove privacy from family surveillance, block access to schoolwork, and prevent contact with a trusted adult. A broken phone may threaten identity traces, employment coordination, and service access at the same time. The value of the model is not to classify every episode neatly, but to make visible what adult interpretations often flatten.

Beyond nomophobia and screen-time discourse

The term nomophobia, commonly defined as fear of being without a mobile phone, has been useful in naming an experience many people recognise: anxiety when the device is unavailable (Yildirim & Correia, 2015). Nomophobia research has produced scales and correlational findings linking mobile phone absence with anxiety, compulsive checking, and problematic use. Yet the concept can become too broad for youth studies. It names the distress but often does not specify its object. Is the young person distressed because a device is absent, because peers are unreachable, because a caregiver is monitoring location, because school requires digital access, because memories are stored on the phone, or because support systems are no longer accessible? Each possibility carries a different social meaning.

Screen-time discourse has a similar limitation. It treats time on devices as a measurable exposure and often asks whether more time produces worse outcomes. This question can be useful when studying sleep, attention, or displacement of other activities. However, youth digital life is not only a matter of duration. A one-hour video call with a trusted friend, a two-minute humiliating group-chat exchange, a school alert about a schedule change, and an evening of passive scrolling are not equivalent social events. The same length of use can support care, deepen exclusion, create pressure, or make ordinary coordination possible.

Recent scholarship increasingly challenges simple causal claims about digital technology and adolescent wellbeing. Large-scale studies suggest that associations between digital technology use and wellbeing are often small, heterogeneous, and dependent on context (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Reviews have argued for more precise questions about who is affected, under what conditions, and through which mechanisms (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Digital absence sharpens this call for precision. It asks what the phone does before asking whether the young person uses it too much.

A youth studies approach should also be cautious about moralising dependence. To call a young person dependent on a phone may be descriptively accurate, but dependency is not automatically pathological. Young people are dependent on school timetables, transport systems, caregivers, employers, peers, platforms, and institutional communication routines. If these systems are organised through smartphones, then smartphone dependence may reflect social organisation more than individual weakness. The more critical question is why so many forms of youth participation now require continuous digital availability.

This reframing matters because adult responses to youth phone use often begin from suspicion. The phone is treated as distraction, danger, or evidence of insufficient self-control. Those concerns may be justified in specific situations, but they can obscure the functions that the device performs. Digital absence makes these functions visible. When the phone disappears, a

young person may lose a route to reassurance, a record of identity, a tool for navigating institutions, or a line to help. A meaningful account of smartphone dependence must be able to distinguish these losses.

Smartphones as belonging infrastructure

Belonging is a central developmental and social concern of youth. Peer relationships become increasingly salient during adolescence, and young people often use digital media to maintain ordinary textures of peer life: jokes, invitations, group chat presence, images, shared interests, and the subtle confirmation of being included (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The phone is not simply an object through which social life is represented. It is one of the places where social life happens.

Attachment theory helps clarify why absence can feel emotionally charged. Attachment is not limited to early childhood. Across development, people seek proximity to important others, especially when distressed or uncertain (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). The smartphone can function as a proximity-maintenance device, providing access to reassurance, response, and relational cues. Research on mobile phone attachment and interpersonal attachment suggests that people may develop attachment-like relationships to phones partly because phones mediate access to significant others (Konok et al., 2016). For young people, this mediation may be especially intense because peer belonging and social recognition are developmentally salient.

The belonging pathway does not require the phone itself to be loved as an object. The important issue is that the phone carries cues of social availability. A delayed reply, unread message, removed group-chat membership, inactive location share, or sudden silence can become meaningful because it appears to say something about relational standing. The young person may not be distressed only because they cannot use a device. They may be distressed because they cannot tell whether they remain included, remembered, safe, or wanted.

Concrete youth examples make this clearer. A young person without a phone may miss the group chat where plans are made after school and arrive the next day to discover that everyone else knew something. A young worker may miss a schedule change sent by text and then be interpreted as unreliable. A youth with separated parents may lose the private line through which they maintain contact across households. A young person whose belonging is organized through a cultural, queer, disabled, faith, or gaming community may experience phone absence as a temporary removal from one of the few spaces where they feel recognized. These examples are not reducible to screen time. They are examples of digitally mediated social participation.

