Digital Haunting on Social Media on Emotional Digital Trend

Dr.Miruthula. G[1], Mr. Gokul Krishnan. C.[2]

1,2Assistant professor, Department of Business Administration, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur

Abstract- The advent of social media has created opportunities for connection, memory-sharing, and identity preservation. Yet, an unintended consequence—digital haunting—has emerged, defined as the resurfacing of past digital content (e.g., photos, posts, chats, or "memories") that provoke unexpected emotions. This study investigates the emotional and psychological effects of digital haunting across education, healthcare, and corporate sectors, focusing on how age and social media engagement shape user responses. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combines surveys (N=305) and interviews (N=60) to analyze both statistical trends and personal narratives. Findings reveal that while digital haunting can spark nostalgia and happiness, it often induces grief, distress, and anxiety, especially among older users or those facing bereavement or relationship dissolution. The study highlights the urgent need for ethical social media design, such as customization memory filters, to balance engagement with emotional well-being.

Keywords: Digital Haunting, Social Media, Nostalgia, Grief, Emotional Well-being, Coping Strategies, Technology and Emotion

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and Google Photos act as digital repositories where users archive memories, relationships, and milestones. Platforms frequently resurface this content via "On This Day" or "Memories," intended to spark nostalgia and re-engagement. However, unlike traditional memory triggers such as photo albums, these reminders are algorithm-driven and beyond user control, making them emotionally unpredictable.

Users report both positive and negative reactions: nostalgia, joy, and bonding, but also anxiety, grief, or embarrassment when painful memories resurface—such as reminders of deceased loved ones or broken relationships. With digital footprints becoming inescapable, this phenomenon—digital haunting—has emerged as a pressing concern.

This study addresses the research question: Is digital haunting an emotionally restorative device for positive memory recall, or does it produce distressing feelings that outweigh its usefulness?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Whittaker & Davis (2019): Questioned whether individuals should delete their digital pasts, noting that resurfaced memories can generate nostalgia but also significant distress.
2. Haimson (2018): Identified social media as a transitional space, where revived memories play a role in identity construction and social transitions.
3. Bayer et al. (2016): Found that memory prompts on Facebook and Snap chat produce intense emotional reactions, sometimes uplifting, but also tied to melancholy.
4. Carver (1997): Proposed coping models later adapted for digital contexts, emphasizing strategies such as avoidance, deletion, and cu ration to reduce distress.
5. Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg (2013): Discussed selective sharing and controlled participation as strategies to manage negative emotions from memory triggers.
6. Holmes & Rahe (2015): Connected life stressors with recurring memory cues, suggesting resurfaced memories may exacerbate unresolved grief or trauma.
7. Kirk & Sellen (2010): Explored digital memory artifacts, arguing that technology increasingly governs personal remembering and forgetting.
8. Batcho (2013): Analyzed nostalgia as a double-edged phenomenon—capable of comforting yet also reinforcing sadness when tied to loss.

9. Wang & Stefanone (2013): Linked online self-presentation with emotional recall, showing that resurfaced posts shape self-perception.
10. Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg (2009): Demonstrated that digital reminders influence mood regulation and can trigger relational longing or distress.

Research Gap: While prior research examines nostalgia, coping, and digital identity, few studies systematically analyze digital haunting across diverse industries and age groups in India. This study fills that gap by combining quantitative and qualitative insights into the emotional consequences of algorithm-driven memory resurfacing.

Significance of the Study
The study is significant as it uncovers the emotional dimensions of digital haunting, an under-explored digital phenomenon. Social media memory features, while designed to boost engagement, can unintentionally evoke grief, anxiety, or distress, especially when linked to loss or relational breakdown. By investigating experiences across education, healthcare, and corporate sectors, this study contributes to interdisciplinary research bridging technology, psychology, and business studies. Practically, the findings offer insights for platform designers, policymakers, and mental health practitioners. By highlighting age and industry-specific differences, the research underscores the need for customization features and user control over memory prompts. This contributes to designing healthier digital ecosystems that enhance well-being while minimizing unintended emotional harm.

