



CONSCIOUS CONNECTION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEANINGFUL SOCIAL CONNECTION

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Abstract: Meaningful social connection is an important aspect of psychological well-being, yet opportunities for social interaction do not necessarily translate into meaningful interpersonal relationships. As individuals grow and navigate different roles and experiences, they may seek conversations and connections that extend beyond their existing social circles. The present paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding the potential role of shared meaningful orientation and perceived common ground in facilitating platonic connections between unfamiliar individuals. Drawing on psychological literature concerning the need to belong, perceived similarity, interpersonal attraction, shared reality, and communication between unfamiliar individuals, the paper integrates these perspectives into an applied framework termed Conscious Connection. The framework informs the development of a proposed digital platform centred on spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth as shared foundations for meaningful social interaction. Designed to facilitate friendship-oriented connections across genders, the platform envisions a space where individuals can share experiences, exchange perspectives, listen to others, and explore dimensions of themselves that may not always find expression within their existing relationships or social settings. The framework proposes that making meaningful common ground visible at the beginning of an interaction may provide a useful starting point for mutual understanding and engagement. It also identifies the potential relationship between interactional effort and connection fatigue as an area requiring empirical investigation. By integrating psychological perspectives with an applied conceptual model, the paper offers a foundation for future research and the development and evaluation of digital platforms designed to support meaningful, spiritually oriented social connection. The proposed framework remains conceptual and requires empirical testing.

IndexTerms - meaningful social connection, spirituality, platonic connections, perceived common ground, interpersonal similarity, self-awareness, conceptual framework

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Meaningful social connection is an important dimension of human experience. Interpersonal relationships provide opportunities for belonging, emotional exchange, mutual understanding, and the development of shared meaning. Baumeister and Leary [3] identified the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation, emphasizing the importance of forming and maintaining enduring interpersonal bonds. However, opportunities for social interaction do not necessarily translate into relationships that individuals experience as meaningful.

Digital communication has expanded the ways in which people encounter and communicate with others. Online social networks can support the development and maintenance of social ties, and relationships formed online may develop into enduring interpersonal relationships [15, 20]. Nevertheless, the accessibility of digital interaction does not guarantee that every interaction will provide emotional depth, intimacy, or a sense of meaningful connection. The experience of digital interaction varies according to its context and the qualities of the relationship involved [14, 17].

This distinction raises a question relevant to the initiation of new relationships: what conditions may provide a useful starting point for meaningful interaction between individuals who do not yet know one another?

1.2 Perceived Common Ground and Interpersonal Connection

Research on interpersonal attraction suggests that perceived similarity can be associated with interpersonal liking and attraction. A meta-analysis by Montoya et al. [16], covering 313 investigations, found significant associations between both actual similarity and perceived similarity and interpersonal attraction. Research on value similarity has also examined the role of shared values in friendship development [13]. These findings provide a basis for considering whether individuals who recognize meaningful areas of commonality may be more willing to initiate interaction.

However, similarity and common ground are not identical. Two individuals may share a demographic characteristic, activity, or interest without necessarily experiencing a sense of mutual understanding. Common ground involves the knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, or perspectives that individuals treat as shared and relevant to their interaction [7, 10]. Shared reality further highlights the interpersonal experience of understanding or experiencing the world in ways that feel sufficiently aligned with another person [1].

Importantly, common ground is not simply a fixed set of characteristics identified before a conversation. It may also be established, negotiated, and revised during communication. Therefore, a shared characteristic may provide an initial point of entry into an interaction without guaranteeing compatibility, mutual understanding, or the development of friendship.

1.3 Spirituality, Everyday Life, and Meaningful Social Connection

For some individuals, spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth are meaningful dimensions of everyday life. These orientations may influence the questions individuals ask, the experiences they wish to share, and the perspectives they find valuable in conversations. Research has examined associations between spiritual well-being and interpersonal relationship satisfaction [4], as well as relationships among mindfulness, self-connection, and subjective well-being [11, 12].

These findings provide relevant background for considering meaning-oriented interests as a possible basis for interpersonal commonality. However, evidence concerning spirituality and individual well-being does not establish that people with similar spiritual orientations will form stronger friendships or experience greater compatibility. Whether such orientations are useful as an initial basis for connection between unfamiliar individuals remains an empirical question.

In the present paper, spirituality is considered a possible shared orientation rather than a requirement for interpersonal compatibility or a guarantee of meaningful connection. The broader focus is on individuals who wish to explore experiences, exchange perspectives, and engage in conversations about aspects of life that may receive limited attention in their existing social settings.

1.4 Rationale and Purpose of the Present Paper

Existing research has examined several relevant areas, including the need to belong, perceived similarity, shared values, common ground, shared reality, and the formation of relationships through digital communication. These areas provide a substantial foundation for understanding interpersonal connection. Research has also examined what makes digital interactions meaningful and how friendship ties develop within online social networks [14, 2].

The present paper brings these perspectives together in a proposed conceptual framework termed Conscious Connection. The framework informs the development of a friendship-oriented digital platform designed to make a potentially meaningful shared orientation visible at the beginning of an interaction. Its proposed orientation centres on spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth, while supporting platonic connections across genders.

