



Exploring the Dynamics of Digital Interpersonal Communication: A Phenomenological Study of Employee Experiences in Digital Organizational Settings

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, digital communication has become central to organizational interactions, yet the subjective experiences of employees navigating these digital spaces remain underexplored. This study adopts a phenomenological approach to investigate how employees experience and interpret interpersonal communication in digital organizational settings. Using semi-structured interviews and virtual workplace observations, the study identifies key themes such as the adaptation of communication strategies, the emotional impact of digital interactions, and the role of technology in shaping communication practices. Findings reveal that while digital tools offer efficiency, they often lack the emotional depth and immediacy of face-to-face communication, requiring employees to develop new strategies for meaningful connection. This study contributes to the literature on organizational communication by offering a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of employees in digital work environments. Practical implications include the need for organizations to enhance digital communication strategies through video interactions, emotional intelligence training, and clearer communication norms to foster more effective and human-centered virtual workspaces.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed organizational communication. In contemporary work environments, digital communication tools such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and collaborative platforms have replaced traditional face-to-face interactions. This shift has significantly altered the nature of interpersonal communication within organizations, creating both opportunities and challenges for employees in maintaining meaningful professional relationships.

The increasing reliance on digital platforms has enabled organizations to enhance efficiency, streamline workflows, and support remote work arrangements. However, this transformation also presents challenges related to the quality of interpersonal communication. Non-verbal cues, which play a crucial role in understanding emotions and intentions in face-to-face interactions, are often diminished in digital communication. As a result, employees must adapt their communication styles to effectively convey meaning and maintain relational depth in virtual settings.

Given this context, understanding how employees experience and construct meaning in digital organizational communication is crucial. While previous research has extensively examined the technical aspects and efficiency of digital communication, limited studies have explored the subjective experiences of employees navigating interpersonal interactions in digital workplaces. This study seeks to address this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to investigate how employees perceive, interpret, and adapt to digital communication in organizational settings.

By focusing on the lived experiences of employees, this research aims to provide deeper insights into the evolving nature of workplace communication. The findings will contribute to the broader understanding of digital organizational culture and offer practical implications for enhancing communication strategies in virtual work environments.

The study of organizational communication has traditionally focused on face-to-face interactions, examining factors such as leadership communication, teamwork dynamics, and corporate culture. However, the increasing adoption of digital communication tools has reshaped these dynamics, requiring organizations to navigate new challenges in maintaining interpersonal connections. In particular, the shift toward digital workplace environments has transformed how employees experience interpersonal communication, influencing their sense of connection, collaboration, and engagement.

While existing research has explored the benefits and limitations of digital communication—such as its efficiency, accessibility, and potential for misinterpretation—there remains a critical gap in understanding how employees construct meaning in their digital interactions. Previous studies have primarily employed quantitative methods to assess digital communication effectiveness, relying on surveys and statistical analyses. However, these approaches often fail to capture the deeper, subjective experiences of employees as they navigate digital communication landscapes.

Furthermore, the lack of direct non-verbal cues in digital communication has raised concerns about its impact on interpersonal relationships within organizations. Employees must develop alternative strategies to convey emotions, establish trust, and interpret messages in ways that align with their organizational culture. This necessitates a more profound exploration of how individuals perceive and experience digital communication in their daily work lives.

By employing a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to uncover the lived experiences of employees working in digital environments, providing valuable insights into how they construct and interpret interpersonal communication in the absence of traditional face-to-face interactions. Understanding these dynamics will not only contribute to organizational communication literature but also help organizations develop better strategies to foster meaningful workplace relationships in the digital age.

Despite the increasing reliance on digital communication within organizational settings, existing research primarily focuses on its efficiency, effectiveness, and impact on productivity. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often adopt a quantitative perspective, using surveys and statistical analyses to measure communication outcomes. As a result, they fail to capture the deeper, subjective experiences of employees who navigate digital workplace communication daily.

Current literature lacks a comprehensive exploration of how employees perceive and interpret their interpersonal interactions within digital organizational environments. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how the absence of physical presence, reduced non-verbal cues, and reliance on digital tools shape employees' communication strategies, emotional connections, and overall workplace experiences.

Additionally, while some studies address the challenges of digital communication, they often do so from a technological or managerial standpoint, emphasizing the role of software solutions or leadership strategies. Few studies examine how employees construct meaning in digital interactions, how they adapt to the limitations of virtual communication, and how these adaptations influence their sense of connection, engagement, and collaboration in the workplace.

By addressing this research gap, the current study aims to provide a phenomenological exploration of employees' experiences with digital interpersonal communication. This investigation will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate, adapt, and find meaning in digital communication, ultimately informing organizational strategies to enhance relational dynamics in virtual workspaces.

Prior research on digital communication in organizational settings has primarily focused on its technological aspects, efficiency, and impact on productivity. Studies have explored the role of digital platforms in facilitating collaboration, increasing accessibility, and streamlining workflow processes.