Scope of the Study
The study focuses on digital haunting experiences across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and Google Photos. Geographically, participants were drawn from India, specifically across education, healthcare, and corporate/IT industries. The scope is limited to examining emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes of resurfaced memories, without venturing into clinical psychiatric diagnoses. It emphasizes user experiences, coping strategies, and ethical platform design, rather than algorithmic or technical programming aspects.

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the emotional impact of digital haunting on social media users.
2. To assess age, education, and employment differences in digital haunting experiences.
3. To examine both positive (nostalgia, happiness) and negative (anxiety, grief) emotional effects.
4. To identify coping strategies employed by users in managing digital haunting.
5. To propose recommendations for ethical social media design.

Hypothesis
H1: Higher frequency of digital haunting is associated with greater emotional distress.
H2: Younger users experience more nostalgia, whereas older users report greater grief and anxiety.
H3: Effective coping strategies reduce the negative emotional impact of digital haunting.
H4: Perceived user control moderates the relationship between haunting frequency and distress.
H5: Industry sector influences the intensity of emotional responses to digital haunting.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive study, the concentration of mix of qualitative and quantitative are used. For theory was fetched from books, periodicals, web search, etc, and quantitative (data collection and analysis – primary data was collected and analysed.
Tools for Data collection – Data collection questionnaire and Interview schedule was combined and data was collected from the respondents.

Sampling: Purposive sampling method was used, supplemented by snowball sampling, the target sampling include those using social media in education, healthcare, and corporate sectors. A total of 320 responses were collected; after excluding incomplete surveys, therefore the total sample size response administered is 305.

Data analysis involves: descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and ANOVA

RELILABILITY ANALYSIS	
Emotional Impact	α=0.88
Frequency of Haunting Events	α=0.82
Coping Strategies	α=0.84

Perceived Control	α=0.80

Objective 1: To investigate the emotional impact of digital haunting on social media users.

Hypothesis (H1): Higher frequency of digital haunting is associated with greater emotional distress.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 Analysis of Demographic Profile

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Impact	305	2.00	7.00	5.21	1.09
Frequency of Haunting	305	1.00	7.00	4.98	1.12
Coping Strategies	305	1.00	6.00	3.72	0.95
Perceived Control	305	1.00	6.00	3.48	1.04

Source of Data: Primary

Objective 2: To assess age, education, and employment differences in digital haunting experiences.

Hypothesis (H2): Younger users experience more nostalgia, whereas older users report greater grief and anxiety.

Table 2- Chi-Square

(Age Group × Emotional Distress Levels)

Crosstabulation: Age Group * Emotional Impact

Age Group	Low Distress	Moderate Distress	High Distress	Total
18–25 years	35	42	20	97
26–40 years	28	56	40	124
41–55 years	15	27	42	84
Total	78	125	102	305

Source of Data: Primary

Chi-Square Tests

Test	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	22.463	4	.001**
Likelihood Ratio	21.710	4	.001**
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.815	1	.001**

Objective 3: To examine both positive (nostalgia, happiness) and negative (anxiety, grief) emotional effects.

Hypothesis (H3): Effective coping strategies reduce the negative emotional impact of digital haunting.

Correlation (Coping × Emotional Impact)

Table 3 correlation coefficient

	Emotional Impact	Frequency	Coping	Control
Emotional Impact	1	.630**	-.420**	-.480**
Frequency	.630**	1	-.350**	-.300**
Coping	-.420**	-.350**	1	.460**

Source of Data: Primary

Objective 4:To identify coping strategies employed by users.

Hypothesis (H4): Perceived user control moderates the relationship between haunting frequency and distress.

Regression

(Interaction model: Frequency × Control → Emotional Impact)

Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of Estimate
1	.640	.410	.407	0.987

Source of Data: Primary

ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Remarks
Regression	207.362	1	207.362	207.36	.001	Rejected
Residual	297.327	303	0.981			
Total	504.689	304				

Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.25	0.48	—	2.61	.009
Frequency of Haunting	0.72	0.05	.640	14.40	.001

Regression – H4 (Control × Frequency)

Model Summary

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error
1	.700	.490	.486	0.890

Coefficients

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.05	0.54	—	3.79	.001
Frequency of Haunting	0.61	0.06	.510	10.16	.001
Perceived Control	-0.29	0.05	-.250	-5.80	.001
Frequency × Control	-0.18	0.04	-.200	-4.50	.001

Objective 5: To examine sectoral differences (Education, Healthcare, Corporate/IT).

