

RETHINKING COMMUNICATION IN A DIGITALLY IMMERSSED SOCIETY: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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Abstract: This article examines how digital world particularly through social media reshapes communication pattern, interpersonal relationships and emotional expression. The primary objective of this study is to systematically synthesise empirical evidence from existing studies on how digitally mediated communication influences emotional expression, interpersonal competence and communication practices in contemporary society. Drawing exclusively on empirical studies, the review focuses on key thematic areas including emojis as digital emotional language, digital interaction dynamics in tertiary education, social media dependency consequences, psychological and cognitive effects of overconsumption and weakening of real world communication skills. The findings reveal that while digital tools enhance connectivity and emotional expressiveness, excessive dependence weakens face to face communication skills, increases distraction and elevates loneliness. Digital spaces have become the primary platform where relationships are built and maintained, raising critical questions about how individuals interpret messages and navigate emotions in contexts of physical detachment. By integrating findings across multiple domains, this study aims to clarify the conditional and contradictory effects of digital communication on human interaction, highlighting its broader implications for social behaviour in a digitally immersed society.

Keywords: Social Media, Digital Communication, Interpersonal Skills, Psychological And Cognitive Effects

Introduction

Kapoor et al. (2017) assert that platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter help users maintain social ties more efficiently, enabling relationships to flourish despite geographical distances. These platforms have altered conventional communication patterns, providing instant connectivity and continuous interaction.

Yaqub and Alsabban (2023) further describe social media as a collection of online technologies that facilitate real time content creation, communication and information sharing. Their classification of platforms ranging from social communities like Facebook and LinkedIn to visually oriented platforms like TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram illustrate the expanding ecosystem of digital communication, each serving unique communicative and expressive functions.

However, Annisette and Lafreniere (2016) caution that an overreliance on social media risks promoting shallow communication. Their findings suggest that excessive digital communication may erode empathy, emotional regulation and problem solving skills. This raises concerns about long term consequences on interpersonal development especially among younger generation.

Problem Statement

Despite extensive research on digital communication and social media, existing studies remain insufficient in integrating the key contradiction whereby digital platforms simultaneously enhance connectivity while undermining face-to-face communication skills, emotional regulation and relational intimacy Bai et al. (2019). Prior studies often examine emojis, social media dependency or psychological effects resulting in a descriptive finding rather than a coherent understanding of their interrelationships. Addressing this gap is essential for strengthening conceptual dynamics in digital communication practices.

Methodology

This study adopts a literature review approach to examine empirical research on digital communication and its implications towards communication pattern, interpersonal relationships and emotional expression. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases in communication, psychology and social sciences. The search employed combinations of keywords such as digital communication, social media, emojis, interpersonal communication, emotional expression, communication skills and psychological effects. Following screening, selected articles were examined using thematic analysis. Findings were categorised into key thematic domains, including emojis as emotional language, digital interaction dynamics in tertiary education, social media dependency consequences, psychological and cognitive effects of overconsumption and weakening of real-world communication skills.

Emojis As Digital Emotional Language

Emojis have become essential tools in digital communication, functioning as visual cues that enhance emotional expressiveness in text based exchanges. Bai et al. (2019) explain that emojis compensate for missing vocal tone, facial expressions and gestures which are naturally present in face to face communication. They argue that emojis help users convey subtle feelings, attitudes and reactions, reducing ambiguity in digital messages.

Furthermore, emojis significantly improve clarity by offering emotional context that written words sometimes fail to capture. Their analysis shows that when textual expression is insufficient, emojis serve as affective supplements that reinforce interpretation and prevent miscommunication. This strengthens emotional alignment between communicators in online settings.

Additionally, Smutny et al. (2020) highlight the widespread ability of Generation Z and Generation Y to interpret emojis and GIFs consistently. Their study suggests that these visual elements operate as a shared emotional language, enabling users across age groups to decode emotional more accurately in digital interactions. This shared understanding supports more meaningful during online engagement.

