



Exploring the Emotional Impact of Digital Communication on Social Relationships in Young Adults: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication technologies have significantly transformed social interactions creating new dynamics in human relationships. However, while much research has explored the broad implications of digital communication, the emotional and subjective experiences of individuals remain underexplored. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how individuals perceive and emotionally engage with digital communication, focusing specifically on its effects on social relationships. We use a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals navigating online communication and its impact on face-to-face interactions. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, key findings highlight that while digital communication fosters connectivity, it often lacks emotional depth, leading to a sense of detachment in offline interactions. These results underscore the complex interplay between digital platforms and social intimacy, offering deeper insights into the emotional aspects of digital communication. Our findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital communication influences human relationships and suggest that future studies should focus on emotional engagement and the role of different platforms in shaping social connections.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the proliferation of digital technologies has transformed the way individuals communicate and connect with others. Social media platforms, messaging apps, and virtual spaces have redefined the boundaries of human interaction, creating new forms of relationships and social networks that transcend traditional geographic and social limitations (Wu dkk., 2024). These technological advancements have not only changed how people communicate but have also reshaped social norms, behaviors, and the dynamics of personal and professional relationships. As digital communication continues to evolve, it becomes increasingly important to understand how these changes impact the way individuals experience and engage in social connections.

Despite the growing body of research on digital communication, there is a notable gap in understanding the emotional and subjective experiences individuals have with these technologies, particularly in relation to their social relationships. While the convenience and accessibility of digital communication are well-documented, the emotional and psychological consequences of constant online interaction remain underexplored. How individuals perceive and interpret their social relationships within the digital realm, and how these experiences influence their offline interactions, are crucial questions that require deeper investigation. This is particularly important in a time when digital media is becoming an integral part of everyday life, with implications for personal well-being, emotional intimacy, and the overall quality of social bonds.

There is a pressing need to explore the meaning behind these experiences, as understanding the lived experiences of individuals can provide valuable insights into the complexities of modern social interactions. The phenomenological approach, with its focus on uncovering the essence of human experiences, is particularly well-suited to address this gap. By examining the subjective

perceptions of individuals, phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of how digital communication influences relationships on a personal level (Chinchay dkk., 2024). This exploration can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the broader social and cultural shifts occurring in response to digital technologies, offering new perspectives on the human condition in an increasingly connected world.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals within the context of digital communication has become a significant area of inquiry in recent years. As technology continues to evolve, scholars have sought to understand the impact of digital platforms on human relationships, particularly in how individuals experience and interpret their social connections in virtual spaces. The focus has largely been on the transformation of social interactions and the emotional implications of these digital connections. However, while there has been considerable attention to the broader effects of digital communication on societal structures, there remains a gap in understanding the individual, subjective experience of engaging with these technologies.

One of the main challenges in exploring the deep meanings behind these experiences lies in the limitations of traditional quantitative research methods. Quantitative data, often used in studies on technology and social interaction, fails to capture the nuances of individual experiences, reducing complex, emotional, and personal experiences to generalized variables. While surveys and statistical models provide valuable insights into patterns and trends, they do not adequately explore the meanings individuals attach to their interactions or the emotional impact of digital communication (Rosean dkk., 2023). This methodological limitation prevents a comprehensive understanding of how individuals emotionally engage with technology and how it shapes their social lives on a personal level.

The reliance on these methods has hindered the ability of researchers to fully grasp the essence of how digital communication technologies influence human relationships. In contrast, qualitative methods, particularly phenomenology, offer a more suitable approach for exploring the depth of these experiences. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences, providing insights into the subjective and emotional dimensions of digital communication. This approach is essential for uncovering the deeper meanings and implications of the digital age on human relationships, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, phenomenology provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex and multi-dimensional impact of digital communication on social interactions.

Despite the growing body of research on the effects of digital communication on social relationships, much of the existing literature relies on practical, quantitative approaches that focus on surface-level observations and general trends. These methods, while valuable for identifying patterns, are limited in their ability to capture the profound, subjective experiences that individuals undergo in their interactions with digital platforms (Lee & Yu, 2020). Studies typically measure the frequency of digital interactions or survey generalized perceptions of social connectivity, often overlooking the nuanced emotional and psychological dimensions of these experiences. As a result, the current body of knowledge remains incomplete, with a significant gap in understanding the deeper meanings behind individuals' engagement with digital communication technologies.

