

Review Article

Beyond the Online-Offline Divide: Designing Hybrid Social Spaces

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Article History	Abstract
Received: August 11, 2026 Accepted: September 01, 2026 Published: September 07, 2026	Digital technology is often blamed for online aggression and social isolation. This article examines whether these problems arise from technology itself or from the ways digital environments are designed. It reviews research on real-name policies, Hikikomori, online communities, and location-based games. The discussion shows that real-name policies do not necessarily prevent harmful online behavior, while digital spaces can help socially withdrawn people communicate, find support, and maintain connections. The article then examines Pokémon Go and Pikmin Bloom as examples of spaces that connect online activity with physical movement and social interaction. It argues for designing digital environments that support both online and offline social life. Keywords: Digital Technology, Online Anonymity, Hikikomori, Hybrid Social Spaces, Location-Based Games.

1. Introduction

As digital technology has become woven into the fabric of daily life, online interaction now occupies an essential place in how people work, socialize, and spend their time. Yet despite this dependence, digital life is frequently framed in starkly negative terms. Two characteristics that recur most often in this framing are anonymity and antisociality. The internet's capacity to grant users anonymity is widely blamed for enabling online toxic behavior, such as cyberbullying and defamation. Similarly, increased screen time is often assumed to lead directly to social withdrawal, with extreme cases pointed to as evidence: the phenomenon of "Hikikomori," a term describing individuals who withdraw from social life and confine themselves to their homes for extended periods, often for six months or more.

This paper investigates whether this popular conception holds up to scrutiny: is extended use of digital technology inherently harmful, or has its effect been mischaracterized? By synthesizing empirical research on real-name policies, which is a common regulatory response to online toxicity, alongside clinical literature on Hikikomori, this paper argues that the harms typically attributed to technology itself in fact stem from a flawed binary framework, one that treats "online" as inherently corrosive and "offline" as inherently wholesome. Building on this evidence, the paper contends that the more productive path forward is not to impose offline norms onto online spaces, but to design hybrid spaces deliberately; platforms and policies that traverse online and offline, while anticipating anonymity, encouraging accountability, and reducing isolation, rather than simply restricting access. Although this approach is more demanding and less intuitive than extending existing offline standards to digital life, it offers a more durable solution to the very problems the binary framework was meant to address.

2. Anonymity and Accountability: The Failure of Real

2.1. Anonymity as a Source of Online Harm

Lieberman and Schroeder, in their research conducted in 2020, note four main structural differences between online and offline interaction: "fewer nonverbal cues, greater potential for anonymity, more opportunity to form new social ties and to bolster existing weak ties, and wider dissemination of information" (16). Among those factors, anonymity is understood as a key factor that leads to toxic digital behavior, including cyberbullying and online harassment. As those issues became more prevalent, governments and digital corporations attempted to mitigate them not by designing something new for the digital environment, but by transplanting an offline norm wholesale: requiring users to interact using their previously authenticated

identities, aka legal names. This approach, generally referred to as the “real-name policy,” is the clearest example of the binary framework described above in practice. It assumes that because identity disclosure keeps people accountable in physical space, the same mechanism must work identically online, with no adjustment for how differently identity, visibility, and social context operate in digital environments. The policy was predicated on the idea that anonymity promotes careless behavior by lowering accountability; thus, the administrators of various online platforms started to require their users to use their real names online to limit anonymity and increase accountability. This reasoning is supported by a common conception that “greater anonymity is associated with disinhibition and aggressive behavior” (Lieberman and Schroeder 17), since opaque settings frequently erode social standards and individual accountability. Consequently, a number of significant online platforms initiated an effort to forestall anonymous engagement by forcing users to validate themselves.

2.2. Real-Name Verification in Korea

If the binary framework were correct, in other words, if online harm were simply a matter of insufficient offline conditions, real-name policy should have worked. It did not, and the pattern of its failure is instructive. In the case of South Korea, the “Real Name Verification Law” was implemented in 2007 to reduce online slander and soon “extended to websites with an average daily viewership of over 100,000” in 2009 (Cho et al. 3042). The policy did not reveal the user’s legal name explicitly on their postings, but still required it to be verified to upload any postings. In their analyses of Korean websites’ aggregated data and postings, Cho et al. found that although the law somewhat curtailed online slander and defamation in postings, it had no discernible effect on the behavior of individual users or deterred them from participating in online debates (3047). In other words, the policy could suppress the visible symptom (i.e., published slanderous content) without touching the underlying behavioral pattern, because it never addressed why online spaces produce that behavior in the first place; it simply imported an offline deterrent and hoped the online environment would respond the same way.