This interpretation is especially important because youth social life includes unequal power. Digital peer spaces can be supportive, playful, and identity-affirming, but they can also be exclusionary, surveilled, and status-laden. A phone can hold the thread by which a young person remains attached to a group; it can also be the instrument through which the group withholds recognition. Digital absence may therefore magnify both the desire for belonging and the vulnerability of being left out.

Belonging infrastructure also extends beyond peers. For some young people, the phone connects them to separated parents, siblings, romantic partners, mentors, cultural communities, faith communities, language communities, or chosen family. For youth whose offline environments are unsupportive or geographically isolated, digital contact may be a primary route to recognition. In this sense, phone absence may not merely interrupt communication. It may interrupt a young person's access to the social worlds in which they are known.

The first proposition follows: phone absence can become a belonging threat when it interrupts the cues, contacts, and spaces through which young people experience themselves as socially present, reachable, and recognised.

Smartphones as identity-continuity infrastructure

Adolescence is often described as a period of identity formation, but identity development now unfolds partly through digital traces. Young people experiment with self-presentation, preserve memories, curate images, save messages, build playlists, participate in fandoms, manage platform-specific audiences, and keep private notes that may not be visible to adults. These practices are not simply decorative. They can be part of the ordinary work of becoming a person.

The concept of the extended self is useful here. Belk (1988) argued that possessions can become part of the self because they hold memory, identity, and personal meaning. His later work extended this account into digital environments, where devices, profiles, photographs, and stored information become part of how people remember and present themselves (Belk, 2013). Floridi's (2014) account of the informational self similarly suggests that identity in digital environments is partly

constituted through information objects. For youth, whose sense of self is still forming, the smartphone can become an archive of becoming: a place where traces of past selves, possible selves, and relational selves are held together.

Self-continuity refers to the felt connection between who one has been, who one is, and who one is becoming (Sani, 2008; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1997). In youth, this continuity is both important and unstable. Young people are moving between family, school, peers, work, culture, platforms, and imagined futures. The phone can help stabilise this movement by holding evidence of continuity: conversations, photographs, routines, saved ideas, contact lists, passwords, notes, locations, and media that mark personal history.

Digital absence can therefore become more than inconvenience. Losing a phone can feel like losing access to one's archive. A dead battery can mean being unable to retrieve the photo, note, message, map, song, or reminder that anchors the moment. A confiscated phone can feel like a temporary removal of privacy, memory, and control over self-presentation. The young person may not articulate this as self-continuity threat, but the experience may appear as disorientation: I do not know where things are; I cannot prove what happened; I cannot retrieve what matters; I cannot present myself as I intended.

Identity-continuity also involves social recognition. Young people often use digital platforms to present different versions of themselves to different audiences, managing what Goffman (1959) called the presentation of self. This multiplicity can be developmental, not merely deceptive. Youth may use digital spaces to test style, humour, politics, gender expression, creativity, language, and community belonging. Phone absence interrupts not only access to memories but access to audiences who confirm or contest these emerging identities.

The second proposition follows: phone absence can become an identity-continuity threat when it interrupts access to the digital traces, archives, routines, and audiences through which young people maintain a sense of who they have been and who they are becoming.

Smartphones as autonomy infrastructure

Youth autonomy is often imagined as separation from adults, but in practice it is built through coordination. Young people learn to move through social institutions by managing time, transport, school expectations, work schedules, money, appointments, friendships, and family responsibilities. The smartphone increasingly supports this coordination. It allows young people to check a bus route, message a caregiver, confirm a shift, access a school platform, verify identity, manage banking, translate a message, store a ticket, or navigate an unfamiliar place.

Digital absence can disrupt this infrastructure. A young person without a functioning phone may be unable to check transit, contact an employer, receive a school notification, access two-factor authentication, coordinate a ride, locate an address, or respond to a caregiver. These are not luxury functions. They are everyday supports for competence. When absent, the young person may appear irresponsible, late, unreachable, or disorganised, even though the immediate problem is a breakdown in digital infrastructure.

This contradiction is visible in schools. Young people may be discouraged from phone use in classrooms while school communication, assignments, timetables, authentication, and family coordination increasingly depend on digital systems. It is also visible in employment, where young workers may receive shift changes, manager requests, and pay information through apps or messages. It appears in healthcare and social services, where reminders, forms, portals, and follow-up contacts may assume reliable phone access. Institutions may criticise youth dependence while simultaneously designing participation around it.

