



A Sociological Study on Role of Digital Communication in Shaping Family Dynamics and Intimacy

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how digital communication influences family relationships and emotional closeness in today's technologically driven world. With the increasing use of messaging apps, video calls, and social media, the nature of family interaction is undergoing significant change. It highlights that this investigation is empirical meaning it is based on collected data, and specifies that it covers various family types; nuclear, extended, and geographically separated families engage with digital tools to maintain connection, trust, and intimacy. The findings indicate that while digital platforms help strengthen ties among family members living apart, they may reduce face-to-face interaction within cohabiting families. Differences in communication preferences across age groups also affect how effectively digital tools are used to maintain family bonds. The study emphasizes the need for a balanced approach that combines digital communication with in-person interaction to support strong and meaningful family relationships. By addressing a gap in existing research, this study contributes valuable insight into the evolving dynamics of family life in the digital age.

Keywords: *Digital communication, family dynamics, Intimacy, Social Media, Geographically Separated.*

Title of the study

A Sociological Study on Role of Digital Communication in Shaping Family Dynamics and Intimacy.

Objective

➤ To investigate how digital communication tools (such as messaging apps, video calls, and social media) are used within families and their role in maintaining relationships.

- To explore the impact of digital communication on family dynamics, such as cohesion, trust, and intimacy, and how these interactions vary by family structure (e.g., nuclear, extended, or geographically separated families).
- To assess whether different forms of digital communication (video calls, text messaging, etc.) have varying impacts on emotional intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

Statement of the Problem:

In recent years, digital communication has transformed how family members interact, particularly with the increased use of smartphones, social media, and other platforms. However, there is a lack of understanding regarding whether these tools positively or negatively impact family dynamics and intimacy. For example, while digital tools allow geographically separated families to stay connected, their impact on families who live together may differ, potentially replacing or reducing face-to-face interaction. This study addresses this gap by investigating whether digital communication fosters meaningful connections or if it poses a barrier to genuine interpersonal relationships.

Review of the Study

A comprehensive review conducted by Johnson and Johnson (2014), covering 685 individual studies, found that collaborative efforts aimed at achieving shared goals enhance higher-order thinking, foster the generation of innovative ideas and solutions (often referred to as process gain), and facilitate the transition of group achievements to individual capabilities. This reinforces the growing emphasis on collaborative learning, especially within digital environments, to promote effective online group learning (**Kreijns et al., 2021**).

The concept of social presence is closely linked with computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools and online learning platforms. It refers to the extent to which digital communication can replicate the interpersonal and collaborative experiences typical of face-to-face interactions. Social presence significantly influences how people engage in virtual group settings, thereby affecting learning outcomes and the quality of interaction (**Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Zhao et al., 2014**). Studies have shown that social interaction enhances social presence (**Tu, 2000**), and, conversely, a strong sense of presence may further improve interaction quality (**Song & Yuan, 2015**). According to **Poth (2018)**, cultivating an individual's sense of presence in virtual learning spaces is vital for creating a more engaging, motivating, and successful learning experience. Similarly, **Mykota (2017)** emphasized that social presence is a key emotional factor in determining interaction levels and overall effectiveness of digital learning environments.

Despite its relevance, there is still no universally accepted definition of social presence. Various interpretations and conflicting methods of measuring it have created confusion within the research community (**Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017**). The inconsistency in definitions often stems from different theoretical perspectives, which makes it difficult to establish a cohesive framework for evaluating the concept and its implications in online learning. As a result,

findings on the impact of social presence have been mixed. For instance, **Giesbers et al. (2014)** observed no notable difference in perceived social presence when comparing text-based communication with video conferencing, despite expectations to the contrary (**Sallnäs, 2005**). Moreover, their study found that web-based video conferencing did not necessarily enhance student performance, even showing a decline in some cases, which contradicts the outcomes of earlier research (e.g., **Satar, 2013**).

Social Presence Theory proposes that different types of media vary in their ability to convey a sense of connection and presence during communication. For example, video calls can offer a stronger emotional and social presence than simple text messages. In alignment with Media Richness Theory, it is suggested that more dynamic forms of media such as video and audio are more suitable for complex and emotionally nuanced communication, as they are better at conveying tone, context, and emotional cues.

Previous research also highlights the dual nature of digital communication. On one hand, it strengthens ties for family members living apart by offering constant connectivity. On the other hand, it can reduce the quality of interactions among those living together, sometimes replacing meaningful face-to-face engagement and causing emotional distance.

Research Gap: While much of the existing literature has focused on the role of digital communication in romantic and peer relationships, there remains limited understanding of how it affects family structures. This study aims to address that gap by exploring how families utilize digital tools to maintain emotional closeness and manage interpersonal dynamics in the digital age.

Definitions and Terms Used in the Study

To ensure clarity and consistency, the following key terms are defined as they are used in this research:

1. Digital Communication

Refers to this study the use of electronic tools and platforms for conveying information, such as messaging apps, video calls, social media, and emails for sharing messages, emotions, and share information among family members and others.