The reliance on these conventional approaches does not address the essential question of how digital communication shapes the very nature of human connection at a personal level. While surveys and statistical methods can quantify the effects of technology, they fail to explore the lived experiences that contribute to individuals' emotional responses and perceptions of their relationships. This lack of depth in understanding leaves a significant gap in the field, one that cannot be adequately filled by traditional quantitative research.

A more holistic and in-depth exploration of the phenomenon can be achieved by adopting a phenomenological approach, which focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and allows for a deeper understanding of how they make sense of their interactions with digital technology. Phenomenology offers the opportunity to explore not just the behaviors and patterns associated with digital communication, but the underlying emotions, meanings, and subjective perceptions that shape

those behaviors (Kim dkk., 2024). By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital communication impacts human relationships on a personal and emotional level, offering new insights that traditional methods fail to uncover.

Numerous studies have examined the role of digital communication in shaping social relationships, focusing on aspects such as the frequency of online interactions and their impact on social well-being. However, many of these studies rely on quantitative methods, which fail to capture the depth of individual experiences. For instance, research by McMullan dkk. (2020) explored the social implications of social media use but did not delve deeply into how individuals emotionally process their interactions online. Similarly, theoretical frameworks like social capital theory (Atlam dkk., 2022) and media richness theory (Zewude dkk., 2025) have been applied to digital communication studies but often overlook the subjective, lived experience of individuals. These studies provide valuable context but leave a gap in understanding the personal meanings that users attribute to their digital interactions.

The proposed phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals experience and interpret their social connections through digital communication. This method was chosen because it is well-suited to uncover the subjective meanings and emotional responses that arise from engaging with technology. By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, phenomenology provides a richer understanding of the phenomenon, moving beyond surface-level observations to explore the true essence of digital communication's impact on relationships. This approach answers the gap identified in previous research, which failed to fully address how individuals emotionally process their online interactions and how these experiences shape their relationships in the offline world.

This article is structured to provide a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon. After the introduction, the context of the research will be explained, detailing the relevance of digital communication in modern social relationships (Li dkk., 2024). The methodology section will outline the phenomenological approach used, followed by an in-depth description of data collection and analysis processes, including the use of thematic analysis. The results will present key findings derived from participants' experiences, which will then be discussed in relation to the existing literature. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the key insights and offer recommendations for future research and practical applications of the findings.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employs a phenomenological design, which is ideal for exploring the lived experiences of individuals within their natural context. Phenomenology is particularly suited for investigating the meaning and essence of human experiences, making it highly relevant for addressing the research question regarding how digital communication influences social relationships (Prihidko dkk., 2020). This design focuses on understanding the subjective experiences of participants, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how they perceive and interpret their interactions in the digital space and its effects on their social connections.

The approach used in this study is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is known for its focus on both the personal and shared experiences of participants, as well as the interpretation of those experiences. IPA emphasizes the meaning individuals assign to their experiences, and how those meanings shape their understanding of the world. This method allows for a detailed and nuanced exploration of the participants' perspectives on the impact of digital communication technologies on their social relationships.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring they had relevant experiences with digital communication and social interactions. The inclusion criteria required

participants to be active users of social media and digital communication platforms, with a minimum of one year of experience engaging in such platforms (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). Furthermore, participants needed to have experience interacting with others both digitally and face-to-face, which was central to understanding the impact of digital communication on their relationships.

A total of 12 participants were included in the study, with an average age of 28 years. The group consisted of both male and female participants, representing a diverse range of social backgrounds. Participants ranged from students to working professionals, all of whom were regular users of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. This diversity allowed for a broader understanding of how digital communication influences relationships across various demographic groups. Although the sample size of 12 participants is relatively small, it is consistent with the typical approach in qualitative research, particularly phenomenological studies, where the focus is on depth rather than generalizability. Phenomenological research values rich, detailed accounts from a small number of participants, allowing for a deeper exploration of individual experiences. The small sample size is therefore adequate for the purpose of this study, as it provides meaningful insights into the emotional and subjective experiences of individuals interacting with digital communication technologies.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted in person or via video calls, depending on the participants' availability and preference. The interviews aimed to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' experiences with digital communication and its influence on their social relationships. A standardized interview guide was used to ensure that all relevant topics were covered, while also allowing flexibility for participants to share their unique experiences (Maltby dkk., 2024). Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to facilitate open and candid discussions.

