

The Phenomenon of Miscommunication in Online Conversations in the Digital Era: Causes and Its Impact on Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has fundamentally reshaped human interaction, shifting a substantial portion of interpersonal exchanges from face-to-face settings to digital platforms. While these innovations overcome geographical barriers and accelerate information dissemination, they simultaneously introduce new complexities in the form of miscommunication. This study aims to examine the underlying causes of miscommunication in online interactions and analyze its implications for the quality of interpersonal relationships. Drawing on Media Richness Theory, Social Presence Theory, and empirical findings from recent communication studies, this article identifies that the absence of non-verbal cues, contextual disparities, anonymity, varying levels of digital literacy, and platform-specific characteristics constitute primary sources of misunderstanding. Furthermore, miscommunication manifests in observable impacts: escalation of conflicts, erosion of mutual trust, diminishing emotional intimacy, and alteration of long-established communication norms. This paper concludes that proactive adaptation of communication styles, combined with enhanced digital literacy, is imperative to mitigate misunderstandings and sustain constructive interpersonal relations in an increasingly connected yet fragmented digital landscape.

Keywords: miscommunication; computer-mediated communication; digital era; interpersonal relations; non-verbal cues; digital literacy

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the bedrock of human social existence, serving as the mechanism through which individuals exchange thoughts, emotions, intentions, and shared meanings. Traditionally, most interactions occurred in direct encounters, where verbal expressions were accompanied by a rich array of non-verbal signals facial expressions, vocal intonation, gestures, and physical proximity that collectively clarify intended messages.

In the contemporary digital era, however, the paradigm has shifted dramatically. Messaging applications, social media platforms, and digital forums have become primary channels for daily interaction. According to the 2024 survey by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), internet penetration in Indonesia reached 78.8%, with approximately 90% of users utilizing digital services primarily for social and communicative purposes. Globally, data from Datareportal (2025) indicates that over 5.3 billion people are active social media users, signifying that digital communication has become the norm rather than the exception.

Despite its unparalleled convenience, digital communication carries inherent vulnerabilities. A message intended as lighthearted banter may be interpreted as mockery; a concise statement may be perceived as coldness; a delayed response may be construed as disregard. This divergence between intended meaning and perceived meaning is defined as miscommunication. When unresolved, it does not merely disrupt a single conversation it can fundamentally alter the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. This article elaborates on the multifaceted causes of this

phenomenon and evaluates its short-term and long-term impacts on interpersonal communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To contextualize the occurrence of miscommunication, two foundational theories in computer-mediated communication are essential:

A. Interpersonal Communication Theory

Interpersonal Communication Theory was created by Joseph A. DeVito (2016) explains how communication happens between two or more people through either direct interaction or using some kind of medium. DeVito says that interpersonal communication is an ongoing process where people share messages, constantly sending and receiving both spoken and unspoken words, and giving responses to what they hear. Good communication between people happens when everyone is honest, understanding, kind, positive, and treated fairly. These elements help people understand each other better and keep their relationships with others in good shape.

In today's digital age, people are communicating more with each other through computer-based tools like instant messaging apps, social media sites, and online message boards. Even though these platforms are easy to use and offer a lot of options, not being able to talk directly can make messages less clear and lead to more confusion. If people don't understand messages correctly, it can lead to misunderstandings, which can harm trust, feelings of closeness, and the overall health of a relationship.

In this study, we use the theory of interpersonal communication to look at how misunderstandings in online chats can affect the way people relate to each other. The idea says that good communication isn't just about sending a message, but also about both people understanding each other, giving clear feedback, and correctly getting the meaning of what's being said.

B. Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory was introduced by Daft and Lengel in 1986. The idea is that different ways of communicating can send different amounts of detailed information. Rich media, like talking face to face, let people share words and body language, give quick responses, and make things clearer by reducing confusion. Unlike rich media, which includes video calls and voice chats, lean media like text-based messaging apps offer fewer clues about how someone is feeling or what they mean. This can make it easier for people to misinterpret what is being said.

The idea says that how well a message is communicated depends on how well the type of communication matches the difficulty of the message. Messages that need to be understood emotionally or explained in detail work better when sent using more expressive forms of communication.