The central proposition is that identifying meaningful common ground before an interaction begins may offer a useful starting point for mutual engagement between unfamiliar individuals. This proposition does not assume that shared orientation guarantees compatibility, that a digital interaction will necessarily develop into friendship, or that common ground reduces interactional effort. The paper therefore aims to integrate relevant psychological and digital-communication literature, articulate the proposed framework, and identify questions for future empirical investigation.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The Need to Belong and Meaningful Relationships

The need to belong provides a foundational perspective for understanding the importance of interpersonal relationships. Baumeister and Leary [3] argued that individuals possess a fundamental motivation to form and maintain lasting interpersonal bonds. This perspective positions social connection as more than the frequency of contact: relationships also involve continuity, mutual care, and the experience of belonging.

The distinction between contact and meaningful connection is relevant to contemporary social environments, where individuals may encounter numerous opportunities for interaction without necessarily experiencing every interaction as personally significant. Litt et al. [14], in a cross-cultural study involving more than 4,600 people in the United States, India, and Japan, examined how individuals described and evaluated meaningful social interactions. Their findings highlighted emotional, informational, and tangible value, alongside the relevance of relationship ties, shared activities, and synchronous interaction. The study also indicated that technology-mediated interactions can be meaningful, challenging the assumption that online interactions are inherently less valuable than face-to-face exchanges.

The relationship between meaning and social well-being has also received scholarly attention. Folker et al. [8] reviewed empirical studies and theoretical perspectives concerning meaning and loneliness, highlighting the importance of considering how meaning may relate to experiences of social disconnection. However, meaning in life and meaningful interpersonal connection should not be treated as identical constructs.

Research on encounters between strangers adds another dimension to this discussion. Zeeb and Joffe [21] examined encounters with strangers through the concept of mattering, drawing attention to the contextual and interpersonal significance of such encounters. Their work supports the relevance of examining how unfamiliar individuals experience and interpret social contact, rather than assuming that the presence of other people automatically produces a sense of connection.

Taken together, this literature establishes the importance of belonging and the subjective quality of interpersonal experience. It does not establish that every individual requires the same form of connection or that a particular digital platform can meet that need. For the present framework, the relevant question is how individuals might begin interactions that offer the possibility of meaningful engagement.

2.2 Perceived Similarity and Interpersonal Attraction

Perceived similarity is a central concept in research on interpersonal attraction. Individuals may evaluate potential interaction partners partly in terms of whether they appear to share attitudes, values, interests, or perspectives. Montoya et al. [16] conducted a meta-analysis of 460 effect sizes drawn from 313 laboratory and field investigations. They found significant associations between interpersonal attraction and both actual similarity and perceived similarity. Their findings also indicated that perceived similarity was associated with attraction across studies involving no interaction, brief interaction, and existing relationships.

Research focusing specifically on values has considered the role of value similarity in friendship development. Lea and Duck [13] proposed a model addressing how similarity of values may contribute to the development of friendship. Such work is relevant to the possibility that perceived commonality in personally important areas may influence initial interpersonal evaluations.

Nevertheless, perceived similarity should not be interpreted as a complete measure of compatibility. Individuals may believe that they are similar to another person on the basis of limited information, while important differences remain undiscovered. Research on social projection also cautions against assuming that a perceived similarity means another person shares one's broader characteristics or perspective [6]. The distinction between perceived and actual similarity is therefore important when considering the design of systems that present shared characteristics before people interact.

For Conscious Connection, this literature supports considering perceived meaningful commonality as a possible starting point for interaction. It does not establish that matching individuals on a shared orientation will necessarily result in attraction, compatibility, or lasting friendship.

2.3 Common Ground and Shared Reality

Common ground refers to information, assumptions, beliefs, or understandings that participants treat as shared during communication. Clark and Brennan [7] described grounding as a collaborative process through which people coordinate their communication and establish sufficient mutual understanding for an interaction to proceed. Kecskes and Zhang [10] further examined common ground from a socio-cognitive perspective, emphasizing that it can be activated, sought, and created through interaction.

This perspective distinguishes common ground from a simple list of shared characteristics. A common interest may help individuals begin a conversation, but the meaning and relevance of that interest still need to be established between them. Participants may initially interpret the same topic differently, and shared understanding may develop only as they clarify their experiences and perspectives.

Bovet et al. [5], in a systematic review of linguistic measures of common ground in dialogue studies involving matching tasks, examined how researchers have operationalized and assessed common ground. Their work is relevant to the methodological challenge of studying shared understanding, although its focus is narrower than friendship formation or digital social-platform design.

The concept of shared reality adds an interpersonal dimension to this discussion. Andersen and Przybylinski [1] reviewed research on shared reality in interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the experience of having one's understanding of the world aligned with another person's understanding. Shared reality may be relevant to meaningful connection because people can experience a sense of being understood that extends beyond the possession of similar interests.

These perspectives suggest that common ground can serve as both an initial resource and an evolving outcome of interaction. A platform may make potentially relevant similarities visible before two people begin communicating, but the extent to which they actually understand one another can only emerge through interaction. This distinction is central to the proposed framework.

2.4 Interaction Between Unfamiliar Individuals

Interactions between unfamiliar individuals differ from interactions within established relationships because participants begin with limited knowledge of one another. They may need to interpret unfamiliar communication styles, establish the relevance of conversation topics, clarify expectations, and determine whether further interaction is mutually welcome.