To ensure the reliability and relevance of the data, the interview questions were designed to prompt participants to reflect on specific experiences, feelings, and thoughts related to digital communication. The guide included questions about the frequency of digital interactions, the perceived quality of relationships formed online versus in person, and the emotional impact of these interactions.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), focusing on identifying key themes that emerged from the participants' narratives. The analysis followed a systematic approach: transcriptions of the interviews were read multiple times to gain a thorough understanding of the data, and meaningful units were identified. These units were then grouped into categories, leading to the identification of core themes that encapsulated the participants' experiences.

IPA involves an iterative process where the researcher moves back and forth between the data and the interpretation. The themes were refined and re-evaluated to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing the qualitative data, but the emphasis remained on the interpretative process rather than on the software itself.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, ensuring that they understood the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to confidentiality (Johnson & Rogers, 2024). Each participant was informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To maintain confidentiality, all data was anonymized, and participants' identities were protected throughout the research process. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human subjects, ensuring the integrity and ethical soundness of the study.

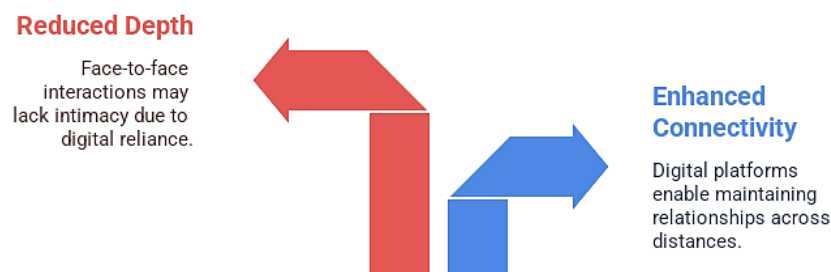
RESULTS

Transformation of Social Connections through Digital Communication

The first theme that emerged from the analysis centers around the transformation of social connections through digital communication. Participants described how digital technology, particularly social media, has redefined the way they interact with others. For many, social media platforms serve as both a bridge and a barrier in maintaining relationships. One participant shared, "I feel more connected to my friends online, but sometimes, it feels like we are more distant when we meet face to face. It's like we communicate through our screens and forget the personal touch."

This quote highlights a key finding: the digital experience shapes the way individuals perceive social interactions, creating both opportunities for connection and potential challenges for real-world engagement. The use of technology has enabled individuals to maintain relationships despite geographical barriers, yet it has also led to a sense of detachment when face-to-face interactions occur. The participants acknowledged that while the digital world offers convenience and accessibility, it may sometimes reduce the depth of social connections.

How do digital communications affect social connections?



The Impact of Technology on Emotional Intimacy

The second theme relates to the influence of technology on emotional intimacy within relationships. Several participants revealed that while they feel connected to others on a superficial level through digital media, they experience challenges when it comes to establishing deeper emotional bonds. One participant explained, "It's easier to share jokes or memes, but when it comes to serious discussions, I prefer face-to-face talks. Online conversations often feel disconnected, like there's something missing."

The lack of emotional depth in digital communication was a consistent point among participants. They expressed that while technology facilitates quick and easy exchanges, it often lacks the emotional nuance and body language that are integral to genuine intimacy. This theme underscores a central paradox: although digital communication fosters constant connectivity, it does not always provide the emotional resonance required for deep, meaningful relationships.

Generation Gaps and Technology Adoption

A third theme that surfaced was the role of generational differences in adopting and adapting to digital communication technologies. Younger participants, in particular, expressed a sense of ease and comfort in using digital platforms, viewing them as essential tools for staying connected. Conversely, older participants were more hesitant and often described digital communication as less authentic. As one older participant noted, "I still prefer to talk to my family over the phone or in person. These new apps, they just don't feel like real conversation to me."

This theme suggests that generational differences influence how individuals perceive and utilize technology. For younger individuals, technology represents a natural extension of their social environment, while for older generations, it often remains an unfamiliar or less satisfying substitute for traditional forms of interaction. These differences indicate that while digital communication has become ubiquitous, its impact on social relationships varies significantly across age groups.

The results of this study reveal that the impact of digital technology on social connections is multifaceted. While it has undeniably facilitated communication across distances, it has also introduced complexities in maintaining emotional intimacy and bridging generational divides. Participants highlighted a blend of positive and negative aspects, pointing to the need for a balanced approach to digital interaction that fosters both connection and meaningful, personal engagement. The findings suggest that while digital platforms are integral to modern communication, they cannot fully replace the depth and authenticity of face-to-face interactions.