2.3. Social Media and the Limits of Legal Identity

The fact that use of legal names online is ineffective is again evidenced by continuing digitally aggressive behavior on Facebook, which is famous for its policy to use legal or given names, what it calls “real names.” Facebook was started at Harvard, and its early users “provided their name because they saw the site as an extension of campus life” (Boyd 29): an offline social context in which real-name norms made sense because the platform mirrored an existing face-to-face community. That correspondence no longer holds for the platform Facebook became, yet the policy persisted regardless, another sign that the rule was never designed for the digital environment it now governs; it was carried over from a context where it happened to fit and then left in place after that context disappeared. Facebook nonetheless continues to encourage its users to use their legal names, since its CEO Mark Zuckerberg seems to conclude that only people with more than one identity assign different names to each, claiming “having [more than one] identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Lovink 41). Facebook’s marketing editor Randi Zuckerberg shares a similar opinion, claiming that “People behave a lot better when they have their names down [...] people hid behind anonymity and they feel like they can say whatever they want behind closed doors” (Galperin). van der Nagel and Frith criticize this reasoning, observing that treating anonymity as the root cause of deviant behavior is appealing precisely because it points to a simple fix: eliminating anonymity.

2.4. The Limits of Transplanting Offline Norms Online

Implicit in this simple solution is, as Boyd argues, the assumption “that in ‘real life,’ people have to use their ‘real names’ so why shouldn’t they be required to do so online?” (30) This is too convenient an adoption named at the outset of this paper: rather than asking what accountability should look like in an environment with fundamentally different structural properties, platforms simply asked what accountability looks like offline and imported it unchanged. The premise is also factually thin, since it rests on only a partial understanding of offline interaction itself, since “people do not share their names with every person they encounter” (Boyd 30). Consider someone entering a cafe: although small bits of information are conveyed through outward appearance (gender, age, ethnicity, and so on) that information “is not always precise” (Boyd 30). Offline life already runs on partial, ambiguous identity signals rather than verified legal names; real-name policy does not so much bring online spaces in line with offline norms as it holds online spaces to a standard offline interaction does not actually meet.

2.5. Identity, Privacy, and Exclusion

Nor does using legal names online guarantee accurate representation of oneself, which undercuts the policy’s stated goal even on its own terms. If a user does not use their legal name on Facebook, their account can be

suspended with the “Update Your Name” notification: “Your account has been temporarily suspended because it looks like you’re not using your real name. Facebook is a community where people use their real identities. We require everyone to provide their full name so you always know who you’re connecting with.” Here, one cannot help but wonder what defines “real.” In 2013, the policy’s enforcement further marginalized minority users, such as members of the LGBTQ community who use self-chosen names instead of a given name that no longer matches their gender. This is the cost of the binary framework made concrete: in trying to force digital identity into an offline mold, the policy did not merely fail to reduce harm. It actively produced new harm for users whose chosen names were essential to their privacy, safety, and self-expression, precisely because the policy was never built with the realities of digital experiences in mind.

A further assumption embedded in real-name policy is that visibility itself increases accountability; that people behave better once identifying information is available, on the theory that they can then be tracked down and punished. Boyd identifies that there is no data that either supports or refutes the claim that real-name policy increases accountability, noting that “both Facebook and face-to-face settings continue to be rife with meanness and cruelty” (30). Real-name policy, and the broader binary framework it exemplifies, treats the mere threat of exposure as a substitute for actually building an environment that discourages harm: an approach that this case study suggests does not work. What the failure of real-name policy across different platforms and legal contexts demonstrates is not that accountability is unimportant online, but that accountability transplanted directly from offline life, without being redesigned for how anonymity, identity, and visibility actually function in digital space, does little more than create new exclusions while leaving the original problem largely intact.

3. Digital Sociality and Social Withdrawal: Global Cases

3.1. The Assumption of Digital Isolation

The previous section examined why real-name policy failed: regulating anonymity could not curb anonymous online slander because the approach rests on a binary notion of social interaction, one that treats offline involvement as inherently more valuable than online engagement. This section turns to a second negative conception frequently and mistakenly tied to increased screen time: antisociality. Through the case of Hikikomori syndrome, which describes an extreme example of the belief that extended digital use produces pathological social isolation, it shows once again that the dichotomy of “online as harmful, offline as wholesome” does not hold.