McKenna et al. [15] examined relationship formation on the internet through survey research and an experiment. Their findings indicated that online environments can provide opportunities for people to express aspects of themselves and develop close relationships. The study also found that some online relationships persisted over time and that initial internet-based encounters could support interpersonal liking. These findings demonstrate the potential for online interaction to contribute to relationship formation, but they do not show that all online encounters will produce close relationships.

More recent research has examined the development of friendship ties within digital networks. Ameri et al. [2] modelled the formation of friendship ties alongside users' online activities in an evolving social network. Their work illustrates that online friendship formation can be studied as a process unfolding over time, rather than as a single decision to connect. However, the study does not establish that a shared meaning-oriented profile or spiritually oriented interest is a decisive factor in friendship formation.

Speer et al. [19] compared conversations involving friends and strangers using hyperscanning methods. Their findings indicated differences in neural alignment and convergence during conversation, with friends beginning from greater alignment and strangers showing greater convergence over the course of interaction. These results offer one perspective on the dynamics of interaction between familiar and unfamiliar individuals. They do not demonstrate that strangers necessarily experience greater fatigue or that making shared characteristics visible beforehand will improve their interactions.

Together, these studies suggest that unfamiliar individuals can form relationships through digital communication and that the process of interaction remains important. For the present framework, the relevant question is whether a potentially meaningful shared orientation can provide a useful starting point for that process, while leaving room for individuals to discover differences and develop their own understanding.

2.5 Spirituality, Personal Meaning, and Everyday Life

Spirituality may be relevant to how some individuals interpret life experiences, understand themselves, and engage with questions of meaning. For individuals who regard spirituality as an important part of everyday life, conversations concerning inner exploration, self-awareness, and personal growth may be particularly relevant to their interests and values. This makes spirituality a possible area of shared orientation, rather than an assumed source of compatibility.

Batool and Saleem [4] examined the relationship between spiritual well-being and interpersonal relationship satisfaction among adults. Their findings indicated an association between these variables. Because the study was correlational, it does not establish that spiritual well-being causes greater relationship satisfaction, nor does it show that people with similar spiritual orientations form stronger relationships with unfamiliar individuals.

Research on mindfulness provides related but distinct evidence. Klussman et al. [11] examined self-connection as a mediator in the relationship between mindfulness and well-being. In a later study, Klussman et al. [12] examined indirect relationships involving mindfulness, self-connection, meaning in life, and subjective well-being. These studies contribute to understanding the potential relevance of self-awareness and meaning to individual well-being. They do not directly test whether mindfulness or shared spirituality facilitates friendship formation.

The distinction between individual well-being and interpersonal connection is important. An orientation that is meaningful to one individual may offer a starting point for conversation with another person who values similar experiences. However, meaningful connection depends on more than the presence of a shared topic; it also involves communication, responsiveness, boundaries, and the development of mutual understanding.

Accordingly, Conscious Connection treats spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth as possible foundations for identifying common ground. It does not presume that all users understand these concepts in the same way or that a shared orientation ensures a compatible relationship.

2.6 Interactional Effort and the Proposed Concept of Connection Fatigue

Social interaction can be rewarding, but the effort associated with interaction may vary across situations and individuals. Hall et al. [9] examined social bandwidth and the conditions under which social interactions are experienced as energy intensive. Their research provides a basis for considering how characteristics of an interaction and the experience of connection or disconnection may be associated with perceived social energy demands.

Digital communication research has also examined fatigue arising from specific forms of technology use. Shin and Shin [18] investigated mobile messenger overload, fatigue, and mobile shunning. This work is relevant to understanding fatigue associated with communication demands, but mobile messenger fatigue is not equivalent to the proposed concept of connection fatigue.

In the present paper, connection fatigue is used as a proposed concept referring to the subjective weariness that may arise when efforts to initiate or sustain connection feel repetitive, effortful, or insufficiently meaningful. This is a working conceptual definition, not an established or validated psychological construct. It should not be confused with general social fatigue, digital communication overload, or clinically significant exhaustion.

The existing literature offers adjacent grounds for investigating interactional effort and communication-related fatigue. However, it does not establish that limited common ground causes connection fatigue, that unfamiliar interactions are necessarily more tiring, or that a platform built around shared orientation will reduce fatigue.

The proposed relationship between common ground, interactional effort, and connection fatigue therefore remains a question for future research. Empirical work would first need to define and operationalize the proposed construct, distinguish it from related concepts, and test whether it can be measured reliably.

2.7 Synthesis and Conceptual Research Gap

The reviewed literature provides several foundations for understanding the initiation of meaningful social connection. Research on belonging emphasizes the importance of interpersonal bonds [3]. Research on similarity and attraction suggests that perceived commonality may be associated with interpersonal attraction, while also highlighting the distinction between perceived and actual similarity [16, 6]. Research on common ground and shared reality explains how mutual understanding may be established and developed through communication [7, 10, 1].

Research on digital interaction further demonstrates that online environments can support meaningful interactions and the formation of relationships, although the perceived quality and development of those relationships vary [15, 14, 17, 20]. Studies of evolving online networks also show that friendship formation can be examined as a process involving users' connections and activities over time [2].

These areas of research are relevant to the present framework, but they address different aspects of social connection. The literature reviewed here does not, by itself, establish the effectiveness of a digital platform that makes a personally meaningful shared orientation visible before interaction. Nor does it establish that spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, or personal growth are universally effective bases for initiating friendship.