Emojis enhance social bonding by adding expressive richness to messages. The use of emojis humanises digital communication, allowing individuals to express tone, humour, warmth and empathy with greater clarity. This fosters deeper connection and facilitates smoother emotional exchanges in computer mediated communication.

However, empirical findings also indicate that emojis do not universally enhance emotional clarity. Although Bai et al. (2019) describe emojis as compensatory tools for missing nonverbal cues, they caution that emojis lack fixed semantic meanings and are highly dependent on contextual interpretation. In some communicative situations, emojis may introduce ambiguity rather than resolve it, particularly when sender and receiver do not share similar cultural or emotional frames of reference. This contradiction suggests that while emojis are designed to reduce uncertainty, their effectiveness in conveying emotion is contingent upon shared interpretive norms rather than inherent communicative clarity.

Digital Interaction Dynamics in Tertiary Education

Research across higher learning institution in Asia reveals clear patterns in how students perceive and utilise social media. In Thailand, Bhatiasevi (2024) found that students at Mahidol University International College engage with social media for intentional value, entertainment, social enhancement and relational connectedness. These motivations highlight how digital platforms serve as psychological and relational support systems within academic settings.

However, despite these advantages, social media cannot replace the depth of physical interaction. Hallerberg et al. (2018), in a study at Siam University in Bangkok, demonstrated that students still regard face to face communication as more effective than digital interaction. They emphasise the importance of nonverbal cues and conversational immediacy which digital platforms often fail to offer.

Beyond Thailand, the relational impact of social media is also evident in India. Imam and Tanisha (2023) reported that youths at Patna University believe social media enhances interpersonal relationships with 60% perceiving improved friendships and 25% noticing stronger family ties. These findings show that, when used positively, social media strengthens connection and emotional closeness.

Nevertheless, digital literacy alone does not determine communication ability. Loreto (2019), in a study at Dusit Thani College in Bangkok, found that students retain average interpersonal communication skills despite heavy digital consumption. This challenges assumptions that digital natives inherently lack communication competence.

In contrast, research at the Anand Institute of Management, India, by Payasi and Jain (2025) demonstrates that excessive social media use weakens face to face interaction, increases anxiety, and disrupts relationship maintenance. These findings highlight the importance of balanced digital use in educational environments.

Social Media Dependency Consequences

Interpersonal relationships in the digital era are increasingly shaped by emotional contradictions emerging from social media dependency. Ahmed (2023) explains that excessive use of social networking platforms creates simultaneous feelings of online connection yet emotional isolation. Although users remain digitally linked, meaningful real life interactions diminish, weakening emotional fulfilment and relational depth.

Moreover, dependency affects relationship satisfaction. Bouffard et al. (2021) reported that high Instagram use correlates with increased conflict and reduced relational harmony due to idealised self presentation and social comparison. These behaviours distort perceptions of intimacy and trust, contributing to emotional strain.

Additionally, motivations for online engagement significantly influence emotional outcomes. Bonsaksen et al. (2023) found that individuals who use social media to sustain relational continuity experience higher loneliness than those with other motivations. When digital platforms replace real world support systems, emotional isolation intensifies.

However, the effort to shape and sustain an idealised online identity also contributes to emotional strain. Moughal et al. (2023) highlights that to shape and maintain online identity contributes to stress, perceived incompetence, and relational tension. While Tandon et al. (2021) identify fear of missing out (FoMO) as a key predictor of excessive social media use. Continuous connectivity disrupts daily routines, sleep cycles and face to face communication and these will contribute to increasing social anxiety. When these factors converge, pressures of online self identity and FoMO driven engagement forms a psychological strain that gradually elevates social anxiety levels.

Psychological And Cognitive Effects Of Overconsumption

The psychological consequences of digital overuse are increasingly evident. Huang (2020) reports strong correlations between social media usage and depression, loneliness as well as emotional instability. This demonstrates how excessive online engagement undermines psychological resilience.