The contradiction is also visible in work, transport, and health systems. A young worker may receive shifts through an app. A student may need a phone for transit updates or payment. A youth with health or disability needs may rely on reminders, accessibility tools, translation apps, maps, medication information, or support contacts. A young person with caregiving responsibilities may use a phone to coordinate siblings, elders, or family logistics. Phone absence in these contexts can produce a temporary loss of agency because social systems have offloaded coordination onto the device.

A youth studies account of autonomy must therefore ask how independence is expected to work. If independence requires digital access, then phone absence can become a temporary loss of agency. This is especially true for young people with caregiving responsibilities, precarious employment, disability-related accessibility needs, rural transport barriers, language needs, or unstable housing. A smartphone may allow them to move through the world with greater independence; its absence may expose how conditional that independence has become.

The autonomy pathway also helps distinguish dependence from competence. A young person who relies on a map app may be dependent on a phone, but may also be competently navigating an unfamiliar environment. A youth who texts a caregiver

when plans change may be dependent on a device, but may also be responsibly coordinating safety. A blanket critique of dependence misses the practical intelligence involved in using digital tools to manage complex environments.

The third proposition follows: phone absence can disrupt autonomy when young people rely on smartphones to coordinate mobility, schooling, employment, family responsibilities, institutional access, and ordinary competence.

Smartphones as access and safety infrastructure

The fourth pathway concerns access and safety. For many young people, the phone is a route to support. It can connect them to trusted adults, friends, youth workers, counsellors, health services, school staff, community organisations, public information, and emergency help. It can hold appointment reminders, care plans, transportation information, housing contacts, interpretation tools, accessibility tools, and records of communication. For youth navigating complex systems, the phone may be the place where support becomes reachable.

Digital absence may therefore intensify vulnerability. A young person without phone access may be unable to contact a trusted person, receive a service update, respond to a housing worker, access transport information, or confirm an appointment. The practical consequences may accumulate quickly: missed messages become missed opportunities; missed opportunities become adult judgements about reliability; adult judgements may then reduce trust, access, or support. Intermittent connectivity can therefore produce cascading forms of exclusion.

This access pathway must be discussed carefully. It does not mean phones are inherently safe. Digital spaces can expose youth to harassment, surveillance, misinformation, exploitation, and distress. For some young people, phone absence may offer temporary relief from pressure or harm. The point is not to romanticise constant connection. The point is to recognise ambivalence. The same device can expose a young person to risk and connect them to help. Policies that remove access without understanding function may remove harms and supports at the same time.

Youth-facing systems often respond to phone use through rules: turn it off, put it away, surrender it, limit it, monitor it. Rules may be necessary in particular contexts. However, a developmental and equity-sensitive approach asks what the rule interrupts. Confiscating a phone during school may reduce distraction, but may also remove access to a translation app, disability accommodation, caregiver contact, transit coordination, or a trusted support. Requiring app-based communication may improve efficiency, but may also exclude young people who lose devices, cannot afford data, share phones, or move between unstable living arrangements.

The fourth proposition follows: phone absence can become an access and safety disruption when it removes a young person's route to support, services, trusted relationships, information, or practical help.

The ambivalence of absence: relief, resistance, and chosen disconnection

A credible youth studies account of digital absence must avoid the opposite error of treating continuous access as inherently desirable. Absence is not always a loss. Being unreachable can produce relief from pressure, comparison, surveillance, harassment, obligation, and the demand to respond. Young people may value moments when the phone is off, absent, hidden, or deliberately ignored. Digital absence can be a route to privacy, rest, concentration, face-to-face presence, family boundaries, spiritual practice, creative work, or refusal of platform demands.

This ambivalence is especially important because smartphones can intensify social pressure. Visibility cues, read receipts, location sharing, streaks, likes, group-chat dynamics, and algorithmic feeds can turn availability into obligation. A young person may feel expected to answer quickly, monitor conflict, maintain an image, respond to peer distress, or remain visible in spaces that are emotionally exhausting. In such contexts, absence can be protective. It can interrupt the demand to perform, compare, reassure, or be constantly locatable.