The conceptual contribution of Conscious Connection lies in bringing these perspectives together around a specific question: might making meaningful common ground visible at the beginning of an interaction provide a useful starting point for platonic connection between unfamiliar individuals? The framework proposes a friendship-oriented digital environment in which individuals can recognize potentially shared orientations, exchange experiences, and explore whether mutual understanding develops through interaction.

The framework does not assume that commonality guarantees compatibility or that an initial sense of similarity will lead to a lasting relationship. It also treats connection fatigue as a separate, proposed concept requiring definition and empirical testing, rather than as an established consequence of limited common ground.

The present paper therefore offers a conceptual integration and an applied framework for future investigation. Subsequent research could examine whether visible shared orientation is associated with willingness to initiate conversation, perceived common ground, interactional experience, and the development of meaningful platonic relationships. Research would also be needed to determine whether the proposed platform offers value beyond existing digital approaches to social connection.

3. Development of the Conscious Connection Conceptual Framework

3.1 Conceptualising Conscious Connection

Conscious Connection is proposed as a framework for understanding how shared meaningful orientations may provide a starting point for developing platonic relationships between unfamiliar individuals. The concept emerges from the observation that opportunities for social interaction do not necessarily translate into meaningful interpersonal connections. Although digital platforms have expanded the possibilities for meeting and communicating with others, the availability of potential connections does not, in itself, ensure that individuals experience a sense of common ground, mutual understanding, or meaningful engagement.

The proposed framework places emphasis on the orientation that individuals bring to social interaction. This orientation may include interests in spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, personal growth, and the desire to engage with others around experiences and questions that hold personal significance. Such orientations are not intended to represent fixed personality categories or definitive indicators of compatibility. Rather, they provide possible points of reference through which individuals may recognise shared interests, values, or areas of personal exploration before initiating a conversation.

The concept draws on psychological perspectives concerning the need to belong, perceived similarity, common ground, and shared reality [3, 16, 7, 1]. Considered together, these perspectives provide a theoretical basis for examining why the recognition of meaningful commonalities may be relevant to interpersonal engagement. However, the recognition of similarity alone cannot establish the quality or future course of a relationship. Meaningful connection remains dependent on the interaction between individuals, including their willingness to communicate, listen, exchange perspectives, and develop mutual understanding.

Conscious Connection therefore distinguishes between identifying a possible basis for connection and the subsequent process of building a relationship. The initial recognition of shared meaningful orientations may help individuals identify a potential starting point for interaction; the development of a relationship, however, requires further engagement and cannot be assumed from similarity alone. This distinction is particularly relevant to friendship-oriented digital environments, where individuals may have opportunities to meet others beyond their existing social circles but may not always have a clear indication of the common ground on which a conversation could begin.

Within this framework, Conscious Connection is understood as a proposed approach to facilitating meaningful platonic social interaction by making potentially relevant common ground more visible at the beginning of an encounter. It does not assume that all individuals with similar orientations will form compatible relationships, nor does it claim that a particular digital environment will necessarily reduce loneliness or social fatigue. Instead, it offers a conceptual foundation for examining how shared meaningful orientations, initial engagement, and subsequent interpersonal interaction may relate to the development of meaningful social connections. The framework is intended to guide future theoretical refinement, platform development, and empirical investigation.

3.2 Core Components of the Framework

The proposed Conscious Connection framework comprises five interrelated components: meaningful orientation, recognition of common ground, initial engagement, reciprocal exploration, and the potential development of a meaningful relationship. These components represent conceptually distinct aspects of the connection process rather than fixed stages that every interpersonal relationship must follow. They are informed by psychological literature on belonging, perceived similarity, common ground, shared reality, and interpersonal communication [3, 16, 7, 1].

Meaningful Orientation. Meaningful orientation refers to the interests, values, experiences, and areas of personal exploration that individuals consider significant in their lives. Within the proposed framework, these may include spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, mindfulness, and personal growth. Such orientations offer a broader basis for potential connection than demographic characteristics or superficial similarities alone. However, their significance lies in how individuals understand and engage with them, rather than in the mere presence of a shared label or interest.

Recognition of Common Ground. The second component concerns the recognition of potentially meaningful commonalities between individuals. These may emerge through shared interests, personal experiences, values, questions, or approaches to life. Research on perceived similarity and common ground provides a basis for considering how such recognition may facilitate initial interpersonal engagement [16, 7]. Within Conscious Connection, common ground is treated as a possible starting point for interaction rather than evidence of complete compatibility. Individuals may interpret the same orientation differently or discover substantial differences through conversation.

Initial Engagement. Recognition of common ground may provide individuals with a clearer reason to initiate or participate in a conversation. When a potential point of connection is visible, individuals may have a meaningful subject around which to begin an interaction. This component concerns the transition from recognising a possible connection to engaging with another person. Nevertheless, the presence of common ground does not ensure that either individual will initiate contact or that the interaction will be comfortable or mutually rewarding.

Reciprocal Exploration. Meaningful connection requires more than identifying similarities. Reciprocal exploration involves listening, sharing experiences, asking questions, exchanging perspectives, and developing an understanding of how another person interprets their experiences. The process may reveal further commonalities as well as differences that were not initially apparent. Research on shared reality suggests the relevance of developing a sense of understanding about the world with another person [1]. Within this framework, reciprocal exploration is therefore considered an important part of moving beyond initial similarity towards a more individualised understanding of another person.