In this study, Media Richness Theory is used to explain why online conversations often lead to misunderstandings. Because text messages don't include things like face expressions, body movements, or the way someone speaks, people might understand the same message in different ways. This can cause confusion and misunderstandings..

C. Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory was introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). The theory explains that the effectiveness of communication is influenced by the level of social presence, which refers to the extent to which individuals perceive the presence, attention, and psychological closeness of their communication partners during an interaction. The higher the level of social presence provided by a communication medium, the easier it is for individuals to understand the emotions, attitudes, and intentions of others.

In online communication, the level of social presence is generally lower than in face-to-face communication because digital media, particularly text-based communication, cannot fully

convey nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, vocal tone, eye contact, and body language. As a result, messages are more likely to be misinterpreted, increasing the risk of misunderstanding. According to this theory, misunderstandings in online conversations can be explained as a consequence of the lower level of social presence in digital communication. Therefore, using communication media that provide richer social cues, such as voice calls or video calls, can enhance mutual understanding and reduce the likelihood of miscommunication.

D. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) refers to a form of communication that takes place through digital devices, such as computers, smartphones, and various internet-based platforms. According to Walther (2011), CMC enables individuals to exchange information without being constrained by geographical distance or time, making it one of the most common forms of communication in the digital era. Through applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and other social media platforms, people can share information and maintain interpersonal relationships more quickly and efficiently.

Despite its convenience, CMC differs significantly from face-to-face communication. Interactions conducted through digital media often fail to convey nonverbal cues completely, such as facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and vocal intonation. This limitation makes messages more susceptible to ambiguity and misunderstanding, particularly in text-based communication. As a result, message recipients may interpret the intended meaning differently from what the sender originally intended to convey.

Furthermore, Walther (2011) argues that the effectiveness of Computer-Mediated Communication depends not only on the communication medium itself but also on users' ability to adapt their communication strategies in digital environments. Using clear language, providing sufficient context, and possessing strong digital literacy skills are essential for minimizing the risk of misunderstanding. Therefore, the Computer-Mediated Communication theory is highly relevant for explaining the factors that contribute to misunderstandings in online interactions and their impact on interpersonal communication in the digital era.

Root Causes of Miscommunication in Online Conversations

Miscommunication in digital settings is rarely accidental; it arises from the interplay of technological, psychological, social, and individual factors:

A. Absence and Limitation of Non-Verbal Cues

Research by Knapp et al. (2014) confirms that over 65% of meaning in interpersonal communication is conveyed through non-verbal channels. In text-based interactions, these cues are entirely absent. A statement such as "*Fine, do as you wish*" may carry a tone of consent, sarcasm, or resentment—none of which can be definitively determined from text alone. While emojis, stickers, and punctuation attempt to compensate, they are subjective, culturally variable, and cannot replicate the nuance of natural expression.

B. Divergences in Context and Interpretive Frames

Every individual interprets messages through the lens of their own cultural background, life experience, language proficiency, and personal values. In asynchronous communication—where sender and recipient do not interact in real time there is no immediate opportunity to clarify context. A phrase that is routine in one social group may be perceived as offensive or confusing in another, creating semantic gaps that often go unnoticed until conflict emerges.

C. Anonymity and the Online Disinhibition Effect

Suler (2004) identifies the online disinhibition effect: the tendency to express thoughts and feelings more freely and often more harshly online than in person, driven by anonymity, invisibility, and reduced accountability. When social constraints that govern face-to-face interaction weaken, individuals may communicate without considering tone or impact, inadvertently causing hurt or misunderstanding.

D. Disparities in Digital Literacy and Communicative Norms

Digital literacy encompasses not only technical proficiency but also understanding of online etiquette, linguistic conventions, and platform-specific norms. Variations in literacy levels create barriers: younger users may employ abbreviations, slang, or irony that older generations fail to recognize; the use of all-capital letters, intended for emphasis by some, is widely interpreted as shouting or anger by others.

E. Technical and Temporal Constraints

Autocorrect errors, unstable connectivity, typos, and message delays can distort or alter meaning. Additionally, time lags between sending and receiving responses allow the recipient to fill informational gaps with assumptions—often negative ones—rather than seeking clarification, leading to unnecessary friction.