2. Family Dynamics

The present study describes family dynamics ‘the patterns of interaction, relationships, roles, and emotional bonds among family members. It includes how family members communicate, make decisions, express affection, and resolve conflicts.

3. Intimacy

In this study, intimacy refers to emotional closeness, trust, and the sense of connection shared between family members. It includes feelings of being heard, supported, and emotionally bonded.

4. Social Media

According to this study social media refers to Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, or similar applications that enable users to share content and communicate instantly with others, including family members.

Area of the Study

Geographic and Demographic Scope:

The study is conducted across urban and suburban regions of Palani (Dindigul District) to capture diverse family dynamics. The sample includes various family structures, such as nuclear families, extended families, and families with members living apart. By focusing on these demographics, the study aims to understand the nuances of digital communication across a wide range of family interactions.

Selection of Sample

- **Sample Size:** 100 participants selected for representing a diverse range of family types and ages.
- **Sampling Technique:** Stratified random sampling ensures diversity by selecting families based on key demographics, such as family structure and frequency of digital communication use.
- **Selection Criteria:** Families are selected if they regularly use digital communication (at least once per week) for family interactions, ensuring that the study is relevant to their experience.

Hypothesis

These hypotheses are specific, testable statements based on existing theories and previous research:

- Families separated by distance will find digital communication beneficial for maintaining intimacy.
- In cohabiting families, an increase in digital communication may reduce face-to-face interactions, potentially affecting emotional closeness.
- Different digital platforms will vary in their impact on family dynamics, with video calling being perceived as more effective for maintaining intimacy than texting.
- Generational differences will influence family members' use of digital communication, with younger generations relying more heavily on digital tools, potentially affecting family cohesion.

Sources of Data

- **Primary Data:** Directly collected from participants through surveys and interviews to gather first-hand insights into how digital communication affects family dynamics.
- **Secondary Data:** Includes existing research, articles, and reports on digital communication and family relationships. This background research helps frame the study's questions and hypotheses, providing context and support.

Methods of Study

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods used for a comprehensive analysis:

- **Quantitative** Structured questionnaires distributed to 100 participants to quantify the impact of digital communication on family dynamics, such as intimacy and cohesion.
- **Qualitative** Conducted with a subset of 20 families to explore deeper personal experiences and perceptions, offering context and depth to the survey data.

Tools and Data Collection

- **Survey Questionnaire:** Consists of questions assessing digital communication frequency, types of platforms used, and perceived impact on intimacy and relationship satisfaction.
- **Interview Guide:** Contains open-ended questions designed to explore participants' subjective experiences and perceived advantages or challenges of using digital communication with family members.
- **Digital Tools:** Online survey platforms and phone calls were used for collecting responses and conducting interviews.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

- **Scope:** This study covers a range of family structures, including nuclear and extended families and those separated by distance. It examines the impact of various digital communication platforms on family cohesion and intimacy.
- **Limitations:** Potential limitations include self-reported data that may introduce bias, cultural factors that may affect communication styles, and a sample limited to families with digital communication access, which could limit generalizability.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age	No. of Respondents	Percentage
18-28	42	42
29-38	35	35
39-48	23	23
Total	100	100

Sources: Primary data

Age Distribution of Respondents

Out of 100 respondents, the highest number (42 per cent) belong to the 18–28 years of age group, followed by 35 per cent in the 29–38 years of group and 23 per cent in the 39–48 years of group. This indicates that younger adults (18–28 years) are the most active participants in digital communication within families. The trend also suggests that as age increases, digital communication usage tends to decrease, reflecting generational differences in adoption and comfort with digital tools.

Table 2: Digital Communication usage by Family Role

S. No	Family Member	Primary Digital Communication Tool	Frequency of communications (Daily)	No. of Respondents
01	Parent	Text Messaging	6-10 times	18
02	Parent	Video Calls	2-4 times	12
03	Child	Social media	7-10 times	20
04	Sibling	Messaging Apps	4-6 times	15
05	Parent	Social media	4-6 times	08
06	Child	Video Calls	3-6 times	10
07	Sibling	Video Calls	2-4 times	07
08	Parent	Messaging Apps	4-5 times	05
09	Child	Messaging Apps	6-8 times	05
			Total	100

Sources: Primary data

Digital Communication Usage by Family Role

The table shows varied digital communication patterns among family members:

- Children are the most frequent users, with 20 respondents using social media 7–10 times daily, and 10 respondents using video calls 3–6 times.
- Parents mostly use text messaging (18 respondents, 6–10 times daily) and video calls (12 respondents, 2–4 times daily).
- Siblings primarily use messaging apps (15 respondents) and video calls (7 respondents).

In total, 100 responses highlight that social media and video calls are preferred tools for emotional engagement, with children being the most digitally active group. The variation shows that different roles in the family adopt platforms that suit their communication style and emotional needs.

