



Digital Bonds in Long-Distance Relationships: A Study on New Forms of Intimacy Based on Suki

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Abstract. Urbanization-driven mobility has made long-distance relationships increasingly prevalent, prompting the rise of vertical couple-oriented apps like Suki to sustain emotional bonds. Yet the mechanisms by which such apps construct virtual intimacy remain underexplored. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation with 12 long-distance couples, this study examines how Suki addresses core intimacy challenges via scenarized co-presence and ritualized interaction. Findings reveal a human-platform-human inter-construction that fosters virtual symbiosis and performative expression—a novel intimate form. The study advances digital intimacy research and offers empirical insights into vertical emotional media.

Keywords: Long-Distance Relationship; Suki APP; Virtual Intimacy; Digital Media; Affective Practice

1 Introduction

Digital technology is profoundly rewriting the maintenance paradigms of long-distance relationships. The emotional predicament of spatial-temporal separation amidst urbanization has generated an urgent demand for novel interactive tools. The latest data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs indicates that the proportion of long-distance relationships among the marriageable population in China has climbed to 29.3%, corresponding to a demographic scale exceeding 240 million individuals[1] (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2024). Furthermore, a specialized survey conducted at the end of 2025 revealed that 73% of the 18 million long-distance couples endure the emotional anguish of "yearning to touch yet unable to embrace," with 60% of breakups directly attributed to connection ruptures caused by distance[2] (Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2025). Against this backdrop, vertical couple-oriented apps have become critical emotional carriers. Tools exemplified by Suki, through features such as virtual cohabitation spaces, synchronized activity check-ins, and intimacy visualization, construct a dedicated digital interactive field for long-distance couples. According to operational data released by the Suki team, its active user base has reached 40,000 individuals. However, the actual efficacy and operational logic of such apps in mitigating emotional alienation have yet to be systematically explored. Relevant research

holds distinct practical significance in addressing the emotional needs of this 240-million-strong demographic.

Digital technology is no longer a mere auxiliary instrument for maintaining long-distance relationships but engages in a symbiotic, interactive relationship with users, co-participating in the dynamic construction of intimacy. As a "digital bond" for long-distance couples, Suki's functional design and user practices collectively shape affective configurations that remain insufficiently elucidated. Accordingly, this study centers on the following core research questions: Through what specific technological pathways and interactive mechanisms does Suki construct virtual intimacy? What novel morphological characteristics does this virtual intimacy, built upon a vertical couple-oriented APP, exhibit?

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Research Trajectory and Mediatization Turn in Long-Distance Relationship Studies

Research on long-distance relationships within sociology has revolved around structural social factors such as population mobility and regional development disparities, investigating their role in precipitating the spatial-temporal separation of intimate relationships[3] (Shi Lei & Li Lulu, 2022). Studies within social psychology have prioritized analyzing the actual impact of geographical separation on psychological perceptions such as attachment and trust among long-distance couples[4] (Gao Xiuxiu, 2020). Notably, sociological perspectives particularly attended to the social backdrop of long-distance relationship formation: imbalances in urban-rural development and disparities in regional economic gradients catalyzed large-scale population movements. Such research predominantly explored the tangible effects of geographical separation on marital stability and family functioning, without establishing deep correlations between media technology and the emotional maintenance of long-distance relationships.

Early media studies conceptualized technology as a compensatory tool under conditions of bodily absence in long-distance relationships, highlighting its fundamental function in transmitting information and alleviating emotional detachment. Although capable of fulfilling basic emotional needs to a certain extent, interactions within virtual spaces consistently fell short of replicating the authentic emotional experience of face-to-face encounters[8] (Han Yu, 2023). This body of research positioned media as a passive conduit for information transmission, failing to account for the agency and formative power inherent in technology itself.

With the materiality turn in media studies and the introduction of the affordance perspective, scholars began to re-examine the nexus between media and long-distance relationships. From the vantage point of affordance theory, social media possesses characteristics of assemblability, visibility, traceability, and quantifiability. Social media actively participates in the quotidian practices of intimacy, fostering virtual co-presence and the joint construction of shared memories through digital traces. In this

phase of research, media transitioned from a mere auxiliary tool to an agentic actor, co-constituting the forms and boundaries of intimate relationships alongside users.

In recent years, scholarly attention has increasingly converged on the distinctive role of vertical media platforms in long-distance relationships, positioning couple-exclusive apps as novel objects of inquiry in the mediatization of intimacy. The concept of "all-weather love," proposed through the study of the "Heartbeat Daily" APP, posits that such vertical couple software facilitates a transformation of identity from "I" to "We" by constructing cross-temporal emotional archives and shared cyber spaces, thereby achieving a continuous integration of affective narratives[5] (Yu Jiayi, 2025). An analytical framework centered on "rules as media" suggests that dating apps pre-script intimate practices through technological rules, which users, driven by rational appeals, accept and reinforce, potentially leading intimacy toward homogenized developmental trajectories[6] (Chen Tuo et al., 2025).