Potential Development of a Meaningful Relationship. The final component concerns the possibility that sustained, mutually valued interaction may contribute to the development of a meaningful platonic relationship. Such a relationship may involve a growing sense of understanding, trust, emotional openness, or shared interest. However, this outcome is neither immediate nor guaranteed. The interaction may instead remain casual, reveal incompatibilities, or conclude without the development of a continuing relationship. Conscious Connection therefore considers meaningful relationship development a possible outcome of the process, not an inevitable consequence of shared orientation.

Taken together, these components position Conscious Connection as a framework that begins with personally meaningful orientations, considers how common ground becomes recognisable, and examines how interaction may develop through reciprocal engagement. The framework does not treat similarity as a sufficient condition for friendship; instead, it considers how similarity may provide an initial basis upon which interpersonal understanding can develop.

3.3 Proposed Process of Conscious Connection

The proposed process of Conscious Connection describes how meaningful orientations may relate to the emergence and development of platonic connections between unfamiliar individuals. It brings together the five components outlined in Section 3.2 while recognising that interpersonal relationships are dynamic, context-dependent, and not necessarily linear.

The process begins with the visibility of meaningful orientation. Individuals may have interests, values, or areas of personal exploration that are important to them but are not immediately apparent in ordinary social encounters. When these orientations become visible, they may provide additional information through which individuals can identify people with potentially relevant interests or perspectives. This proposition is consistent with the broader relevance of perceived similarity to interpersonal attraction, although the specific role of meaningful orientation within the present framework requires empirical examination [16].

The next part of the process involves the recognition of possible common ground. Individuals who recognise a shared orientation may identify a topic or experience around which interaction could begin. This recognition can reduce uncertainty about what might provide a meaningful starting point for conversation, although the framework does not assume that uncertainty will necessarily be reduced in every encounter. Common ground may also emerge during interaction rather than being recognised beforehand, making this component potentially iterative rather than exclusively initial.

This may lead to initial engagement and reciprocal exploration. Once interaction begins, individuals have an opportunity to examine the significance of their apparent similarities through conversation. Sharing personal experiences, listening to different perspectives, and asking questions may reveal whether the initial commonality is meaningful to both individuals. It may also uncover differences in expectations, values, communication styles, or levels of interest. Consequently, the relationship between perceived common ground and subsequent engagement is understood as a possibility to be investigated rather than a predetermined causal sequence.

Through continued interaction, mutual understanding and the potential for relationship development may emerge. When individuals experience their exchanges as relevant, respectful, and mutually meaningful, they may choose to continue the interaction and develop a platonic relationship. Conversely, the process may stop at any point if the interaction does not meet their expectations or if their interests and interpersonal preferences do not align. The framework therefore allows for varied outcomes, including continuing friendship, occasional interaction, or disengagement.

The proposed process can be summarised as follows:

Meaningful orientation → Recognition of possible common ground → Initial engagement → Reciprocal exploration → Potential development of a meaningful relationship.

This sequence represents a conceptual guide rather than a validated developmental pathway. The components may overlap, recur, or occur in a different order. For example, an individual may discover a meaningful shared orientation only after an initial conversation, while another interaction may begin with an apparent similarity that becomes less relevant over time.

Within a digital environment, the framework suggests that making meaningful orientations visible could offer one possible way to support the initial stages of connection. However, the quality and continuity of any resulting relationship would depend on subsequent interpersonal interaction and individual circumstances. The framework does not establish that orientation-based digital platforms produce stronger relationships than other forms of social interaction. Rather, it identifies a set of relationships between meaningful orientation, perceived common ground, engagement, and interpersonal development that can guide future empirical research and inform the design of platforms intended to facilitate meaningful platonic connection.

3.4 Conceptual Propositions

Building on the proposed framework, this section presents a set of conceptual propositions concerning the relationship between meaningful orientation, perceived common ground, interpersonal engagement, and the potential development of meaningful platonic connections. These propositions are derived from the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review and are intended to guide future empirical investigation. They do not represent empirically established relationships within the Conscious Connection framework.

Proposition 1: Visibility of Meaningful Orientation and Recognition of Common Ground

Making personally meaningful orientations visible at the beginning of an interaction may facilitate the recognition of potential common ground between unfamiliar individuals. Shared interests in spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, or personal growth may provide an initial basis for identifying topics that individuals consider relevant to their lives. This proposition draws on research concerning perceived similarity and common ground [16, 7]. However, the extent to which such orientations facilitate recognition of common ground remains an empirical question.

Proposition 2: Perceived Common Ground and Initial Interpersonal Engagement

The recognition of meaningful common ground may be associated with greater willingness to initiate or participate in interpersonal interaction. When individuals perceive a relevant basis for conversation, they may have a clearer starting point for engaging with someone unfamiliar. This proposition is consistent with the broader literature on interpersonal similarity and shared understanding [16, 1]. It does not imply that perceived common ground will consistently lead to engagement, as individual preferences, social circumstances, and communication styles may also influence whether interaction occurs.