Digital absence can also be an act of resistance. Young people may refuse a platform, leave a group chat, turn off notifications, use privacy settings, avoid location sharing, or reject adult monitoring. These acts are not simply withdrawal. They may be attempts to reclaim control over attention, data, body, movement, or identity (Marwick & Boyd, 2014). For youth whose lives are heavily surveilled by institutions, families, peers, or platforms, chosen disconnection can be part of agency.

The important distinction is between chosen absence and imposed absence. Chosen absence can support wellbeing and autonomy. Imposed absence can remove access to belonging, support, mobility, identity, or care. The same outward state - the young person does not have or is not using the phone - can therefore have opposite meanings. A phone-free afternoon may be restorative when chosen; a confiscated phone may be isolating when it removes privacy and support; a dead phone may be

dangerous if the young person depends on it for transport or care coordination. This is why adult responses must begin with function and context rather than assumption.

A developmental model of digital absence and youth participation

The four pathways can be integrated into a developmental model of digital absence and youth participation. The model begins with a triggering absence: the phone is missing, dead, broken, confiscated, unaffordable, disconnected, or relationally silent. The absence then becomes meaningful through one or more pathways. Through the belonging pathway, the young person experiences interrupted social presence. Through the identity-continuity pathway, they experience interrupted access to digital traces and self-presentation. Through the autonomy pathway, they experience interrupted coordination and competence. Through the access and safety pathway, they experience interrupted support or care access.

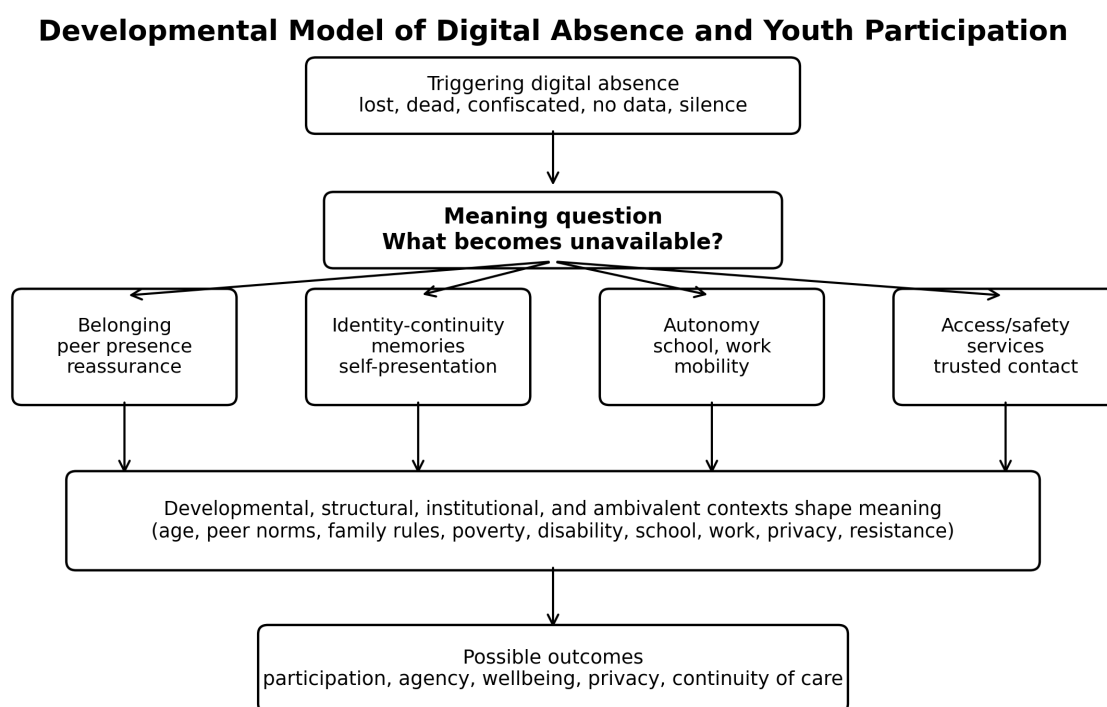
The model emphasises that these pathways are not mutually exclusive. A lost phone can simultaneously remove peer contact, identity traces, transport information, and service access. A confiscated phone can simultaneously reduce distraction and intensify isolation. A silent message thread can be technically ordinary and relationally painful. The meaning of absence depends on what function the phone was performing at the time.