2.2 The Evolution of Digital Intimacy: From "Online Extension" to "New Symbiotic Forms"

The research trajectory of digital intimacy mirrors the complete process of intimacy's migration and mutation from physical to digital spaces. Early studies typically regarded digital intimacy as an "online extension" or "supplement" to offline intimacy.

Scholars have advanced the core concept of "digital intimacy." Research indicates that long-distance couples can actively construct "digital intimacy" through "focused, convenient, and intimate online interactions" and shared tasks, simultaneously reshaping trust mechanisms within the "bidirectional domestication" involving technology[7] (Wang Lei & Ye Yuwan, 2024).

The current research frontier is beginning to employ more complex theoretical lenses to scrutinize the ontological transformations of digital intimacy—that is, it may no longer represent a replication or supplement of offline relationships but rather evolve into a "new symbiotic form" possessing its own inherent logic. Despite deepening inquiry, gaps persist in the exploration of the "new forms" of digital intimacy. First, existing research predominantly describes generalized digital intimacy characteristics (e.g., visualization, contractualization), offering limited comparison regarding the substantive differences in generative mechanisms and experiential textures between intimacy cultivated on general platforms versus vertical specialized platforms. Second, studies often emphasize either technology's shaping of humans or human agency, lacking detailed empirical analysis of how the two form a unique "symbiotic system" within enclosed, customized media environments like Suki, thereby engendering virtual intimacy configurations marked by highly customized interactions, deep affective involvement, and co-constructed meaning. This constitutes the core concern of this study: To what extent and through what mechanisms does the virtual intimacy constructed by Suki—a "digital bond" specifically designed for long-distance relationships—differ from relationship forms previously based on general social media, thereby signifying new trajectories in the evolution of digital intimacy?

3 Research Materials and Methods

This study selected young long-distance couples aged 18-35 who use the Suki APP as research subjects. Selection criteria encompassed three dimensions: stable geographical separation status, with long-distance duration ≥ 3 months; established Suki usage adherence, with daily average usage ≥ 0.3 hours and cumulative usage ≥ 3 months; and voluntary participation in the research, with consent provided for interview recording and anonymous data processing.

A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was employed for participant recruitment. Recruitment notices were initially disseminated through the Suki APP's internal community, the "Long-Distance Relationship" topic group on Xiaohongshu, and Douban couple exchange groups. Subsequently, eligible couples were recommended by initial respondents, culminating in the selection of 12 couples (24 respondents) as research subjects. The sample encompassed 9 inter-provincial and 3 transnational couples. Regarding relationship duration, 4 couples had been together for 6 months to 1 year, 5 couples for 1-3 years, and 3 couples for over 3 years, ensuring sample heterogeneity to enhance the generalizability of research conclusions. Detailed demographic information of all interview participants is shown in Figure 1.

This study employed a comprehensive approach integrating semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a one-on-one, multi-round format, centered on core themes including Suki feature usage, affective practices, intimacy construction, and differences in media utilization. Interviews were recorded with respondent consent and subjected to anonymized transcription. The researcher registered on Suki as an ordinary user and engaged in immersive participant observation for a duration of two months, comprehensively experiencing the platform's core functionalities and joining user-initiated communities. Detailed records were maintained regarding feature usage, emotional interactions, and relational practices. Concurrently, auxiliary materials including field notes, community chat logs, and feature screenshots were systematically compiled to fully capture the processes of generation and operation of virtual intimacy.

Code	Age	Gender	Usage Duration (Years)	Interview Method	Location	Code	Age	Gender	Usage Duration (Years)	Interview Method	Location
A-1	22	Female	1	Offline	Yantai, China	E-2	25	Male	1	Offline	Beijing, China
A-2	23	Male	1	Offline	Toronto, Canada	F-1	31	Female	0.5	Offline	Quanzhou, China
B-1	24	Female	0.5	Text	Yangzhou, China	F-2	30	Male	0.5	Offline	Zhuhai, China
B-2	26	Male	0.5	Text	Shangrao, China	G-1	23	Female	3	Text	Wuxi, China
C-1	21	Female	2	Text	X'ian, China	G-2	21	Male	3	Text	J'ian, China
C-2	21	Male	2	Text	Manchester, UK	H-1	19	Female	2	Text	Qingdao, China
D-1	20	Female	3.5	Video	Shenyang, China	H-2	19	Male	2	Text	Changsha, China
D-2	20	Male	3.5	Video	Dalian, China	I-1	20	Female	1.5	Text	Changzhou, China
E-1	25	Female	1	Offline	Tianjin, China	I-2	22	Male	1.5	Text	Wuhan, China

Fig. 1. Basic Information of Interview Participants

4 Technological Empowerment and Emotional Mutual Construction: The Dual Pathways for Suki to Build Virtual Intimacy

The core predicament of long-distance relationships lies in geographical-physical separation, the absence of embodied companionship, and the impossibility of realizing offline cohabitation scenarios. General social tools, limited to basic information transmission, struggle to replicate the scenarized ambience of offline togetherness, resulting in spatial alienation.

