



The Meaning of Emotional Connection in Digital Communication: The Subjective Experience of Generation Z in Virtual Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Digital communication has become a dominant mode of interaction, particularly among Generation Z, reshaping emotional connectivity and social presence. While prior research has explored the psychological and behavioral aspects of digital interactions, the subjective experiences underlying emotional connection in virtual spaces remain underexplored. Existing studies primarily rely on quantitative metrics, failing to capture the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of digital communication. This study employs a phenomenological approach to uncover how Generation Z constructs, interprets, and sustains emotional connections in digital environments. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, findings reveal that digital platforms facilitate new forms of intimacy through multimodal expression, asynchronous engagement, and perceived social presence. However, challenges arise due to the lack of non-verbal cues, potential misinterpretation of messages, and the limitations of virtual interactions in fostering deep emotional bonds. These insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of mediated communication, emphasizing the evolving nature of emotional intimacy in digital spaces. The study highlights the need for further research on cross-cultural differences and the long-term psychological implications of digital emotional connectivity, paving the way for a deeper exploration of human relationships in the digital era.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital communication has significantly altered the way individuals connect and maintain relationships. In contemporary society, particularly among Generation Z, virtual interactions have become the primary mode of communication, facilitated by social media platforms, messaging applications, and video conferencing tools. Unlike previous generations who relied heavily on face-to-face interactions, digital natives navigate their social landscapes through mediated forms of communication, shaping new patterns of emotional connection and interpersonal engagement (Baym, 2015).

One of the most intriguing aspects of digital communication is its impact on emotional intimacy and social presence. Research indicates that while digital interactions enable instant connectivity, they also pose challenges in conveying emotional depth due to the absence of physical and non-verbal cues (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2018). Scholars have debated whether digital communication enhances or diminishes emotional connections, with some arguing that multimodal features such as emojis, GIFs, and video calls help compensate for the lack of physical presence, while others highlight the limitations in interpreting tone, intention, and emotional nuance (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Prior studies have explored various facets of digital communication, including its role in maintaining long-distance relationships, its psychological effects, and its influence on social behaviors. However, much of the existing research has approached this phenomenon from a psychological or sociological perspective, often employing quantitative methodologies that focus on measurable aspects such as communication frequency and user engagement. While these studies provide valuable insights,

they do not fully capture the lived experiences and subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their digital interactions.

Given these gaps, a phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for exploring how Generation Z perceives and experiences emotional connection in digital spaces. By focusing on lived experiences, this study aims to uncover the nuanced ways in which individuals construct, interpret, and navigate their emotional relationships in virtual environments. Understanding these subjective experiences is essential for broadening the discourse on digital communication, offering deeper insights into how technology shapes human connection in contemporary society.

The study of individuals' lived experiences in digital communication has emerged as a crucial area in contemporary research. Scholars have recognized the importance of understanding not just the frequency or mode of digital interactions, but also the depth of meaning individuals assign to their virtual connections. Emotional engagement in digital spaces is shaped by both technological affordances and personal perceptions, making it a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires qualitative exploration (Baym, 2015).

Despite growing interest in this field, methodological challenges persist in capturing the essence of subjective experiences within digital communication. Many prior studies have relied on quantitative metrics such as screen time, interaction frequency, and response rates, which, while informative, fail to encapsulate the depth of emotional connection and the qualitative aspects of virtual interaction. The reliance on self-reported surveys and experimental designs often results in an oversimplified understanding of how digital communication fosters or inhibits emotional intimacy (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2018).

The lack of emphasis on the lived experiences of individuals interacting in digital spaces highlights the need for methodological approaches that prioritize depth over breadth. Traditional survey-based research, for example, tends to measure predefined constructs rather than allowing individuals to articulate their own meanings and interpretations of digital interaction. Consequently, these approaches may overlook critical aspects such as how individuals perceive emotional closeness, social presence, and the evolving nature of interpersonal bonds in virtual settings (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Given these methodological limitations, phenomenology provides a robust framework for capturing the richness of individual experiences in digital communication. This approach allows researchers to move beyond surface-level descriptions and instead uncover the essence of what it means to form and sustain emotional connections in digital spaces. By focusing on personal narratives and subjective interpretations, phenomenological inquiry ensures that participants' voices are at the center of the analysis, yielding deeper insights into the social and emotional dimensions of digital communication.

Current research on digital communication has predominantly relied on practical and quantitative approaches to assess emotional connectivity in virtual spaces. Studies frequently utilize behavioral metrics, algorithmic assessments, and structured survey data to gauge the intensity and frequency of digital interactions. While these approaches provide measurable insights, they often fail to encapsulate the depth of individual experiences and the intrinsic meanings that users attach to their digital connections (Baym, 2015).