The extreme case of antisociality that is often associated with increased screen time can be located in the social/psychological phenomenon called “Hikikomori” (“to withdraw” in Japanese). Coined by Japanese psychiatrist Saito in 1998, the term names both the syndrome and the people who voluntarily confine themselves at home for extended periods (six months or more), avoiding social interaction for a range of reasons, including school/work pressures, collectivist norms, strong social stigma, and many more (Esposito and Addeo 2). As the previously mentioned causes illustrate, Hikikomori syndrome “emerged as an offline phenomenon largely because the internet was not yet as developed or pervasive as it is today” (Esposito and Addeo 2). Still, as the use of digital technology becomes more accessible and even inseparable from our daily lives, researchers have observed that Hikikomori occurs globally and is closely associated with heavy digital use. Digital use is now popularly cast not only as a factor that worsens social isolation but as one that can trigger it. Recent findings, however, complicate the public discourse that increasingly blames online behavior as a primary cause of this social disengagement.

3.2. Digital Technology as “Secondary Sociality”

While the extended use of digital technology can prolong a Hikikomori’s isolation by supplying entertainment, Hikikomori also use digital technology as “tools for maintaining communication with the outside world and for constructing a form of ‘secondary sociality’” (Esposito and Addeo 2). Here, “secondary” does not mean “less important” than some assumed “primary” offline sociality, but rather “selective sociality mediated by online platforms” (Esposito and Addeo 15). For those who have withdrawn from offline life, this secondary sociality serves as meaningful settings for communication, identity construction, and psychological support, rather than merely perpetuating it. Drawing on interviews with people diagnosed with Hikikomori as well as with experts, including psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, and educators, Esposito and Addeo argue that online spaces afford opportunities for social support, identity exploration, and communication, making digital involvement an alternative to total isolation. For instance, a 54-year-old sociologist claims that “new technologies often appear as a kind of cure rather than the cause: the PC allows communication that would otherwise not happen.” Another 56-year-old psychologist also adds that “Internet allows Hikikomori young people to open up the outside: it is the only window to the world, the only way to talk with peers and others,

to play, to have social contact, to experience emotions” (Esposito and Addeo 11). Based on these findings, Esposito and Addeo conclude “[the] internet use does not appear to be merely a passive pastime, but rather an active tool for socialization” (8). They call instead for a reevaluation of the relationship between digital technology and Hikikomori: “For experts, the Internet is not considered one of the main causes of isolation or a factor that reinforces Hikikomori’s withdrawal. On the contrary, it is often regarded as a solution and a tool through which secondary sociality can develop, helping Hikikomori to make their social withdrawal less oppressive” (11).

3.3. Cross-National Evidences

Coppola supports this claim, observing that many Italian Hikikomori have shifted from offline social settings to online networks rather than detaching from social life altogether. Rather than remaining wholly alone, Italians who identify as Hikikomori formed connections, exchanged emotional support, and took part in online debate and cyberactivism (877). Such findings challenge the conventional medical view of Hikikomori as purely pathological seclusion, suggesting instead that digital spaces can be legitimate sites of social interaction and identity formation. Similarly, Vainikka observes that anonymous online Hikikomori communities in Finland function as “an intimate public” (602), where socially reclusive people can speak openly about shared concerns such as loneliness, unemployment, and mental health, without fear of being ostracized. Such spaces engage the “questions that have an impact on the life-course or well-being of a person” (599) and help construct “the story of survival in many ways” (607).

3.4. Anonymity as a Condition for Connection

Online-enabled anonymity, by easing social pressure and inviting honest self-expression, may look like antisociality from an offline vantage point while in fact fostering a cross-national sense of belonging. In other words, anonymity, the same property that real-name policy treated as the root of online harm, becomes the precondition for connection, allowing the reclusives to speak without fear of stigma. Anonymity, to reiterate, is neither inherently corrosive nor inherently freeing; the binary framework fails precisely because it cannot register that a single feature of digital life can do opposite work in different contexts.

3.5. The Relationship Between Digital Use and Social Withdrawal

Taken together, this international evidence on Hikikomori undercuts the binary assumption that online activity typically deepens social isolation. The studies discussed above indicate that, even when heavy digital use coincides with social disengagement, technology is more often a response to underlying social problems and a relational and survival toolkit for coping with them than their root cause. Online communities offer many Hikikomori opportunities for emotional support, identity development, and communication that are nearly impossible to find offline. The problem, then, is not digital use itself but the failure to recognize the distinct social roles that online and offline environments play. Productive responses should therefore treat digital environments as legitimate social spaces and ask how they can be designed to complement rather than compete with offline interaction, rather than trying to eliminate digital experience or simply push for more offline participation.