Developmental moderators shape this meaning. Age matters because the phone may perform different functions for younger adolescents, older adolescents, and emerging adults. Attachment history matters because relational ambiguity may be more distressing for youth who expect rejection or abandonment. Family rules matter because phone access may signal trust, control, punishment, or protection. Peer norms matter because expectations for response, visibility, and group participation vary across social worlds. Platform design matters because read receipts, location sharing, streaks, ephemeral content, and notification systems create specific forms of urgency and absence.

Structural context is equally important. Digital absence is not simply the inverse of digital use. It is mediated by economic resources, geography, disability, migration, race, language, gender, sexuality, family structure, and institutional expectations. Digital inequality scholarship has shown that divides are not only about whether people have access, but also about quality of access, skills, autonomy of use, and social consequences (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Robinson et al., 2015; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Digital absence extends this insight by asking what happens when access is intermittent, surveilled, restricted, or fragile.

The model also avoids assuming that distress is always harmful. Distress may signal overdependence, but it may also signal that an important support has been interrupted. A young person distressed by a dead phone may be worried about missing a friend's crisis, a parent's message, a bus transfer, an appointment, or a shift change. The task for adults is not to decide in advance that the distress is irrational, but to ask what has become unavailable.

Figure 1 summarises the model. The digital absence experience sits at the centre of four pathways: belonging threat, identity-continuity threat, autonomy disruption, and access or safety disruption. Developmental, structural, and institutional moderators shape the intensity and meaning of absence, while outcomes include participation, agency, wellbeing, and continuity of care.

Figure 1*Developmental model of digital absence and youth participation*

Note. The figure presents four conceptual pathways through which smartphone absence may become meaningful for young people, while emphasizing developmental, structural, institutional, and ambivalent contexts. The pathways are analytically distinct but empirically overlapping; a single episode of absence may activate more than one pathway at once.

Digital inequality and the uneven burden of absence

A central strength of the digital absence frame is that it foregrounds inequality. Digital inclusion is often discussed in terms of access to devices and connectivity, but absence reveals the fragility of that access. A young person may technically own a phone yet lack reliable data, a stable charger, privacy, repair money, storage space, replacement options, or safe control over the device. They may share a phone with family members, depend on public Wi-Fi, lose service because of cost, or have their phone monitored by adults. They may be connected enough to be expected to respond, but not connected enough to respond reliably.

This matters because digital systems often punish intermittent access. Missed messages can become missed appointments, missed shifts, missed assignments, missed invitations, or missed opportunities. Youth with stable connectivity may recover quickly from these disruptions. Youth with precarious connectivity may be judged as unreliable or disengaged. The social consequences of absence therefore fall hardest on those least able to prevent it.

The question, then, is not only who has a phone, but who can afford disconnection. A financially secure young person may treat phone absence as a digital detox. A young person navigating poverty, caregiving, disability, unstable housing, rural transport, precarious work, or fragmented services may experience the same absence as a barrier to participation. Digital absence therefore turns a personal device into a lens on structural inequality. It reveals which young people have backups, advocates, flexibility, and institutional trust, and which young people are expected to remain reachable despite having few resources to do so.

Inequality also shapes the meaning of surveillance and privacy. For some youth, a phone provides privacy from adults. For others, it is a site of adult monitoring. For some, location sharing increases safety. For others, it enables control. For some, group chats provide belonging. For others, they provide exposure to harm. Digital absence must therefore be analysed alongside digital presence. The question is not simply whether the young person has a phone, but who controls it, who can see through it, who can reach the young person through it, and what alternatives exist when it disappears.

The uneven burden of absence raises policy questions. Schools, health systems, employers, social services, and governments increasingly use digital communication as a default. Yet young people may not have stable access to the tools required for this default. When institutions assume continuous connectivity, they convert personal device access into a condition of participation. This is a youth studies issue because it concerns how young people are included, excluded, governed, and made responsible within changing social systems.

This does not mean every youth-facing institution must permit unrestricted phone use. It means restrictions should be designed with attention to function, equity, and alternatives. Confiscating a phone, banning phones, requiring apps, or moving services online may each have legitimate aims. But each decision should be accompanied by a question: what young people will lose access to, and who will bear the consequences?

