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Impact of technology on offline communications: Relationships

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Definition

The impact of technology on offline communication explores the role of different digital platforms and design features and how they impact, both positively and negatively, on offline communication. This has a specific focus on relationships which is defined in this entry as both friendships and romantic relationships.

Keywords

Offline communication; Digital technology; Romantic relationships; Friendships

Introduction

Technology is a crucial part of everyday life, and it plays a significant role in shaping how individuals initiate, maintain, and experience interpersonal relationships. Offline communication is defined as a face-to-face, non-digital interaction and is considered crucial for social bonding and emotional expression within friendships and romantic relationships. Digital technology has transformed offline communication within friendships and romantic relationships, changing the nature of our social interactions and connections. Digital technology, such as smartphones, may enhance closeness and convenience, but it also introduces new forms of distraction, surveillance, and emotional disconnection. In some ways, offline communication may become shallow or limited due to a lack of non-verbal cues, misinterpretation, and a feeling of less emotional connectedness. On the other hand, technology may offer greater opportunities for connection with more people, which can lead to stronger and diverse relationships. This entry examines the impact of technology on offline communication, with a particular focus on friendships and romantic relationships. It considers both the benefits and challenges of digital technology to understand how digital interactions influence offline communication and relationships.

Main Text

Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the role of digital technology in offline communication, the Media Multiplexity Theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005) is a useful framework which suggests that stronger relationships use more media channels to communicate, while weaker relationships use fewer. It explains how the number and type of communication mediums people use are directly related to the strength of their social ties. In the context of relationships, this framework suggests that digital technologies are layered onto existing in-person connections rather than replacing them entirely. That said, the different ways we use technology to interact with significant others can impact the quality of offline communication and interaction. Research has suggested that while the use of technology may reinforce social bonds (Sutcliffe et al., 2023), it can also lead to a reduction in the depth of offline interactions (Misra et al., 2016).

The Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) suggests that communication media can be ranked based on their “richness” in their capacity to convey information when interacting with others. According to this framework, face-to-face interaction remains the richest medium due to its ability to provide immediate feedback, verbal and non-verbal cues, synchronous exchange, and its more personal and emotionally expressive nature. Despite being the richest, people still prefer leaner, more convenient forms of communication, such as phone calls or text messaging (Kim, 2017). Using digital technology is often preferable for individuals experiencing social anxiety or discomfort, as it feels less intense than a face-to-face conversation (Lacombe et al., 2024). In the context of romantic relationships, a face-to-face conversation is often considered the richest and most appropriate way to break up with someone, but many people still do it via text to avoid discomfort and awkwardness (Pancani et al., 2022). Overall, this theory suggests that offline communication is the richest and best for clarity, emotion, and complex conversations. However, the richer the medium, the more likely it is to be avoided in favour of easier, less rich (but more convenient) digital alternatives.

The Displacement vs. Stimulation Hypotheses (Kraut et al., 1998; Kraut et al., 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) are important to consider when examining competing views on technology’s social effects, especially regarding its impact on offline communication. The displacement hypothesis suggests that interaction via digital technology completely substitutes any quality in-person interaction. This can then lead to social isolation or weaker relationships. On the other hand, the stimulation hypothesis argues that digital technology can enhance relationships as it encourages more frequent contact creating better offline interactions and relationships. Current research suggests that both displacement and stimulation can occur, but this depends on contextual factors, individual preferences, and relationship stage and strength (Verduyn et al., 2021).

Friendships: Technology’s Impact on Offline Communication

Technology has reshaped offline friendships by offering tools that can have both positive and negative impacts on offline communication. In some ways, technology may deepen connection by enhancing communication and intimacy, but it can also disrupt presence in offline contexts and dilute the quality of face-to-face interactions. The use of technology to facilitate online interactions encourages friends to feel up to date with one another and emotionally connected (Angelini et al., 2023). As a result, offline interactions can begin at a deeper level, building on shared digital experiences, which can have a positive impact on the quality of friendship. Research suggests that for individuals with social anxiety, online interactions offer a way for friends to be vulnerable via technology platforms, which in turn encourages richer, in-person interactions (Yen et al., 2012). This use of technology can strengthen emotional connection before and during face-to-face interaction. Referring to the debate over the displacement versus stimulation hypotheses earlier, research by Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found support for the stimulation hypothesis but not for the displacement hypothesis among adolescents. This study highlighted that text messaging with friends positively predicted wellbeing and overall quality of friendships.

Despite these positive impacts, technology can also have a negative impact on offline communication for friendships. For instance, distractions created by technology can reduce feelings of closeness and conversational quality in face-to-face contexts (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). In addition, constant online connection may also impact offline communication among friends. For example, if everything has been shared digitally, then face-to-face interactions may feel redundant as there is less 'new' topics

to discuss. Also, certain platform features, such as read receipts and location sharing, may complicate offline dynamics as they may make individuals feel there is a level of surveillance or exclusion seeping into their friendship. Overall, technology transforms our offline, face-to-face communication and relationships, and whether that is positive or negative may depend on different individual and contextual factors.