4. Creating Hybrid Spaces: Location-Based Games

4.1. From Analysis to Design: Hybrid Online-Offline Spaces

The subjects that the Hikikomori researchers discussed in the previous section are specifically “digital Hikikomori”: people who withdraw from society after digital technology has already become widely available and accessible, whom Esposito and Addeo call “Hikikomori 2.0.” These researchers contend that, contrary to the popular conception, the use of digital technology can help digital Hikikomori rehabilitate their capacity for social interaction. Even so, other findings claim that increased screen time does trigger and worsen the syndrome, since heavy internet users can easily develop internet addiction. Given that digital technology has become inseparable from daily life, such addiction is a possible outcome not only for those who are already socially withdrawn but for everyone. This objection should not be waved away, since it identifies a real risk; but it does not follow that digital use is inherently harmful. It follows instead that the effect of digital technology depends on how a given environment is designed: whether it rewards passive, sedentary consumption or active, embodied engagement. Digital technology is in this sense a neutral tool: like a knife, it can be both useful and dangerous, and the relevant question is what a particular design does with it. In the previous section, I argued that the binary designating online experience as inherently harmful and offline experience as genuine is false, showing how digital technology plays an integral role in helping socially withdrawn people reconnect with the world. Once that binary is dismantled, the next objective becomes clear: creating an environment that enables everyone to interact freely. As the studies on digital Hikikomori show, some individuals prefer to interact online while still hoping to engage with others offline, and vice versa: as

social media use grows more pervasive, those accustomed to offline interaction increasingly find themselves left out of popular conversations because they do not participate online. In the middle of this tension, “location-based” games stand out as a case worth examining. Location-based game apps such as Pokémon Go, Pikmin Bloom, and Ingress let users enjoy online communication through their smartphones while simultaneously interacting with the physical world by walking, taking photos, and sharing them. At first glance, these games may seem an odd capstone for an argument that has, in Section III, defended anonymity as a protective good: they tie play to a player’s real movement through real space, seemingly the opposite of the anonymity that lets reclusive users speak without stigma. But this apparent tension is precisely the point. Anonymity, as Section III argued, is neither corrosive nor freeing in itself; what matters is whether an environment lets people calibrate their own exposure. Location-based games are worth examining because their design does exactly that (i.e., anticipating anonymity, encouraging accountability, and reducing isolation) and can therefore serve as a model for the online/offline hybrid spaces this paper has called for.

Location-based games, which deliberately combine virtual experiences with real-world engagement, serve as what Esposito and Addeo call “a conduit for micro-reopenings to the offline world” (14). According to Amari Low et al. location-based mobile games “can be vehicles of placemaking through play, [...] enhancing the careful processes that form places out of layered networks of affection, habit, and social bonds” (135). They further argue that “physical and virtual places are understood to be equally real” (136), refuting the notion that genuine social interaction can occur only offline. Such findings suggest that digital technologies should be understood as means of deepening people’s ties to the real world rather than as replacements for it.

Pokémon Go, created by Niantic Inc. and released in 2016, requires players to travel through their physical neighborhoods to collect, raise, and exchange Pokémon, which they then use in both individual and team battles. Low et al. describe the virtue of location-based games such as Pokémon Go as follows: “by semantically linking the virtual and physical layers, they support a sense of co-presence through features that allow players to leave traces on the virtual landscape. This makes way for chance embodied, ‘in-person’ encounters as well as a sense of serendipity, proximity and community” (137). The design of these games thus instills a sense of physical anchorage, ownership, and co-construction, reminding players that they belong to both online and offline communities (Low et al. 143). Another Niantic game, Pikmin Bloom, released in 2021, promotes “healthy pleasure” in much the same way as Pokémon Go does: players must walk through their neighborhoods to collect Pikmin and decorations and to fight off mushrooms. The “healthy” dimension is more pronounced in Pikmin Bloom than in its predecessor, since each player’s daily steps are tracked as data and players earn rewards the more they walk. According to Lee and Kim, healthy pleasure refers to a concept that “emphasizes making health-related activities a source of pleasure, unlike traditional healthcare approaches that may [have focused] on discipline or obligation” (96). Unlike Pokémon Go, which centers on battling other trainers, Pikmin Bloom emphasizes the sense of community and co-construction that Low et al. highlight: it lets players share digital photographs (“postcards”) of the physical places where they completed a mission, encourages players to fight off giant mushrooms together with their collected Pikmin, and lets them plant flowers that make it easier for others to collect special Pikmin. This design bears directly on the addiction concern raised earlier. The concern is that heavy digital use is sedentary and self-reinforcing; healthy-pleasure design answers it not by limiting screen time but by tying in-game reward to physical movement and in-person cooperation, so that the more a player is drawn into the game, the more they walk, photograph their surroundings, and coordinate with others nearby. The risk is not merely relocated but restructured: engagement is channeled toward exactly the embodied, social activity whose absence made ordinary screen time worrying in the first place.