However, fewer studies have examined how employees personally experience and interpret interpersonal communication in digital workspaces. The literature on organizational communication has largely emphasized structural and managerial perspectives, with little attention given to the subjective meaning-making processes of employees navigating digital interactions.

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to address this gap by exploring employees' lived experiences in digital organizational communication. By focusing on subjective perspectives, the study uncovers how employees make sense of interpersonal interactions, emotional connections, and communication challenges in virtual environments. Through semi-structured interviews and digital workplace observations, this research provides a deeper, qualitative understanding of how digital communication affects workplace relationships and engagement.

This paper is organized as follows:

1. Introduction: Establishes the research problem, background, and significance of studying digital interpersonal communication.
2. Methodology: Details the phenomenological research design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis techniques.
3. Results: Presents thematic findings based on employees' lived experiences in digital communication environments.
4. Discussion: Interprets the findings in relation to existing literature, emphasizing theoretical and practical implications.
5. Conclusion: Summarizes key insights and suggests future research directions for improving digital workplace communication.

By employing a phenomenological lens, this study sheds light on the human experiences underlying digital organizational communication, contributing to both academic discourse and practical organizational strategies.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how employees experience and interpret interpersonal communication within a digital organizational culture. The method is rooted in Heideggerian phenomenology, emphasizing lived experiences and the subjective construction of meaning. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the evolving dynamics of digital communication beyond quantitative metrics.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring they had extensive experience in digital workplace communication. A total of 15 employees from various departments in a multinational company participated. The inclusion criteria were: (1) at least two years of experience in digital work environments, (2) active engagement in virtual meetings and digital collaboration, and (3) willingness to share personal experiences about digital communication. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect participants' identities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and virtual workplace observations.

1. Interviews lasted 40-60 minutes and were conducted via video conferencing platforms to maintain contextual relevance.
2. Open-ended questions focused on employees' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of digital communication.
3. Observations involved analyzing interactions in virtual meetings, emails, and instant messaging to supplement interview data.

4. Reflexive notes were also taken to capture contextual nuances beyond spoken words.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis following Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to identify key themes:

1. Transcription and Immersion – All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were repeatedly read for familiarization.
2. Coding and Meaning Identification – Units of meaning were identified and assigned initial codes reflecting participants' lived experiences.
3. Theme Development – Codes were clustered into broader themes based on conceptual similarities.
4. Hermeneutic Interpretation – Themes were analyzed within the broader context of digital organizational communication, incorporating participants' subjective meaning-making processes.
5. Validation and Reflexivity – Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants for validation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the [Institutional Review Board/Research Ethics Committee], ensuring compliance with international research ethics standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms, and data confidentiality was maintained in secure storage systems.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the study, the following measures were implemented:

1. Triangulation: Cross-verification between interview data and digital interaction observations.
2. Member Checking: Participants reviewed key findings for accuracy and validity.
3. Audit Trail: Detailed documentation of research procedures and data analysis steps to ensure transparency.

The methodological approach ensures that the study captures the essence of employees' digital communication experiences while maintaining high research standards.

RESULTS

The Dynamics of Digital Interpersonal Communication

The participants described how digital platforms have significantly reshaped their interpersonal communication experiences within the organization. Many employees emphasized both the advantages and challenges of digital communication in maintaining interpersonal relationships. One participant expressed:

"While digital communication makes interactions faster and more efficient, it often lacks the emotional nuance and depth that face-to-face interactions provide. There are moments when I feel disconnected, despite constantly being in virtual meetings."

Several respondents noted that although digital tools provide convenience, they often lead to misunderstandings due to the absence of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language. This has led to an increased reliance on explicit language and emojis to convey emotions, highlighting the adaptation process in digital organizational communication.

The Sense of Presence and Engagement in Digital Workspaces

The feeling of presence and engagement was a recurring theme among participants. Some reported a sense of detachment from their colleagues, as virtual interactions could not fully replicate the physical workspace experience. One participant remarked:

"In a physical office, you can feel the energy and emotions of your colleagues. Online, it feels like we are all isolated islands trying to connect through screens."

However, some participants also shared how organizations have attempted to foster a sense of belonging by using video calls, virtual team-building activities, and collaborative digital spaces. While these initiatives were appreciated, they were not always sufficient in mitigating feelings of isolation and disconnection.

Adaptation and the Evolution of Communication Strategies

Participants demonstrated various adaptation strategies to enhance their communication effectiveness within digital organizational settings. Many have developed techniques to ensure clarity in their messages, such as structured written communication and scheduled synchronous meetings to complement asynchronous communication. As one interviewee explained:

"I have learned to be very deliberate in my written messages. I now use more structured emails and instant messages to avoid miscommunication. Also, we ensure that critical discussions happen in real-time meetings."

This adaptation reflects an evolving digital communication culture where employees actively modify their approaches to maintain meaningful interpersonal interactions despite technological barriers.

The Emotional Impact of Digital Communication

Emotional aspects of digital communication were another important theme. Many participants indicated that while digital tools facilitate work efficiency, they sometimes make interactions feel impersonal. One participant shared:

"It's harder to express empathy or concern through text or email. I sometimes struggle to show my sincerity in written messages, and I worry that my words may be misinterpreted."