IMPACTS OF MISCOMMUNICATION ON INTERPESONAL MISCOMMUNICATION

Repeated or unresolved miscommunication has cascading effects on the structure and quality of human relationships:

A. Escalation of Conflicts

Minor misunderstandings frequently escalate into prolonged disputes. Without the ability to observe reactions or adjust tone instantly, disagreements can harden into resentment, with exchanges becoming defensive rather than collaborative. Conflicts originating in private chats may also spill over into public spaces, damaging reputations and social standing.

B. Erosion of Mutual Trust

Trust is built on the consistent alignment of intent and interpretation. When messages are regularly misconstrued, individuals begin to question the sincerity, transparency, or goodwill of others. This uncertainty reduces willingness to share personal thoughts, rely on one another, or engage in open dialogue.

C. Diminution of Emotional Intimacy

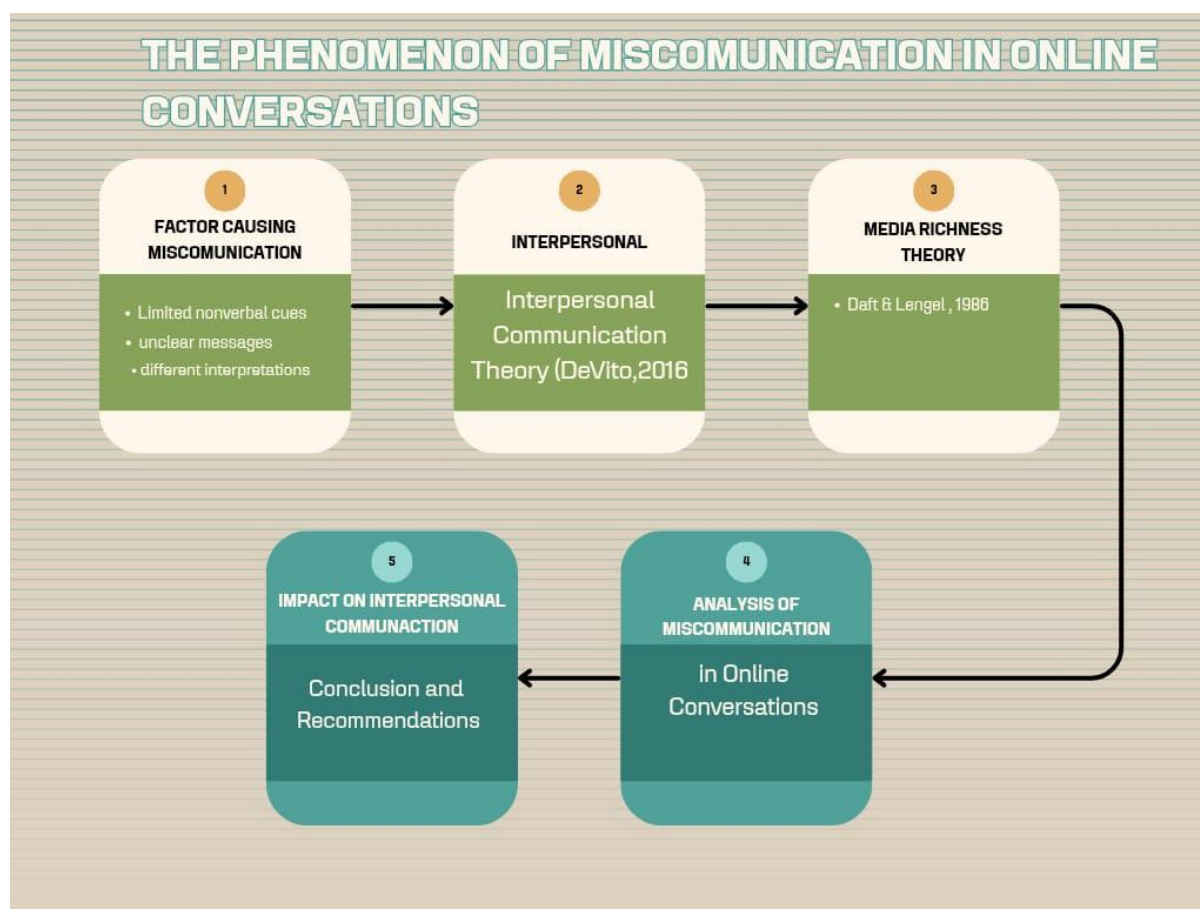
Empathy and emotional bonding rely heavily on the ability to recognize and respond to subtle emotional signals. Online miscommunication disrupts this process: emotional cues are lost, responses are often delayed, and interactions risk becoming transactional rather than relational. Long-term, this can transform deep, meaningful connections into superficial, distant exchanges.