Proposition 3: Reciprocal Exploration and the Development of Mutual Understanding

Reciprocal exploration of experiences and perspectives may contribute to the development of mutual understanding between individuals who initially recognise common ground. Through listening, questioning, sharing experiences, and exchanging interpretations, individuals may develop a more nuanced understanding of one another. The relevance of shared reality to interpersonal relationships provides a theoretical basis for this proposition [1]. Nevertheless, the quality of the interaction and the extent to which individuals feel understood would need to be examined empirically.

Proposition 4: Initial Similarity and Relationship Development

The recognition of shared meaningful orientations may provide a starting point for relationship development, but the continuation of a meaningful platonic connection is likely to depend on subsequent interaction rather than perceived similarity alone. Although similarity may be relevant to initial interpersonal attraction, it does not establish enduring compatibility or guarantee a continuing relationship [16]. This proposition highlights the distinction between identifying a potential connection and developing a mutually valued relationship over time.

Proposition 5: Meaningful Orientation as a Basis for Digital Connection Design

Digital environments that make meaningful orientations visible may offer an alternative approach to facilitating initial interactions between unfamiliar individuals. By presenting areas of personal interest and exploration as possible starting points for conversation, such environments may help users identify potential common ground beyond demographic characteristics or broad social categories. This proposition concerns a possible design implication of the framework rather than a demonstrated advantage of orientation-based digital platforms. Comparative and longitudinal research would be required to determine whether this approach influences users' engagement, perceived meaningfulness of interaction, or subsequent relationship development.

Taken together, these propositions outline the relationships that the Conscious Connection framework proposes for further investigation. They position meaningful orientation as a possible starting point, perceived common ground as a potential basis for initial engagement, and reciprocal interaction as relevant to the development of mutual understanding and continuing relationships. The framework also recognises that these relationships may vary across individuals and contexts. Future research could examine the propositions using qualitative interviews, longitudinal studies of emerging friendships, or comparative evaluations of digital platform designs. Such investigations would help establish whether the proposed relationships are supported, require modification, or differ according to the nature of the individuals and interactions involved.

4. DISCUSSION

The present paper develops the Conscious Connection framework to examine how shared meaningful orientations may provide a starting point for meaningful platonic relationships between unfamiliar individuals. Drawing on literature concerning the need to belong, perceived similarity, common ground, shared reality, and interpersonal communication, the framework brings these perspectives together in the context of contemporary digital social interaction. Its central premise is that the opportunity to interact with others and the recognition of a potentially meaningful basis for interaction are conceptually distinct. Although individuals may have access to numerous social contacts, the availability of potential interactions does not necessarily indicate whether those interactions will be personally meaningful.

A key contribution of the framework is its emphasis on meaningful orientation as a possible basis for recognising common ground. Research on interpersonal similarity suggests that perceived similarities can be relevant to interpersonal attraction [16], while research on common ground and shared reality highlights the importance of establishing mutual understanding during communication [7, 1]. Conscious Connection brings these perspectives together by proposing that personally significant orientations, including spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth, may offer identifiable starting points for interaction. This extends the discussion from whether individuals perceive one another as similar to how potentially meaningful areas of commonality might be made visible before a conversation begins.

The framework also distinguishes between initial common ground and the subsequent development of a relationship. Recognising a shared interest or orientation may provide a reason to initiate interaction, but it does not establish that two individuals will be compatible or develop a lasting friendship. The quality of a relationship depends on what unfolds between individuals as they communicate, exchange experiences, and respond to one another. This distinction is important because it prevents perceived

similarity from being treated as a sufficient explanation for meaningful interpersonal connection. Instead, the framework considers common ground a potential starting point within a broader, interaction-dependent process.

Another contribution concerns the role of meaningful conversation in developing an understanding of unfamiliar individuals. Reciprocal exploration allows people to move beyond an initial perception of similarity and examine how another person interprets experiences, values, and questions that matter to them. The framework therefore positions meaningful connection not simply as the discovery of shared characteristics but as a possible outcome of sustained interpersonal engagement. This perspective also allows for the possibility that an initial sense of commonality may diminish or that meaningful differences may emerge through interaction.

The framework has potential relevance to digital social environments. Existing online platforms provide opportunities for people to meet and communicate, and research has examined the formation and maintenance of relationships through digital media [15, 14, 20]. Conscious Connection proposes a complementary question: whether making personally meaningful orientations visible could provide a useful starting point for interactions between unfamiliar individuals. This is a design-oriented implication of the framework rather than a claim that existing platforms are ineffective or that an orientation-based platform would necessarily produce better relationships. The value of this approach would depend on how users interpret the information presented, whether it supports relevant conversation, and how subsequent interactions develop.

The framework may also offer a basis for investigating the effort involved in initiating and sustaining social interaction. The concept of connection fatigue, discussed earlier in this paper, is proposed as an area for further inquiry rather than an established psychological construct. Research on social interaction and digital communication provides related perspectives on the effort and demands associated with social engagement [9, 18]. However, these studies do not directly establish that difficulty finding meaningful common ground causes connection fatigue. Future research would need to define the proposed concept clearly, distinguish it from related constructs such as social exhaustion and digital communication fatigue, and investigate whether it can be measured reliably.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, Conscious Connection is a conceptual framework and has not yet been empirically validated. The proposed relationships among meaningful orientation, perceived common ground, initial engagement, reciprocal exploration, and relationship development should therefore be treated as propositions for investigation rather than established findings. Second, the framework places particular emphasis on spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth. These orientations may be meaningful to some individuals but may not be relevant to everyone, and their interpretation may vary across cultural and individual contexts. Third, the framework does not account comprehensively for all factors that influence relationship formation, including communication preferences, personality, situational circumstances, accessibility, and individual expectations. Finally, a shared orientation may create an initial impression of similarity without guaranteeing shared values, mutual respect, or relational compatibility.