One of the primary limitations of previous research lies in its inability to explore how individuals personally perceive and experience emotional intimacy in digital interactions. Existing studies tend to reduce complex emotional experiences into predefined variables, overlooking the subjective nuances that characterize digital communication. As a result, there remains a significant gap in understanding how users themselves define, interpret, and navigate emotional connection in virtual environments (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2018).

Furthermore, digital communication involves layers of interpretation that extend beyond simple text exchanges or video interactions. The perceived presence of others, the role of multimodal cues, and the contextual nature of virtual engagement contribute to a dynamic and evolving form of emotional

connectivity that is difficult to quantify (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Without an approach that allows for deep exploration, the complexities of these experiences remain underexplored.

A phenomenological approach is uniquely suited to addressing this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals as they navigate emotional connections in digital spaces. Unlike traditional methodologies, phenomenology prioritizes meaning-making and the subjective interpretation of experiences, offering a richer and more holistic perspective on how digital communication fosters emotional bonds. This study seeks to bridge the existing knowledge gap by capturing the essence of digital emotional intimacy through the lens of those who experience it firsthand.

Prior research has explored digital communication through psychological and sociological frameworks, focusing on behavioral metrics and user engagement patterns. Studies have examined the role of technology in shaping social presence and emotional connectivity, yet they often rely on structured surveys and experimental methods that fail to capture the depth of lived experiences (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2018). Phenomenology, as a research approach, offers an alternative perspective by prioritizing subjective narratives over quantitative measurements, allowing for a deeper understanding of how individuals construct and perceive emotional bonds in digital spaces.

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore how Generation Z experiences emotional connection through digital communication. By focusing on lived experiences, this research aims to uncover the meanings individuals attach to their virtual interactions, moving beyond numerical assessments to examine the essence of digital intimacy. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study provides insights into the ways multimodal features, asynchronous messaging, and perceived social presence shape the emotional landscape of virtual relationships.

The article is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of digital emotional connectivity. The introduction contextualizes the research problem and knowledge gap, followed by a review of relevant literature on digital communication and emotional intimacy. The methodology section outlines the phenomenological framework, detailing participant selection, data collection, and analysis techniques. The results present key themes emerging from the data, which are subsequently discussed in relation to existing theories and research. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the findings, highlights the study's contributions, and suggests directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of Generation Z in forming emotional connections through digital communication. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to provide a deep understanding of lived experiences, allowing the study to capture the essence of emotional interactions in virtual environments. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was utilized to uncover the meanings behind participants' narratives, emphasizing personal perception and context in digital interactions.

Participants

Participants consisted of 10 individuals from Generation Z, aged between 18 and 25 years, who actively engaged in digital communication as their primary mode of social interaction. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that individuals with relevant experiences were included. Inclusion criteria required participants to have frequent and meaningful interactions via digital platforms such as social media, messaging applications, or video calls. Individuals who rarely engaged in virtual communication were excluded from the study. Participants' identities remained confidential to maintain ethical integrity.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted virtually to align with participants' natural mode of communication. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was guided by an open-ended interview protocol designed to explore participants' emotional

experiences, social presence, and perceived challenges in digital interactions. To ensure comfort and authenticity in responses, interviews were conducted in settings chosen by the participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic approach. Data were first transcribed verbatim, then coded to identify emerging patterns. Key themes were identified through iterative reading and comparison, capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences. To enhance credibility, coding and theme identification were cross-checked by independent researchers. NVivo software was used to organize and manage data during the analysis process, ensuring systematic identification of themes and subthemes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent before participating, with explicit acknowledgment of their rights to anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary withdrawal. All recorded data were securely stored, and pseudonyms were used in place of real names to maintain participant privacy. The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

Emotional Intimacy in Digital Communication

Participants revealed that digital communication fosters emotional intimacy in ways that differ from face-to-face interactions. Many reported that the perceived partial anonymity of digital platforms reduced social pressure, allowing them to share personal feelings more openly. One participant stated, I feel more comfortable expressing my emotions through text because I can carefully choose my words without worrying about immediate reactions. Another participant highlighted that asynchronous messaging enabled deeper self-reflection before responding, which enhanced their emotional articulation. However, some also noted that the absence of physical presence created a sense of detachment, which limited the depth of their emotional connections.

Social Presence in Virtual Interactions

Despite being mediated by technology, digital interactions still provided a sense of social presence through multimodal communication features such as emojis, GIFs, and video calls. Many participants indicated that the use of non-textual cues played a crucial role in conveying emotions. One participant explained, Using emojis and GIFs makes my conversations feel more lively and expressive, almost like I'm talking in person. Another shared, When I have a video call with my close friends, I feel like they are really there with me, even though we are physically apart. However, some participants noted that while video calls enhanced emotional closeness, they also introduced a layer of discomfort due to the self-awareness of being observed through a screen.