The hybrid spaces that location-based games generate “successfully integrate physical activity with digital interactions [...] that promote digital communication and support relationship-building among users” (Lee and Kim 96). The games anticipate anonymity by letting players participate under chosen usernames and avatars rather than legal identities (the very disclosure that real-name policy demanded and Section II showed to be both ineffective and exclusionary), so that a player’s degree of self-revelation remains theirs to control. They encourage accountability not through the threat of exposure but structurally, by making cooperative features (e.g., team battles, shared raids, flowers planted for others) the primary route to reward, so that players have a standing reason to act well toward one another. And they reduce isolation by furnishing what Esposito and Addeo call “micro-reopenings to the offline world” (14): low-stakes, incremental occasions for co-presence that do not demand the full social exposure of unmediated face-to-face contact. This last point is what makes the model relevant to Hikikomori in particular, rather than to general users who could reconnect by other means. For someone who will not leave the house, a game that supplies a concrete, self-paced reason to step outside (and to encounter others obliquely, through shared virtual traces rather than direct confrontation) lowers the threshold of re-entry in a way that an exhortation to “socialize more” cannot. The benefit the earlier

studies attribute to online communities (i.e., connection without the pressure that drove withdrawal in the first place) is here extended into physical space on the withdrawn person's own terms.

Still, there are two main limitations for considering location-based games as an epitome of online/offline hybrid spaces that I envision. First, these are commercial products, and their designers optimize for engagement and revenue, not for the well-being of withdrawn users; the same cooperative and reward structures that can draw a player outward can also be tuned to maximize time spent and spending, and nothing guarantees the two aims stay aligned. A design that happens to be therapeutic is not the same as a therapy, and the incentives behind it are not a clinician's. Second, the evidence that these games benefit Hikikomori specifically remains thin: the studies cited here establish that location-based games foster placemaking and co-presence for players generally, and that online communities matter for Hikikomori, but the bridge between the two is so far argued rather than measured. What location-based games offer, then, is not a proven intervention but a proof of concept: a demonstration that a single environment can anticipate anonymity, encourage accountability, and reduce isolation at once, and thus a model that deliberately designed, non-commercial hybrid spaces could adapt with the withdrawn person's interests, rather than a platform's, at the center. Their value lies less in the games themselves than in what their design makes conceivable.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to ask whether the popular negative conception of digital use is in fact accurate. By examining two features central to that negative perception, anonymity and antisociality, it has argued that the binary between online and offline experience (the assumption that the former is harmful while the latter is genuine) is flawed. Real-name policy failed because it transplanted an offline deterrent into an environment it did not fit; the Hikikomori research showed that anonymity and digital connection can be the very means of re-entry into social life. Rather than holding to the binary, we should perceive the benefits and limitations of each realm accurately and combine them deliberately. Doing so requires designing hybrid spaces that encompass both online and offline interaction, and location-based games show that such spaces are possible: that one environment can anticipate anonymity, encourage accountability, and reduce isolation at once. They are a starting point and a proof of concept, not a finished remedy; realizing their promise would mean building comparable spaces around users' interests rather than a platform's. That task has only grown more urgent: the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the entanglement of online and offline life for nearly everyone, dissolving whatever remained of the assumption that "real" social life happens only in person, and the generations now coming of age are described as "digital natives" for whom the two realms were never separate to begin with. Gaining an accurate sense of the realms we all now inhabit, and building hybrid spaces where digital natives and non-natives can gather together rather than forcing digital natives back offline, offers a more durable response both to the genuine harms of digital use, such as internet addiction and social withdrawal, and to the shared need for spaces that can serve as everyday agoras.

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