Despite these limitations, the Conscious Connection framework provides a starting point for examining how meaningful orientations and perceived common ground may be incorporated into a broader understanding of platonic social connection. By distinguishing the identification of potential commonality from the interpersonal work of developing a relationship, it offers a conceptual basis for future research on meaningful social interaction and the design of digital environments intended to facilitate it. Its contribution lies not in establishing a proven pathway to friendship, but in identifying relationships and questions that warrant systematic investigation.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL PLATFORM DESIGN

The Conscious Connection framework has potential implications for the design of digital environments intended to facilitate meaningful platonic social connections. Rather than focusing exclusively on expanding the number of available contacts, the framework draws attention to how individuals identify potential common ground, initiate conversations, and develop mutual understanding. These implications are conceptual and are intended to inform future platform development and evaluation.

5.1 Making Meaningful Orientations Visible

The framework suggests that digital platforms could provide individuals with opportunities to express orientations that are personally meaningful to them, including spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, mindfulness, and personal growth. Making these orientations visible may offer a starting point for recognising potentially relevant common ground before an interaction begins. Such information would complement, rather than replace, conventional profile details and should allow users to describe their interests in their own terms. The purpose would not be to categorise individuals rigidly, but to communicate aspects of their interests and perspectives that may otherwise remain undisclosed during initial encounters.

5.2 Supporting the Recognition of Common Ground

A second implication concerns how platforms present potential areas of commonality between users. Instead of relying exclusively on demographic characteristics or broad interest categories, a platform informed by Conscious Connection could highlight shared topics, experiences, or areas of exploration. For example, two individuals interested in self-awareness might approach the subject through different personal experiences, creating an opportunity for conversation without implying that they share identical beliefs or values. Such design should communicate potential common ground without presenting similarity as evidence of compatibility or predicting the success of a future relationship.

5.3 Encouraging Meaningful Initial Interaction

Recognising common ground does not necessarily make it easy to initiate a conversation. Digital platforms could therefore provide optional conversation prompts that invite users to share experiences, reflect on a topic, or exchange perspectives related to their expressed interests. These prompts might help individuals move beyond generic introductions towards conversations that feel relevant to them. However, the platform should preserve users' freedom to choose whether and how they participate. Prompts should encourage voluntary exchange rather than pressure users to disclose personal experiences or engage in conversations they find uncomfortable.

5.4 Facilitating Reciprocal Exploration

The framework places importance on the interaction that follows initial recognition of common ground. Platform design could support reciprocal exploration by providing an environment in which users can listen, ask questions, exchange perspectives, and gradually develop familiarity. This implies that meaningful engagement should not be evaluated solely through the number of messages exchanged, contacts made, or interactions initiated. Qualitative aspects of the interaction, including users' perceptions of relevance, mutual understanding, and willingness to continue communicating, may also be important areas for evaluation. These are proposed evaluation dimensions, not established indicators of relationship quality within the present framework.

5.5 Supporting User Autonomy and Boundaries

A platform designed to facilitate meaningful social connection should recognise that individuals differ in their preferred pace, level of openness, and willingness to engage with unfamiliar people. Users should retain control over the information they disclose, the conversations they enter, and whether they wish to continue an interaction. Privacy controls, clear consent mechanisms, blocking and reporting options, and the ability to disengage from a conversation are relevant design considerations. In addition, the platform should avoid implying that shared interests automatically establish trust or that users are obliged to develop a relationship after initiating contact.

5.6 Evaluating Meaningful Connection Beyond Engagement Metrics

The framework also raises questions about how the effectiveness of a digital social platform should be evaluated. Conventional measures such as time spent on a platform, frequency of use, or number of contacts may not adequately capture whether users experience their interactions as meaningful. Future evaluations could examine users' perceived common ground, the relevance of conversations, perceived mutual understanding, satisfaction with interactions, and whether relationships continue beyond initial contact. Such measures would need to be selected or developed carefully and evaluated for reliability and validity. Research should also consider whether users experience the interaction process as manageable or demanding, without assuming that the proposed concept of connection fatigue is already established.

Overall, the implications of the Conscious Connection framework concern the possibility of designing digital environments that make meaningful common ground easier to recognise while supporting voluntary, reciprocal, and respectful interaction. The framework does not establish that these design choices will produce stronger friendships or reduce loneliness. Rather, it offers a conceptual basis for developing and evaluating platform features that seek to facilitate meaningful platonic social connections. Empirical research would be required to determine which design elements are useful, for whom they are useful, and under what circumstances they contribute to meaningful interaction.

6. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Limitations

The present paper has several limitations. First, the Conscious Connection framework is conceptual and has not been empirically tested. The proposed relationships between meaningful orientation, perceived common ground, initial engagement, reciprocal exploration, and the potential development of meaningful platonic relationships are theoretically informed propositions rather than established findings. Consequently, the framework should be understood as a foundation for future investigation rather than a validated explanation of how meaningful social connections develop.

