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HAS THE INTERNET RESHAPED COMMUNICATION IN WAYS THAT ARE DEEPLY TROUBLING OR NOT?

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of Internet technologies has fundamentally transformed patterns of human communication, shifting interactions from predominantly face-to-face exchanges to digitally mediated forms. This study examines whether the Internet has reshaped communication in ways that are deeply troubling or not, guided by three objectives: to analyse the transformation of communication patterns, identify the positive impacts of Internet-mediated communication, and evaluate its negative or "deeply troubling" effects. Anchored in Uses and Gratifications Theory and Technological Determinism, the study adopts a qualitative integrative review design, drawing on peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025. Data were analysed using a thematic approach, with findings organised around key themes of transformation, positive impacts, and negative effects. The findings indicate that while the Internet enhances connectivity, accessibility, and relationship maintenance, it also contributes to reduced communication depth, misinformation, psychological strain, and the "loneliness paradox." The study concludes that the Internet's impact on communication is both beneficial and troubling, depending on patterns of use, platform design, and user intention, and recommends more intentional use, improved platform design, and enhanced digital literacy.

Keywords: Communication, Internet communication, Interpersonal communication, Deeply troubling effects.

Introduction

Communication has always been central to human interaction, evolving from face-to-face exchanges and handwritten correspondence to technologically mediated forms. Traditionally, communication was largely physical, synchronous, and context-rich, allowing for emotional cues, immediacy, and interpersonal depth. However, the emergence of the Internet has fundamentally altered these patterns, introducing new modes of interaction that transcend geographical and temporal limitations. As of October 2025, more than 6.04 billion people approximately 73.2% of the global population actively use the Internet, with social media user identities reaching 5.66 billion (DataReportal, 2025). This rapid expansion has transformed

communication into a predominantly digital experience, reshaping not only how people interact but also the nature and quality of those interactions (Li et al., 2022).

Building on this transformation, Internet-mediated communication has become deeply embedded in everyday life through platforms such as instant messaging, social media, and video conferencing. These technologies enable both real-time and asynchronous communication across vast distances, fostering continuous interaction and global connectivity (Ambhore, 2024). The scale of engagement is equally striking, with the average user spending approximately 141 minutes daily on social media alone (Statista, 2025). In contexts such as Nigeria, this evolution is particularly pronounced and mobile-driven, with Internet penetration surpassing 50% and platforms like WhatsApp becoming central to social, economic, and community interactions (DataReportal, 2025; TechCabal, 2025). Consequently, communication is no longer confined by physical proximity but is increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures and algorithmic systems.

Despite these advancements, the transformation of communication through the Internet has generated considerable scholarly debate. On one hand, proponents argue that digital communication enhances connectivity, increases interaction frequency, and reduces feelings of isolation. Empirical evidence suggests that Internet use can strengthen interpersonal communication by increasing both the time and frequency of interactions among individuals (Li et al., 2022). Additionally, digital tools such as video calls, voice notes, and group chats have democratized communication, enabling broader participation, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering social support networks across distances (Uslu, 2025). These developments highlight the Internet's potential to enrich communication and sustain relationships in ways previously unimaginable.

On the other hand, a substantial body of research points to deeply troubling dimensions that may undermine the essence of human interaction. Excessive reliance on digital communication has been associated with reduced face-to-face engagement, limited emotional expression, and difficulties in interpreting non-verbal cues (Ambhore, 2024). Furthermore, algorithmic curation has been shown to reinforce echo chambers and intensify polarization, exposing users primarily to like-minded perspectives while facilitating the rapid spread of misinformation (Cinelli et al., 2021; Jiang, 2021). These dynamics contribute to what scholars describe as the "loneliness paradox," where increased connectivity coincides with feelings of social isolation, alongside issues such as attention fragmentation and declining trust in information ecosystems (Hartmann, 2025; Chen, 2024).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the effects of the Internet on communication are neither entirely positive nor wholly negative. Rather, they are shaped by factors such as usage patterns, technological literacy, platform design, and socio-cultural context. While active and intentional use of digital platforms can enhance social connection and access to information, passive and algorithm-driven engagement may amplify negative outcomes (Uslu, 2025; Broda, 2024). This duality underscores the multifaceted nature of Internet-mediated communication and suggests that its impact cannot be adequately understood through simplistic or one-sided interpretations, particularly within mobile-first societies such as Nigeria.

However, a critical gap remains in determining whether these transformations are indeed "deeply troubling." Much of the existing literature tends to emphasize either the benefits or the drawbacks of Internet use without systematically evaluating the depth, severity, or contextual variability of its negative effects. The concept of what constitutes "deeply troubling" remains subjective and insufficiently theorized within communication studies. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to critically examine whether the Internet has reshaped communication in ways that are deeply troubling or not. By synthesizing existing scholarly evidence, the paper aims to provide a nuanced and balanced assessment, moving beyond binary judgments to better understand the complexities of communication in the digital age.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of Internet technologies has fundamentally transformed patterns of human communication, shifting interactions from predominantly face-to-face exchanges to digitally mediated forms. With billions of people now connected globally and increasing Internet penetration in contexts such as Nigeria, digital platforms have become central to everyday interaction, enabling instant communication, information sharing, and social coordination (DataReportal, 2026). While these developments have enhanced speed, accessibility, and global connectivity, they have also raised growing concerns about the quality and depth of interpersonal communication.