DISCUSSION

The primary findings of this research reveal the dual nature of digital communication's impact on social relationships. While participants acknowledged that digital platforms facilitated connections, many also expressed that these interactions lacked emotional depth, often leading to a sense of detachment during face-to-face meetings. These findings resonate with the central question raised in the introduction regarding how digital communication influences social relationships, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that technology presents in shaping human connections.

The study contributes to the understanding of how individuals subjectively experience digital communication in their social relationships. It reveals that, while online platforms can foster quick and accessible interactions, they often fall short in creating deep emotional bonds. This contrasts with the rich, nuanced connections formed in face-to-face interactions. By focusing on participants' lived experiences, the study provides a nuanced perspective on how these digital interactions are perceived emotionally and how they influence relationships offline. This contribution is significant in a field dominated by studies focusing on quantitative measures or surface-level interactions, offering a deeper, qualitative understanding of the emotional complexity in digital communication.

When compared with existing literature, the findings align with studies such as those by Liu dkk. (2024), who have explored the role of social media in shaping social networks. These studies indicated that digital media promotes connectivity, but they did not fully address the emotional implications of these interactions. The current research supports the argument that while digital platforms allow for constant communication, they may hinder emotional intimacy, as highlighted by authors like Dionisio dkk. (2021), who suggest that online communication often lacks the emotional depth found in face-to-face interactions. However, unlike previous studies, this research brings to light the participants' personal reflections on how digital communication reshapes their perceptions of social intimacy, thereby providing a richer understanding of the emotional and psychological impact of technology on relationships.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications both academically and practically. From a scholarly perspective, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge about how digital communication reshapes social relationships, specifically by exploring the emotional dimensions that are often overlooked in traditional studies. This study highlights the importance of understanding not only the frequency of interactions but also the quality and emotional depth of those connections. Practically, these findings can inform the design of digital platforms and social media tools, encouraging developers to consider how to enhance emotional engagement and intimacy in online spaces. Furthermore, the study has broader social implications, suggesting that while digital tools offer valuable means of communication, they should not replace the rich emotional connections that can only be achieved through face-to-face interactions.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, with only 12 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to larger populations. Additionally, the research focused on participants from a specific demographic group, primarily young adults who are active users of social media platforms, which may not reflect the experiences of older generations or those who are less

engaged with digital technologies. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data through interviews, which can be influenced by the participants' ability to articulate their emotions or the social desirability bias. These factors suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution and that further research with a larger and more diverse sample is needed to confirm and expand upon these conclusions.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, future research could explore the experiences of other demographic groups, such as older adults or individuals with varying levels of engagement with digital media. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide further insight into how digital communication affects long-term relationship dynamics and emotional intimacy. Future research could also investigate the role of different types of digital platforms—such as social networking sites, messaging apps, or video conferencing tools—in shaping social interactions and emotional connections. Finally, cross-cultural studies could reveal how digital communication is experienced in different social and cultural contexts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the global impact of technology on human relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of digital communication on social relationships, focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals who engage with digital platforms. The findings revealed that while digital communication facilitates connectivity, it often lacks emotional depth, leading to a sense of detachment during face-to-face interactions. These results address the gap in previous research by providing a deeper understanding of the emotional dimensions of digital communication, highlighting both its benefits and limitations. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study has enriched our understanding of how individuals emotionally engage with digital tools and the resulting effects on their relationships. However, it is important to acknowledge that the sample size and demographic limitations may affect the generalizability of the findings, and the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for bias in participants' emotional assessments.

Future research could expand these findings by exploring different demographics, including older adults or individuals with varying levels of digital engagement, to understand how these factors might influence emotional engagement in digital communication. Longitudinal studies could also provide deeper insight into the long-term effects of digital communication on relationship dynamics and emotional intimacy. Additionally, research could examine the impact of specific platforms, such as social media, messaging apps, or video conferencing tools, to identify which features or functions are most conducive to fostering meaningful emotional connections.

Practical interventions could include recommendations for digital platform developers to enhance emotional engagement in online communication, such as incorporating features that promote deeper emotional expression or providing tools for more personalized interactions. Moreover, public health campaigns or educational initiatives could address how individuals can strike a balance between digital and face-to-face communication to preserve the emotional depth of their relationships.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All financial and non-financial interests have been disclosed, and the research was conducted without any external influence that could have impacted the integrity of the study.

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