Suki centers on the "Virtual Home," leveraging the spatial convergence and real-time synchronization affordances of media to create a digital interactive space amenable to joint participation by long-distance couples. Couples can collaboratively select furniture and decorate rooms in real-time, replicating the experience of setting up an offline home. Simultaneously, the platform transposes quotidian offline cohabitation routines into digital interactions, supporting shared-screen functionalities within the virtual home for "cloud movie-watching" and "cloud dining," as well as synchronized audio/video playback via the "Listen Together" feature, enabling partners to maintain sensory connection while engaged in daily activities. As one respondent articulated: "We have an 8-hour time difference; our daily schedules are completely misaligned. Before bed, I light the night lamp in our virtual home. When he wakes up and sees it on, it feels like I'm there. We also place identical virtual water cups, simulating the relaxed atmosphere of casual, offline chatter" (J1).

Suki's scenarized ambience creation facilitates the formation of a novel, digitally co-present form of intimacy for long-distance couples. It transcends the flat, planar communication characteristic of general social tools, elevating intimate connection from mere information exchange to perceptible, participatory scenarized interaction. Physical separation ceases to be an absolute barrier to intimacy, and digital intimacy acquires the scenarized texture of offline co-presence, serving as an effective complement to embodied presence.

5 Virtual Symbiosis and Performative Expression: The New Form of Long-Distance Relationship Intimacy Shaped by Suki

In traditional human-to-human long-distance relationships, intimate expression suffers from limited channels and constrained forms due to geographical separation. Daily expressions primarily rely on text, voice, or occasional video communication. Both the process and outcomes of interaction lack tangible, visualizable carriers for retention, and traces readily dissipate, making it difficult to form traceable affective imprints. Within the human-platform-human inter-constructive relationship, Suki, through visualization features such as intimacy score displays, monthly tacit understanding reports, dual-person interaction achievement badges, exclusive shared albums, and love challenge check-in records, provides couples with dedicated, tangible expressive carriers. These transform abstract, private intimate interactions into perceivable, pre-

servable digital traces, giving rise to a new form of performative intimacy—a concrete manifestation of Actor-Network Theory at the level of intimate expression in long-distance relationships.

Suki's visualization features furnish a diversified private stage for performative intimate expression. All displays revolve exclusively around the couple, constituting a dedicated form of affective interaction. The platform generates monthly tacit understanding reports based on interaction data, visually presenting trends in emotional resonance. Dual-person interactive games yield exclusive achievement badges based on tacit coordination, with the unlocking process itself becoming a cherished intimate memento. Shared albums and check-in records preserve interactive moments, forming an exclusive emotional archive. As a respondent articulated: "Every time we complete a love challenge, I immediately check the updated record. In our downtime, we browse the intimacy score and tacit understanding report together. Watching the numbers grow and seeing our high compatibility allows us to clearly perceive each other's efforts, which motivates us further to sustain this long-distance relationship" (A1). G-1 (21 years old) and G-2 (21 years old), a couple of two years who have used Suki for two years, screenshot newly unlocked achievement badges and jointly showcase their decorated virtual home and co-parented virtual pet. These digital artifacts become sweet commemorations of their long-distance journey, endowing remote intimacy with tangible visual markers.

This performative intimate expression constitutes a unique mode of presentation for long-distance relationships within digital space. Its essence lies in the transformation of intimate expression—from abstract to concrete, from fragmented to systematic—within the human-platform-human inter-construction. Suki, as a heterogeneous actor, provides the technological possibility for visualizing intimate expression, enabling abstract emotional bonds to be transposed into viewable, traceable digital traces. The romantic partners, as heterogeneous actors, imbue technological functions with affective meaning through display and reminiscence, allowing digital traces to become carriers of emotion. This form of expression enables couples to perceive the development and intensification of their bond, reinforces a shared "we-ness" identity, and constructs an exclusive dyadic community, thereby mitigating the loneliness and uncertainty inherent in long-distance relationships. Furthermore, Suki incorporates a moderate commercial logic, introducing paid features such as virtual home decoration items and personalized pet apparel. Interviewed users generally expressed acceptance of this moderate commercialization, provided that paid functionalities enrich expressive forms and enhance interactive experience. This reflects a benign integration between the construction of long-distance intimacy in the digital age and platform commercial logic.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

This study both corroborates media affordance theory—demonstrating how Suki's scenarized and ritualized features enable digitally co-present intimacy—and enriches digital intimacy research by uncovering the unique generative mechanisms of vertical

couple-oriented apps. By treating the platform as a constitutive agent, it extends Actor-Network Theory into the domain of affective communication, challenging the conventional view of technology as a mere auxiliary. Situated within China's accelerating urbanization, the virtual symbiosis shaped by Suki dismantles the spatial-temporal constraints on intimacy, accommodates the emotional needs of contemporary youth, and reconfigures the paradigms of intimate expression. This digitally forged bond epitomizes the broader transformation of intimacy in digital society, offering a vivid real-world sample of the deep adaptation between technological development and social-affective demands.

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