Romantic Relationships: Technology's Impact on Offline Communication

Romantic relationships in the digital age are impacted by technology. Digital technologies shape how partners communicate, negotiate intimacy, and maintain emotional closeness. Similar to friendships, the use of digital technology can scaffold and foster in-person emotional closeness and connection. For example, everyday messaging via texts, the use of emojis and memes, and exchanges of photo memories on social media can all have positive impacts on offline communication and relationship satisfaction (e.g., see Gesselman et al., 2019, who demonstrate the role of emojis in maintaining romantic connections). Research by Jin and Peña (2010) found that frequent texting between partners is positively associated with perceived intimacy, especially in the earlier stages of a relationship. This use of technology may serve as a scaffold for offline encounters as it allows couples to maintain a sense of connectedness when apart. In addition, couples often use digital means to support their offline interactions, such as arranging date nights, resolving logistical issues, and even negotiating conflict. Research reveals that partners who interact via digital technology to schedule date nights or resolve logistical issues report higher relational satisfaction and more quality face-to-face interactions, especially in long-distance relationships (Holtzman et al., 2021).

That said, these same technologies can negatively impact relational offline communication through *technoference*. Technoference is defined as everyday interference or disruptions in interpersonal offline interactions caused by the use of technology (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Considerable psychological research has demonstrated the impact of technoference on romantic relationships and individual wellbeing. For example, a study by McDaniel and Coyne (2016) found that frequent mobile phone interruptions during offline interactions are linked to lower relationship satisfaction, greater relational conflict, more depressive symptoms, and lower life satisfaction for women. As technology is so ingrained in everyday life, this interference is often unintentional, but it indicates inattentiveness or disengagement, which impacts the emotional availability of one or both partners (McDaniel & Drouin, 2019). Related to this is phubbing (being ignored in favour of a mobile phone), which has also been shown to impact relational quality. A meta-analysis of 37 studies found that phubbing has a negative impact on couple interactions (Courtright & Caplan, 2020). Further research has found that being “phubbed” by a romantic partner is associated with feelings of exclusion, reduced perceived partner responsiveness, diminished trust, and less relationship satisfaction (Carnelley et al., 2023; Roberts & David, 2016). Technological interferences and prioritisation of a mobile phone while trying to communicate face-to-face degrade the quality of these interactions, leaving one or both partners feeling unsatisfied.

It is clear from the research that the influence of technology on offline communication is equally profound, with the ability to manifest both benefits and challenges for romantic partners. Technology can serve as a scaffold for emotional depth but can also act as a barrier to presence and authenticity. Ongoing research continues to explore ways in which couples can utilise digital tools to foster healthier, stronger relationships in a way that benefits their offline communication.

Future Directions and Considerations

In a digital age, technology is constantly evolving and so the impact of technology on offline communication will continue. Recent technological developments such as AI companions and augmented/virtual reality create new spaces for relational intimacy. These tools may offer emotional support or create a sense of presence during long-distance separations. However, there are also questions to ask about how these artificial relational experiences may impact offline communication. A pre-print published by Fang et al. (2025) suggests that engagement with relational AI tools can reduce the ability for real-world socialisation. This may have detrimental impacts on how partners express emotion, vulnerability, and navigate intimacy face-to-face. Alternatively, technologies are being designed to protect and enhance offline communication in relationships. For example, smartphones now have features such as “focus modes,” and there are apps that gamify face-to-face interaction with significant others. The design of such features suggests that there is a shift in our approach to using technology, becoming more mindful of having digital detoxes or engaging in face-to-face interaction with no digital distractions.

Further research is needed to explore the long-term impacts of these technologies on our offline communication and relationships. Most research is cross-sectional, focusing on Western populations and examining traditional monogamous relationships, which leaves significant gaps in our understanding of how cultural and social values shape tech-offline dynamics. Additionally, research focuses predominantly on the harms associated with technology and offline communication. There is a need to recognise that digital interaction is part of everyday life. Therefore, research is needed to focus on developing and promoting sustainable, healthy uses of technology that enhance rather than undermine our ability to communicate in the offline world.

Conclusion

The impact of digital technology on offline communication in friendships and romantic relationships is dependent on individual factors, context and relationship style. Technology offers individuals tools that can facilitate logistics, extend connections, and enhance emotional intimacy adopting a positive impact on offline communication. However, it can also introduce new relational challenges, such as technoference and reduced presence during face-to-face interactions. According to theory, offline communication is still the richest mode of communication; however, it is increasingly mediated, shaped, and sometimes displaced by digital technology, such as text messaging or video calls. Technology generates greater connectivity alongside reduced quality of presence, which may have negative consequences for both relational and individual wellbeing. As we move forward, it is essential to explore ways in which technologies can be adopted to support meaningful and positive offline communication rather than replace it. Technology can have numerous benefits for offline communication in relationships. Therefore, acknowledging its potential and adopting an approach where technology can be integrated mindfully and intentionally, without compromising offline communication, is crucial. With this approach, we can maximise the benefits of both digital and offline interaction to create positive and healthy interpersonal relationships.

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