D. Transformation of Communication Patterns

To avoid misunderstanding, individuals may adopt overly guarded, brief, or formulaic communication styles, avoiding sensitive or personal topics altogether. In extreme cases, some may withdraw from online interaction entirely, while others may prioritize quantity over quality, leading to what Turkle (2017) terms "connected solitude"—being constantly in touch, yet rarely truly connected.

It is important to acknowledge potential positive outcomes: miscommunication can also prompt reflection, encourage clearer expression, and foster greater patience and openness to verification.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Interview Findings

Based on the interview findings, the participant stated that technological advancements have shifted communication from face-to-face interactions to digital platforms. Although this transition has made communication more convenient, online interactions are more susceptible to misunderstandings due to the absence of nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. This finding is consistent with **Media Richness Theory**, which suggests that text-based communication has limited capacity to convey meaning effectively, making it more prone to misinterpretation.

Furthermore, the participant explained that misunderstandings in online communication may lead to conflict, reduce trust, and negatively affect interpersonal relationships. At the same time, such experiences encourage individuals to become more mindful in choosing their words, avoid making premature assumptions, and seek clarification whenever a message is unclear. Therefore, using richer communication media, such as voice or video calls, along with maintaining clear and transparent communication, can help reduce the likelihood of miscommunication.

Interview

results:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yQYZesEYxxdDLmLDasOE9p_50Q5cIKP2?usp=sharing

B. Root Causes of Miscommunication

1. Absence of Non-Verbal Cues

A big reason why people misunderstand each other when talking online is because there are no body language signals or facial expressions to help explain what is being said. In real-life

conversations, people use their faces, body movements, eye contact, and the way they speak to show what they really mean. Text messages can miss out on these things, which makes it easier for people to get the wrong idea. Because of this, people who receive a message might understand it in a way that's not exactly what the person who sent it meant.

2. Divergences in Context

Miscommunication can happen because people come from different backgrounds, have different experiences, and see things from different cultural viewpoints. A message that makes sense to one person might mean something totally different to another because of the different situations they are in. These differences in context can cause confusion, especially when people from different cultures or countries are communicating.

3. Online Disinhibition

The internet allows people to talk more openly than they usually do when meeting in person. This effect, called the online disinhibition effect, can make people say things on impulse, use rude language, or make guesses without thinking about how their words might hurt others. This behavior makes it more likely that conflicts and misunderstandings will happen.

4. Digital Literacy

Not having enough knowledge about using digital tools can lead to serious issues in how people communicate with each other. People who don't know much about digital platforms, online manners, or how to understand media might misunderstand information, not realize when something is false, or speak in ways that are not appropriate. So, having good digital skills helps make sure people communicate well and responsibly online.

5. Technical Constraints

Technical problems like slow internet, messages taking too long to arrive, software glitches, or bad sound and picture quality can also cause misunderstandings. These limits can cause problems in talking, make information unclear, or stop people from getting messages properly, which makes communication less effective overall.

C. **Impacts on Interpersonal Communication**

1. Escalation of Conflicts

Based on the interview findings, the participant explained that miscommunication in online communication can trigger conflicts. Differences in interpreting the meaning of a message often lead to misunderstandings, causing each party to feel misunderstood or to misinterpret the intentions of the other. If these misunderstandings are not clarified promptly, they may develop into more serious conflicts. This finding is consistent with Media Richness Theory, which suggests that text-based communication has limited capacity to convey meaning comprehensively, making it more susceptible to differences in interpretation.