Implications for youth-facing practice and policy

The conceptual model has implications for educators, families, youth workers, clinicians, service providers, and researchers. The first implication is assessment. Adults often ask how much a young person uses a phone. They should also ask what the phone is doing. Does it provide peer belonging, family contact, identity expression, safety, school access, disability support, employment coordination, transport, or care connection? These questions shift the conversation from moral judgement to function.

The second implication concerns rule-making. Phone policies in schools, homes, and services should distinguish among distraction, connection, access, safety, and accommodation. A blanket restriction may be simple to administer, but simplicity can conceal inequity. Function-specific rules are more developmentally precise. A classroom may legitimately limit social scrolling while still allowing accessibility tools, translation, transport coordination, or emergency caregiver contact through clear procedures.

The third implication concerns digital wellbeing. Interventions that encourage young people to spend less time on phones may be appropriate for some. However, they should not assume that reduced access is automatically wellbeing-enhancing. For young people whose digital worlds include support, identity exploration, cultural connection, or care access, abrupt disconnection may intensify distress. Digital wellbeing should include the capacity to disconnect safely, not simply the instruction to disconnect.

The fourth implication concerns service design. Youth services should not assume continuous phone access. Appointment systems, reminders, consent processes, school supports, employment programs, and healthcare follow-up should include backup routes. A young person should not lose support because a phone is broken, unaffordable, confiscated, stolen, or out of data. Services can reduce the harms of absence by offering multiple contact methods, low-bandwidth options, paper alternatives, drop-in routes, trusted contacts, and continuity plans.

The fifth implication concerns health and mental health care. Phone reminders, virtual appointments, online portals, and text-based follow-up can improve access, but they can also exclude young people with unstable devices, unsafe privacy conditions, or limited data. Care systems should ask whether a young person has stable, private, affordable, and safe access before treating digital contact as neutral. Missed digital communication should be interpreted cautiously when device loss, family control, housing instability, or data limits may be involved.

The sixth implication concerns family conversations. Families often negotiate phone rules through conflict: too much time, too late at night, not during meals, not during homework. These concerns can be legitimate. Yet family conversations may improve when adults ask what the phone represents. Is it entertainment, avoidance, peer surveillance, reassurance, identity exploration, crisis contact, school access, or privacy? A young person's resistance to giving up a phone may look less like defiance when adults understand what is being removed.

The broader policy implication is that youth phone dependence should not be individualised too quickly. If schools, employers, services, transport systems, and families increasingly organise participation through smartphones, then young people will become dependent on smartphones. The policy response should not be only behavioural correction. It should include institutional responsibility for designing alternatives, reducing unnecessary digital compulsion, and protecting young people's right to participate when personal devices fail.

Table 1
Digital absence pathways and conceptual boundaries

Pathway	Core disruption	Youth-specific question	What this pathway is not
Belonging threat	Peer contact, group visibility, relational	Am I still included, remembered,	Not simply love of a device or

Pathway	Core disruption	Youth-specific question	What this pathway is not
	reassurance, social inclusion	reachable, or part of the social field?	inability to tolerate boredom.
Identity-continuity threat	Photos, messages, notes, playlists, accounts, autobiographical traces, self-presentation	What parts of who I have been, who I am, or who I am becoming are stored here?	Not simply vanity, shallow self-display, or attachment to consumer goods.
Autonomy disruption	Transport, school portals, work shifts, banking, authentication, reminders, maps, caregiving coordination	What tasks become impossible or harder when the phone is gone?	Not simply poor planning or irresponsibility.
Access and safety disruption	Trusted contacts, services, care continuity, health information, accessibility tools, emergency routes	Who or what becomes unreachable, and what alternative is available?	Not simply rule-breaking, attention seeking, or refusal to comply.
Ambivalent/chosen absence	Relief from pressure, privacy, resistance, protection from surveillance or harassment	Is this absence chosen, imposed, or negotiated?	Not all absence is harmful, and not all connectivity is protective.

Note. The purpose of the table is not to classify all youth experiences, but to help adults ask more precise questions about what the phone is doing in a young person's life.