Second, the framework places particular emphasis on meaningful orientations such as spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, mindfulness, and personal growth. Although these orientations may provide relevant starting points for some individuals, their importance varies across people and contexts. Individuals may develop meaningful relationships through shared activities, humour, professional interests, life experiences, or other forms of commonality that fall outside the proposed framework. The applicability of Conscious Connection to individuals with different interests, backgrounds, and interpersonal preferences therefore remains to be established.

Third, the framework distinguishes the recognition of common ground from the development of a relationship, but it does not comprehensively account for all the factors that may influence relationship formation. Personality, communication style, interpersonal expectations, cultural context, accessibility, and situational circumstances may affect whether an initial interaction develops into a continuing friendship. Moreover, perceived similarity may not correspond to actual similarity, and the discovery of differences may either enrich an interaction or limit the development of a relationship.

Fourth, the proposed application of the framework to digital platforms remains exploratory. The present paper does not evaluate an operational platform, compare different matching or interaction designs, or establish whether making meaningful orientations visible improves the quality of social interactions. The proposed design implications should therefore be treated as possibilities for development and evaluation rather than demonstrated platform outcomes.

Finally, connection fatigue has been discussed as a potential area of investigation rather than an established construct within the present framework. Although related literature examines the effort associated with social interaction and fatigue associated with digital communication, further conceptual and empirical work is needed to determine whether difficulty identifying meaningful common ground is associated with a distinct experience of connection fatigue. Its definition, boundaries, relationship to existing constructs, and possible methods of measurement remain unresolved.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Future research could develop and evaluate the Conscious Connection framework through several complementary approaches.

First, qualitative research could explore how individuals understand meaningful connection and identify the characteristics that make an interaction feel personally relevant. Interviews or focus groups involving adults with diverse backgrounds and social experiences could examine the role of shared orientations, perceived common ground, reciprocal exploration, and the transition from initial interaction to friendship. Such research could also identify important components that are absent from the current framework and help refine its conceptual boundaries.

Second, quantitative studies could examine the relationships proposed in this paper. Researchers could investigate whether the visibility of meaningful orientations is associated with perceived common ground and whether perceived common ground is associated with willingness to engage with unfamiliar individuals. Further research could examine whether reciprocal exploration is associated with perceived mutual understanding and whether these experiences relate to the continuation and perceived meaningfulness of platonic relationships. Appropriate measures would need to be selected or developed, and the proposed relationships should not be interpreted as causal without a suitable research design.

Third, longitudinal research could investigate how connections develop over time. Rather than measuring only initial attraction or immediate satisfaction, future studies could follow individuals across multiple interactions to examine whether perceived common ground remains relevant as familiarity increases. Such research could explore how initial similarities, newly discovered differences, communication experiences, and mutual expectations relate to the continuation or discontinuation of relationships.

Fourth, empirical evaluation could examine the proposed implications for digital platform design. Researchers could compare different ways of presenting user interests and meaningful orientations, or evaluate optional conversation prompts designed to support initial engagement. Outcomes could include perceived relevance of common ground, willingness to initiate conversations,

perceived mutual understanding, interaction satisfaction, and the continuation of contact. Any comparison should account for alternative explanations, including differences in user motivation, platform familiarity, and opportunities for interaction.

Finally, future research could examine the proposed concept of connection fatigue. Initial qualitative work could establish how individuals describe the effort involved in finding and maintaining meaningful social connections and distinguish this experience from loneliness, social exhaustion, and digital communication fatigue. Subsequent studies could investigate its dimensions and possible measurement before examining whether it is associated with the perceived effort of initiating interactions, the availability of meaningful common ground, or experiences on digital platforms. This process would help determine whether connection fatigue represents a useful distinct concept or is better understood through existing constructs.

Together, these research directions would support the progressive refinement and evaluation of the Conscious Connection framework. By moving from conceptual clarification to qualitative exploration and empirical testing, future studies could determine whether its proposed components and relationships are supported, how they vary across contexts, and whether they offer a useful basis for designing digital environments intended to facilitate meaningful platonic social connection.

7. CONCLUSION

The present paper proposes the Conscious Connection framework as a conceptual approach to understanding how meaningful orientations and perceived common ground may contribute to the development of platonic relationships between unfamiliar individuals. Drawing on psychological literature concerning the need to belong, perceived similarity, common ground, shared reality, and interpersonal communication, the framework distinguishes between recognising a potential basis for connection and developing a meaningful relationship through subsequent interaction.

The central contribution of the framework lies in its emphasis on personally meaningful orientations as a possible starting point for interpersonal engagement. By considering how interests in spirituality, self-awareness, inner exploration, and personal growth may provide opportunities to recognise common ground, the framework offers a perspective for examining meaningful social connection within contemporary digital environments. It also highlights the importance of reciprocal exploration, mutual understanding, and individual differences in the development of platonic relationships.

The framework provides a conceptual foundation for the design and evaluation of digital platforms that seek to facilitate meaningful social interaction beyond simply increasing opportunities to meet others. However, it does not establish that shared orientations lead to stronger relationships or that the proposed approach reduces loneliness or connection fatigue. These possibilities require systematic empirical investigation.

Ultimately, Conscious Connection offers a starting point for further theoretical development, empirical research, and the exploration of digital environments designed to support meaningful human connection. Its value will depend on whether future research can establish the relevance of its proposed components and determine how they may contribute to the development of meaningful platonic relationships across different individuals and contexts.

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