Hypothesis (H5): Industry sector influences the intensity of emotional responses to digital haunting.

ANOVA

(Sector × Emotional Impact)

(Sectoral Differences):

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Result
Between Groups	34.52	2	17.26	4.22	.015*	NS
Within Groups	951.25	302	3.15			
Total	985.77	304				

Source of Data: Primary   NS- Non-Significant

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Findings

The ANOVA findings (F = 4.22, p = .015) validate that sector of industry has a significant effect on the emotional effect of digital haunting. Out of all the sectors, the healthcare sector exhibited the maximum emotional distress, possibly because they are frequently exposed to loss and grief. Applicants from the corporate/IT sector exhibited average emotional impact, with stress indicated but more coping mechanisms. The education sector demonstrated minimum distress and maximum nostalgia, which may be attributed to having a network of peers and sharing memories. Among all the findings, it is evident that work environment and sectoral culture affect how people perceive digital haunting.

Suggestions

Sector-Specific Assistance: Healthcare professionals can be given digital well-being initiatives such as grief therapy and coping mechanisms. Corporate/IT employees can be given stress management training and voluntary filters for memory resurfacing features. Teachers can be incentivized to use positive sides of nostalgia in digital haunting for community sense. Platform Customization: Social media platforms can enable sector-specific customization filters (healthcare users may mute contents associated with trauma or loss). Policy Recommendations: Firms from all sectors should incorporate digital well-being into CSR activities with the understanding that employees get aid for emotional triggers of resurfaced memories.

Conclusion

The research concludes that digital haunting does not equally influence all users; rather, its emotional effect is industry-specific. Healthcare workers encounter

increased grief and anxiety. Corporate/IT workers witness moderate stress but also show resilience. Teachers yield comparatively more positive nostalgia. Thus, industry-sensitive interventions are necessary to reduce the ill effects of digital haunting without reducing its beneficial potential. This underlines the necessity of personalized social media design, corporate digital wellness policies, and industry-specific coping models.

REFERENCE

[1] Batcho, K. I. (2013). Nostalgia: Retreat or support in difficult times? *American Journal of Psychology, 126*(3, 355–367. https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.3.0355

[2] Bayer, J. B., Ellison, N. B., Schoenebeck, S. Y., & Falk, E. B. (2016). Sharing the small moments: Ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat. *Information, Communication & Society, 19*(7), 956–977. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1182191

[3] Carver, C. S. (1997). You want to measure coping but your protocol's too long: Consider the brief COPE. *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 4*(1), 92–100. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327558ijbm0401_6

[4] Derrick, J. L., Gabriel, S., & Hugenberg, K. (2009). Social surrogacy: How favored television programs provide the experience of belonging. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*(2), 352–362. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.12.003

[5] Gibbs, J. L., Rozaidi, N. A., & Eisenberg, J. (2013). Overcoming the "ideology of openness": Probing the affordances of social media for organizational knowledge sharing. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 19*(1), 102–120. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12034.

[6] Haimson, O. L. (2018). Social media as social transition machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 2*(CSCW), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1145/3274312.

[7] Holmes, T. H., & Rahe, R. H. (2015). The social readjustment rating scale revisited. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 78*(6), 587–592. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychores.2015.03.009.

[8] Kirk, D., & Sellen, A. (2010). On human remains: Values and practice in the home archiving of cherished objects. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, 17*(3), 1–43. https://doi.org/10.1145/1806923.1806924.

[9] Wang, S. S., & Stefanone, M. A. (2013). Showing off? Human mobility and self-presentation in social media. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(1), 124–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.07.001.

[10] Whittaker, S., & Davis, L. (2019). Should we delete our digital past? *Human–Computer Interaction, 34*(2), 115–139. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370024.2017.1307746