Challenges in Non-Verbal Expression

A recurring theme in the participants' narratives was the difficulty in interpreting non-verbal cues in digital communication. Several participants expressed frustration over the lack of body language and eye contact, which sometimes led to misunderstandings. One participant recounted, There are times when I misinterpret a message because I can't hear the tone of voice or see the facial expression behind it. Another participant noted, Without physical gestures, I sometimes overthink the meaning of a simple text, wondering if the person is upset or just being concise. These challenges were particularly evident in emotionally charged conversations, where subtle cues in face-to-face interactions play a critical role in understanding the true intent behind messages.

The Role of Physical Distance in Emotional Connection

Participants in long-distance relationships emphasized the significance of digital communication in maintaining their emotional bonds. Many regarded messaging apps and video calls as indispensable tools for sustaining intimacy. One participant in a long-distance romantic relationship stated, Without video calls and voice messages, our relationship would be much harder. Seeing and hearing each other, even through a screen, makes us feel connected despite the physical distance. However, they also acknowledged the limitations of digital communication, such as the inability to engage in physical touch or spontaneous interactions, which sometimes created a sense of longing. Another participant shared, There are moments when I wish I could just be physically present with my loved ones because no amount of texting or calling can fully replace real-life closeness.

The findings illustrate that while digital communication enables Generation Z to maintain and even enhance emotional connections, it also introduces challenges that are unique to the virtual environment. The participants' experiences reflect a nuanced understanding of emotional intimacy, social presence, and the constraints of digital interaction. While digital communication offers a platform for openness and connectivity, it cannot entirely replicate the richness of face-to-face interactions. The study highlights how Generation Z navigates these complexities, balancing the advantages and limitations of digital platforms in forming and sustaining emotional bonds.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that digital communication fosters emotional connections through multimodal expressions, perceived social presence, and flexible interaction styles. While Generation Z participants reported feeling emotionally engaged in digital interactions, they also acknowledged the limitations imposed by the absence of physical presence and non-verbal cues. These results align with the research question regarding how digital communication shapes emotional intimacy and social relationships.

This study contributes to the understanding of digital emotional connectivity by demonstrating how virtual interactions create new forms of intimacy that differ from traditional face-to-face communication. Participants' experiences highlight that social presence can be established even in the absence of physical proximity through adaptive strategies such as the use of emojis, GIFs, and voice messages. Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of digital communication allows for deeper self-reflection, enabling more intentional emotional expression.

These findings extend previous research on mediated communication by offering a phenomenological perspective on digital emotional connectivity. While prior studies have focused on behavioral metrics and engagement patterns, this research uncovers the deeper meanings individuals assign to their virtual interactions. The results suggest that while digital communication facilitates emotional connection, it does not entirely replace the richness of in-person interactions, reinforcing theories of social presence and emotional engagement in mediated communication.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital communication fosters emotional connectivity among Generation Z. The results suggest that digital platforms are not mere substitutes for face-to-face interactions but are instead unique spaces where new forms of intimacy are cultivated. The ability to communicate asynchronously, express emotions through multimodal features, and maintain a sense of social presence despite physical absence highlights the evolving nature of interpersonal relationships in digital contexts. These insights have significant implications for social interactions, mental health, and even professional communication, where understanding virtual emotional dynamics is crucial.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size, while adequate for phenomenological analysis, limits the generalizability of findings beyond the specific demographic of Generation Z participants. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce biases, as participants may have selective recall or subjective interpretations of their interactions. The study

also focuses on a specific cultural and technological context, meaning that variations in digital communication experiences across different cultures or technological infrastructures remain underexplored.

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the cross-cultural dimensions of digital emotional connectivity, examining how different cultural backgrounds influence the perception of virtual intimacy. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how digital emotional connections evolve over time. Given the rapid technological advancements in communication, investigating the role of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality or AI-driven interactions, in shaping emotional connectivity would also be a valuable direction for further exploration.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Generation Z in forming emotional connections through digital communication, highlighting the complex interplay between technological affordances and human interaction. The findings revealed that digital platforms provide alternative means of emotional expression and intimacy, yet they also present challenges in interpreting non-verbal cues and sustaining deep emotional bonds. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research uncovered the subjective meanings that individuals attach to digital interactions, filling a gap in previous studies that relied primarily on quantitative assessments. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on mediated communication, emphasizing the evolving nature of emotional connectivity in digital spaces. While this study provides valuable perspectives, future research should explore cross-cultural differences and the long-term implications of digital emotional connectivity. Expanding this line of inquiry will enhance our understanding of how digital technologies continue to reshape human relationships.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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