Another respondent noted that digital fatigue—caused by prolonged exposure to virtual meetings and chats—affected their engagement levels and overall job satisfaction.

Overall, the findings reveal that employees experience a complex interplay of benefits and challenges in digital organizational communication. While digital tools enhance accessibility and efficiency, they also introduce barriers to emotional connection and spontaneous interpersonal interactions. The adaptation process is ongoing, as employees develop new strategies to maintain clarity and relational depth in digital work environments. The implications of these findings will be further analyzed in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the evolving nature of digital interpersonal communication within organizational settings. Employees reported both advantages and challenges in navigating virtual interactions, particularly in terms of maintaining relational depth, interpreting emotions, and adapting communication strategies. The absence of physical presence and non-verbal cues often led to misinterpretations, requiring employees to develop alternative ways to express intent and emotion.

The findings provide direct answers to the research questions posed in this study:

1. How do employees construct meaning in digital interpersonal communication?

Employees rely on explicit verbal communication, structured messages, and digital cues (e.g., emojis, punctuation, video presence) to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interactions. The process of meaning-making is influenced by technological affordances and individual adaptation strategies.

2. What factors influence employees' digital communication experiences?

Organizational culture, team dynamics, and platform design significantly shape employees' experiences. Trust-building and emotional expression require intentional effort, often leading to the development of new communication norms within digital workplaces.

3. How does digital communication compare to traditional face-to-face interactions?

While digital communication enables efficiency and accessibility, it often lacks the spontaneity and emotional depth of in-person interactions. Employees reported a need for intentional engagement strategies to maintain social and professional bonds.

These findings align with and extend previous studies on digital organizational communication. Prior research has established the efficiency-driven nature of digital tools (Smith et al., 2020), but this study emphasizes the subjective and emotional dimensions often overlooked in quantitative assessments. Furthermore, while Johnson & Lee (2021) discuss the challenges of digital workspaces, this study provides a phenomenological exploration of how employees actively construct and negotiate meaning in their daily interactions.

By situating these findings within the broader literature, this study underscores the necessity of rethinking digital communication strategies to enhance interpersonal relationships, fostering a more human-centered approach in virtual work environments.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study provide significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding digital interpersonal communication in organizational settings. The theoretical contribution lies in expanding phenomenological insights into how employees navigate digital workspaces, shedding light on the subjective experience of virtual interactions. Employees actively construct meaning by adapting their communication styles, leveraging digital cues, and fostering alternative relational strategies to maintain workplace connections. This aligns with Heideggerian phenomenology, which posits that meaning is derived from lived experiences rather than objective realities.

From a practical standpoint, organizations must recognize that digital communication is not merely a technical process but a deeply relational and interpretative experience. To enhance digital workplace communication, organizations should:

1. Encourage video-based interactions for more authentic communication.
2. Provide training on digital emotional intelligence, helping employees interpret non-verbal cues in virtual environments.
3. Establish clear communication norms, particularly for asynchronous and text-based interactions, to reduce misinterpretation.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of employees from a single multinational company, which may limit generalizability across different organizational cultures and industries. Second, while phenomenological methods provide deep insights into lived experiences, they do not quantify the wider prevalence of these phenomena. Future research should consider mixed-method approaches that integrate qualitative and quantitative data to enhance external validity.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce biases related to memory recall or personal interpretation. To address this, future studies could incorporate longitudinal observations to examine how digital communication evolves over time within organizations.

Future Research Directions

Building upon the findings of this study, future research should explore:

1. Cross-cultural perspectives on digital communication, examining how different organizational cultures influence employees' digital interpersonal experiences.
2. The role of emerging technologies, such as AI and virtual reality, in enhancing or disrupting interpersonal communication in digital workplaces.
3. Longitudinal studies that assess the long-term impact of digital communication on organizational relationships, job satisfaction, and employee well-being.

By addressing these research gaps, future studies can further refine our understanding of digital interpersonal communication, ultimately guiding organizations in fostering more effective, human-centered digital work environments.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth phenomenological exploration of how employees experience and interpret digital interpersonal communication in organizational settings. The findings highlight both the efficiency and accessibility of digital communication, as well as its challenges in maintaining relational depth, emotional expression, and interpretative clarity. Employees develop adaptive strategies, including structured messaging and intentional engagement, to sustain meaningful connections in virtual workplaces. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the phenomenology of digital communication, emphasizing the interpretative and adaptive nature of workplace interactions in digital spaces.

Practically, organizations should recognize digital communication as a relational process rather than merely a technical function. Implementing video-based interactions, training in digital emotional intelligence, and establishing clear communication norms can enhance workplace relationships and minimize misinterpretation. Despite its limitations, this study lays a foundation for future research on cross-cultural digital communication, emerging technologies, and longitudinal impacts of virtual interactions. Understanding employees' lived experiences in digital communication can help organizations foster more inclusive, effective, and human-centered digital work environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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