Table 3: Perceived Impact on Family Dynamics

(How participants feel digital communication affects overall family relationships)

Impact Level	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Positive - High	30	30
Positive - Moderate	25	25
Neutral	20	20
Negative - Moderate	15	15
Negative - High	10	10
Total	100	100

Sources: Primary data

Perceived Impact on Family Dynamics

According to the responses:

- 30 percent of participants feel digital communication has a high positive impact.
- 25 percent reported a moderate positive impact.
- 20 percent feel neutral about its effects.
- 15 percent experience a moderate negative impact.
- 10 percent report a high negative impact.

Thus, 55 per cent of respondents view digital tools as positively influencing family dynamics, while 25 per cent perceive negative effects. This suggests that digital communication generally supports family cohesion, but its effectiveness depends on usage patterns and family context.

Table 4: Perceived Impact on Intimacy

(How the participants feel digital communication affects the emotional closeness in the family)

Impact Level	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Positive – High	32	32
Positive – Moderate	28	28
Neutral	18	18
Negative – Moderate	12	12
Negative – High	10	10
Total	100	100

Sources: Primary data

The emotional impact of digital communication on family intimacy is perceived as follows:

- 32 per cent report a high positive effect.
- 28 per cent observe a moderate positive effect.
- 18 per cent remain neutral.
- 12 per cent report a moderate negative impact.
- 10 per cent feel there is a high negative effect.

Overall, 60 per cent of participants believe digital communication enhances emotional closeness, while 22 per cent report negative outcomes. This suggests that when used effectively especially through richer forms like video calls digital platforms can help maintain or even deepen emotional bonds within families, particularly those living apart.

Key to Columns:

- **Age:** Participant's age. Age categories breakup of (18–28, 29–38, 39–48 years)
- **Family Role:** Role of participant within the family (e.g., Parent, Child, Sibling).
- **Primary Digital Communication Tool:** Most used platform (e.g., social media, Messaging Apps, Video Calls, Text).
- **Frequency of Communication (Daily):** Average number of times the participant communicates daily with family members via digital tools.
- **Perceived Impact on Family Dynamics:** Subjective response from participants on whether

digital communication has positively, negatively, or neutrally affected family dynamics.

➤ **Perceived Impact on Intimacy:** Participant's perception of how digital communication affects emotional closeness within the family.

➤ **Quantitative Analysis:** Descriptive statistics summarize digital communication frequency, platform preference, and relationship satisfaction. Correlation analysis explores relationships between communication types and perceived intimacy, while regression analysis examines impacts on family cohesion.

➤ **Qualitative Analysis:** Thematic coding identifies patterns in interview responses, such as differences in family types and generational views on digital communication.

Findings

➤ The study highlights that younger individuals, particularly those aged 18–28, are the most active users of digital communication within families. Usage patterns vary across family roles—children and siblings prefer social media and messaging apps, while parents more often use text and video calls.

➤ Digital platforms are especially valuable for maintaining connections in families separated by distance. Tools like video calls enhance emotional closeness in such cases. However, in cohabiting families, overuse of digital communication can reduce face-to-face interactions, potentially weakening emotional bonds.

➤ While many respondents felt that digital tools positively influenced their family relationships and intimacy, others noted that text-based communication lacks the emotional depth of in-person or video interactions. Overall, the findings suggest that while digital communication strengthens family ties, especially across distances, it should complement not replace personal interaction in daily family life.

Suggestions

1. **Balance Digital and Personal Communication:** Families should aim to strike a healthy balance between using digital tools and engaging in face-to-face conversations, especially in households where members live together.

2. **Encourage Use of Video Communication:** Whenever possible, video calls should be preferred over text messages, as they allow for more emotional connection and better understanding.

3. **Promote Digital Literacy Within Families:** Organizing informal sessions or family discussions can help all members, especially older generations, become more comfortable and effective in using digital platforms.

4. **Support Intergenerational Engagement:** Younger family members can help bridge the digital gap by guiding elders in the use of communication tools, strengthening intergenerational bonds in the process.

Conclusion

This study underscores the growing influence of digital communication in shaping how families interact and maintain relationships. For families separated by distance, tools like video calls, messaging apps, and social media serve as important channels to stay emotionally

connected. These platforms make it easier to share moments, offer support, and bridge physical gaps, helping to sustain family cohesion.

However, the findings also reveal that in households where members live together, excessive reliance on digital devices can have unintended consequences. It may lead to reduce in-person conversations, emotional detachment, and a weakening of everyday intimacy. While digital tools are convenient and accessible, they cannot fully replace the depth and richness of face-to-face interaction.

Therefore, it becomes essential for families to use digital communication mindfully. Technology should enhance relationships—not act as a substitute for real connection. By maintaining a thoughtful balance between online and offline interaction, families can foster deeper understanding, emotional support, and lasting bonds in today's digital age.

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