Table 2

Youth-facing practice and policy implications

Setting	Common phone-focused response	Developmental question to add	Equity-sensitive alternative
School	Ban or confiscate devices	What legitimate coordination, accessibility, privacy, or care functions does the phone provide?	Create clear boundaries, exceptions, non-digital access routes, and predictable communication alternatives.
Family	Reduce screen time	Which uses support belonging, autonomy, privacy, safety, or identity, and which create pressure?	Negotiate function-specific rules rather than global moral judgments.
Youth services	Assume text, portal, or app contact works	What happens if the young person loses access, data, privacy, or device control?	Offer multiple contact methods, safe-contact planning, and continuity protocols for device loss.
Health and mental health care	Use phone reminders or virtual appointments as default	Does the young person have stable, private, affordable, and safe access?	Build backup contact pathways and avoid penalizing missed digital communication without context.
Research	Measure hours of use	What meanings and infrastructures are attached to use and absence?	Combine quantitative measures with youth narratives, institutional analysis, and context.
Policy	Treat phones as individual consumer goods	Which institutions now require phone access for participation?	Design low-bandwidth, offline, and non-device-dependent options.

Note. These implications translate the conceptual model into practical questions for institutions that work with young people.

Research agenda

Because this article is conceptual, its value depends partly on the research it makes possible. The first research direction is qualitative. Researchers should ask young people to narrate experiences of phone absence: losing a phone, being without data, having a phone confiscated, being removed from a group chat, missing service contact, or feeling unreachable. These narratives could clarify whether youth experience absence primarily as relational loss, identity disruption, autonomy interruption, safety concern, relief, or something else entirely.

The second direction is mixed-methods research. Vignette studies could vary type of absence, such as device loss, relational silence, data loss, family confiscation, platform exclusion, school restriction, or service disconnection, while measuring perceived belonging, autonomy, identity continuity, safety, and meaning attribution. Such studies would allow researchers to test whether different forms of absence produce different patterns of response and whether these patterns vary by age, gender, attachment, socioeconomic context, disability, rurality, family rules, or marginalization.

The third direction is ecological and longitudinal. Digital absence unfolds in real time, and young people's responses may change across hours or days. Digital diaries, ecological momentary assessment, participatory mapping, or youth-led methods could examine how absence affects school attendance, peer contact, movement, mood, service access, and family negotiation. These designs would avoid reducing phone absence to a single survey item.



The fourth direction is institutional research. Schools, youth services, health systems, employers, and families all shape digital access. Research should examine how institutional policies create or reduce the harms of absence. For example, what happens when phones are banned in schools that also use digital portals? How do youth services maintain contact with young people who lose phones or data? How do young workers experience app-based shift systems? How do families negotiate phone removal as punishment, protection, or control?

The fifth direction is platform and design research. Smartphones are not neutral containers. Platform features shape urgency, visibility, response expectations, memory preservation, and social comparison. Youth-centred design could reduce the harms of absence by making recovery easier, reducing punitive visibility cues, supporting healthy availability, and giving young people more control over identity traces.

Finally, research should not assume that the goal is always to preserve connection. Some youth may need help gaining access; others may need help escaping harmful availability. The digital absence frame is useful precisely because it keeps both possibilities in view. It asks what the phone connects, what it exposes, what it protects, what it demands, and what alternatives young people have when it is gone.

Conclusion

The missing phone matters because it reveals what has been placed inside the phone. For young people, the device may hold peer belonging, family contact, identity traces, memories, school access, maps, money, work schedules, service links, and routes to support. Its absence can therefore be emotionally and practically significant without being irrational. The problem is not simply that young people have become dependent on smartphones. The problem is that youth life has become organised through digital infrastructures while public discourse continues to treat dependence as an individual flaw.

A youth studies approach can move the debate beyond moral panic and beyond technological optimism. Phones can support belonging and intensify exclusion; protect privacy and enable surveillance; stabilise identity and amplify comparison; support autonomy and deepen dependence on fragile systems. Digital absence brings these contradictions into view. It asks what young people lose when access disappears, who is most affected, and what institutions have made the phone so necessary in the first place.

This article has proposed a developmental model of digital absence and youth participation with four pathways: belonging threat, identity-continuity threat, autonomy disruption, and access or safety disruption. The model is intended to guide research, policy, and practice toward more precise questions. Instead of asking only whether young people use phones too much, youth-facing institutions should ask what phones are doing in young people's lives, what forms of care and participation they mediate, what harms continuous availability creates, and what alternatives exist when the device is absent. The missing phone is not only a personal inconvenience. It is a window into what youth life now requires young people to carry.

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