2. Erosion of Mutual Trust

The participant also stated that repeated incidents of miscommunication can reduce trust within interpersonal relationships. Misunderstanding messages may lead individuals to question the intentions or sincerity of their communication partners. As a result, communication becomes less open, and interpersonal relationships are no longer as strong as before. This finding is also supported by Social Presence Theory, which argues that the low level of social presence in digital communication can weaken trust and interpersonal closeness.

3. Diminution of Emotional Intimacy

The interview findings indicate that unresolved misunderstandings can negatively affect emotional intimacy between individuals. Feelings of disappointment, frustration, or discomfort resulting from miscommunication may reduce interpersonal interaction, causing relationships to become more distant. Over time, this condition may hinder the development and maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relationships.

4. Transformation of Communication Patterns

Based on the participant's experience, miscommunication encourages individuals to adjust the way they communicate in digital environments. They become more careful in choosing their words, provide more detailed explanations, and seek clarification whenever a message is considered unclear. In addition, richer communication media, such as voice calls or video calls, are preferred in certain situations to ensure that messages are understood more accurately. This transformation in communication patterns reflects individuals' efforts to adapt and minimize the likelihood of future miscommunication.

D. Strategic Approaches to Reduce Miscommunication

1. Seeking Clarification

One of the top methods for minimizing miscommunication in digital discussions is seeking clarification. When a message lacks clarity or is open to interpretation, it is important for people to ask for clarification instead of jumping to conclusions. By posing follow-up inquiries or clarifying the intended message, both individuals can ensure they have a shared comprehension, thereby decreasing the chances of misunderstandings and unnecessary disputes.

2. Utilizing Voice Messages

Voice messages can serve as a more effective means of communication compared to written texts, especially when addressing topics that evoke emotions or require intricate explanations. By incorporating vocal tone, stress, and feelings, voice messages offer extra contextual hints that aid recipients in better understanding messages and lessen the risk of misinterpretation.

3. Opting for Voice or Video Conferencing

For crucial or delicate conversations, it is advisable to choose voice or video conferencing over text messaging. These methods of communication enable participants to receive instant feedback and notice vocal nuances, facial expressions, and other non-verbal signals. Consequently, they foster better understanding and significantly lower the chances of miscommunication.

4. Enhancing Digital Communication Skills

Boosting digital communication skills is vital for facilitating effective interactions online. Digital communication proficiency refers to the capability to express oneself appropriately in online settings, employ respectful and clear language, grasp the principles of online communication etiquette, and critically assess messages before replying. Individuals with greater digital communication skills are more likely to convey their messages effectively and steer clear of misunderstandings in online exchanges.

CONCLUSION

Miscommunication in online conversations is an inherent challenge of the digital era, shaped by technological limitations, social dynamics, and individual differences. Its impacts extend beyond momentary confusion to alter trust, emotional closeness, and the very nature of interpersonal relationships. However, technology itself is not the root cause—rather, the challenge lies in how individuals adapt their communication practices to new environments. By integrating theoretical understanding with practical communication strategies, enhancing digital literacy, and maintaining awareness of both the strengths and limitations of digital media, it is possible to harness the benefits of connectivity while preserving the quality and depth of human connection.

IMPLICATIONS

The research emphasizes the significance of comprehending the reasons behind and effects of miscommunication in virtual discussions to enhance the quality of personal interactions in the digital age. The results indicate that people should express themselves more clearly, ask for clarification when messages lack clarity, and select suitable communication platforms according to the situation of the discussion. Adopting these tactics can lead to a decrease in misunderstandings and foster more successful online exchanges.

Additionally, this research offers meaningful implications for teachers, learners, and users of digital communication by stressing the necessity of digital literacy and ethical communication

practices in online settings. Enhancing these skills can enable individuals to engage in more responsible communication, uphold healthy relationships, and reduce the likelihood of miscommunication in digital exchanges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, individuals are encouraged to communicate more carefully through digital media by using clear language, avoiding unnecessary assumptions, and seeking clarification whenever a message is unclear. In addition, the use of more effective communication media, such as voice calls or video calls, should be considered when discussing information that may lead to misunderstandings.

Furthermore, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants from diverse backgrounds in order to obtain a broader understanding of the factors that influence miscommunication in online communication. Future studies may also examine the role of specific social media platforms or different age groups, so that the findings can provide a broader contribution to the development of communication studies.

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