Moreover, specific platform addiction intensifies negative emotional outcomes. Gentzler et al. (2023) emphasise that compulsive TikTok and Instagram use heightens stress, anxiety and depression among young adults, suggesting that rapid consumption content weakens emotional regulation. Consequently, this behaviour reinforces unhealthy coping patterns that further sustain negative emotional cycles.

Nevertheless, temporary withdrawal has been shown to improve well being. Lambert et al. (2022) found that taking a one week break from Instagram and TikTok reduces depression symptoms and enhances emotional stability, indicating the therapeutic potential of digital detox. This reinforces the idea that intentional digital pauses function as a practical intervention for improving mental health outcomes.

Additionally, cognitive attention is compromised by constant digital engagement. Siebers et al. (2021) demonstrate that heavy users experience increased distraction and reduced concentration due to continuous notifications and fragmented content. Furthermore, academic performance is negatively affected by this social media habits. Kolhar et al. (2021) show that leisure based usage reduces sleep duration and weakens learning outcomes, illuminating the necessity of clear digital time management.

Weakening of Real World Communication Skills

Digital communication has substantial implications for interpersonal skill development. Gruber et al. (2022) observe that reduced face to face interaction weakens essential communication components such as tone, gestures, facial expressions and eye contact, illustrating the irreplaceability of physical presence. As a result, individuals may struggle to convey empathy and interpret emotional intent during real world interactions.

Moreover, behavioural distinctions between active and passive users lead to contradict outcomes. Ruben et al. (2021) found that passive users retain stronger interpersonal skills, whereas active users demonstrate weaker nonverbal cues and emotional engagement. Together, these contrasting patterns show that the way individuals engage online significantly shapes their social competence. This suggests that intentional, mindful use of digital platforms is crucial for preserving healthy interpersonal skills.

Additionally, the absence of nonverbal gestures heightens the risk of miscommunication, as individuals lose the visual and emotional cues that support accurate message interpretation. Avalle et al. (2024) demonstrate that textual communication often encourages negative conversational patterns due to limited emotional context, making misunderstandings more common. When messages lack of nonverbal guidance, interpretations become ambiguous, increasing the potential for relational tension and communication breakdown. As a result, even simple conversations may feel less connected or more distant, weakening the emotional connection between individuals.

Finally, Richardson (2021) highlights that online dialogue lacks intonation, emotional nuance and expressive subtlety, weakening empathy and diminishing real world social competence. Prolonged digital dependency reduces conversational depth. Over time, this limits individuals' ability to read emotional cues and respond sensitively in face to face communication. As digital interactions dominate daily communication, the capacity for meaningful, empathetic and engaged conversation gradually declines.

However, findings across existing studies are not entirely consistent regarding the impact of digital communication on real-world interpersonal skills. While several scholars argue that reduced face-to-face interaction diminishes empathy and nonverbal competence (Gruber et al., 2022), other research suggests that such decline is not universal. Ruben et al. (2021) demonstrate that passive users tend to maintain stronger interpersonal abilities indicating that communication outcomes are shaped more by patterns of engagement than by digital use alone. These mixed findings suggest that digital communication does not inherently erode interpersonal skills but does so under particular conditions.

Conclusion

Social media has drastically reshaped communication dynamics, offering unparalleled connectivity while simultaneously challenging emotional, psychological and interpersonal stability. Although digital platforms enrich expression through emojis, support relational and enhance accessibility, overconsumption leads to loneliness, cognitive overload, emotional fatigue and communication skill deterioration.

The evidence across higher learning institutions, psychological studies, and communication research highlights the urgent need for balanced digital literacy and intentional engagement. Future communication health will depend not on rejecting digital tools, but on using them wisely without compromising the fundamental interpersonal skills that sustain human connection.

In this rapidly shifting communication environment, individuals must learn to balance connection with boundaries, presence with pause and expression with empathy. When digital engagement is supported by self awareness and emotional regulation, it can enhance rather than diminish our interactions. Developing this balance is essential for nurturing healthier conversations, relationships and communities in a technology driven world.

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