Existing studies highlight both the benefits and drawbacks of Internet-mediated communication. While it facilitates social connection and sustains relationships across distance, it has also been associated with reduced face-to-face interaction, misinformation, superficial engagement, and diminished non-verbal cues essential for meaningful communication. More concerning issues such as algorithm-driven echo chambers and the spread of false information further complicate the communication landscape, alongside the "loneliness paradox," where increased connectivity may coexist with feelings of isolation (Li et al., 2022; Hartmann, 2025).

Despite these insights, there remains a lack of consensus on whether these changes are truly "deeply troubling." Much of the literature examines either positive or negative dimensions in isolation, with limited critical evaluation of the depth and context of these effects. This gap makes it difficult to determine whether the Internet's impact reflects adaptive change or more profound disruptions to human interaction.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how the internet has transformed patterns of communication.
2. To identify the positive impacts of Internet-mediated communication.
3. To analyse the negative or "deeply troubling" effects associated with Internet use in communication

Review of Related Literature

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication refers to the dynamic process through which individuals exchange messages, meanings, and emotions to build, maintain, and negotiate relationships. It involves both verbal and non-verbal elements such as tone, facial expressions, and gestures,

which contribute to immediacy, feedback, and emotional understanding. Beyond the mere transmission of information, interpersonal communication enables the interpretation of intentions and social cues within specific contexts, making it fundamental to trust, conflict resolution, and social cohesion (Ismailova, 2025; Gina, 2022). Contemporary scholarship further emphasizes that effective interpersonal communication requires adaptability to relational, cultural, and situational contexts, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and psychological well-being (Bassett, 2025).

In contemporary society, interpersonal communication has increasingly been influenced by digital technologies, reshaping how individuals interact and sustain relationships. While traditional face-to-face communication provides richer emotional exchange due to the presence of non-verbal cues, digital mediation extends communication beyond physical boundaries and enables continuous interaction across distances. However, this shift may also reduce communicative depth and increase the likelihood of misinterpretation due to the absence of immediate feedback and contextual cues. As a result, interpersonal communication now operates within both physical and digital environments, creating a dual dynamic in which technology simultaneously expands relational reach and raises concerns about the quality and authenticity of human interaction (Ismailova, 2025; Laksana & Fadhilah, 2021).

Internet-Mediated Communication

Internet-mediated communication, often referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC), denotes interactions that occur through Internet-based platforms such as social media, email, instant messaging, and video conferencing. It involves the use of digital networks and technological interfaces to transmit messages across time and space, enabling both synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (delayed) communication (Yao & Ling, 2020; Hancock, Naaman, & Levy, 2020). Unlike traditional face-to-face interaction, this form of communication is shaped by features such as reduced visibility of non-verbal cues, expanded audience reach, and platform-specific affordances, allowing for both interpersonal and mass communication simultaneously (Baskota, 2024). As a result, Internet-mediated communication has significantly broadened the scope of human interaction, facilitating connectivity beyond geographical and temporal boundaries.

The integration of Internet-mediated communication into everyday life has transformed interpersonal interaction by redefining how individuals express themselves, manage impressions, and maintain relationships. While it enhances connectivity and supports the maintenance of weak social ties, it also introduces constraints such as reduced non-verbal richness, increased potential for misinterpretation, and tendencies toward disinhibition in online environments (Meier, 2021). Furthermore, the influence of platform design and algorithmic structures shapes communication patterns and user experiences, blurring the boundaries between physical and virtual interactions. This duality positions Internet-mediated communication as both an enabler of expanded social connection and a potential source of communicative challenges, making it central to evaluating whether the Internet's influence on communication is adaptive or deeply troubling (Baruah, 2024).

Digital Communication

Digital communication refers to the process through which information is created, transmitted, and exchanged using digital technologies across networked devices. It

encompasses both Internet-based and non-Internet-based systems and is characterized by speed, accessibility, scalability, and the ability to reach large audiences simultaneously. Beyond simple message transmission, digital communication is increasingly interactive, data-driven, and multimedia in nature, combining human intent with machine mediation through algorithmic systems (Nordmann, 2025; Strauss, 2024). This hybrid character distinguishes it from traditional analogue communication, positioning it as a dominant mode of interaction in contemporary society (Bratina, 2023).

Within the context of this study, digital communication reflects the broader transformation of human interaction under the influence of Internet technologies. While it enhances connectivity, supports information exchange, and enables global participation such as activism and online communities, it also introduces significant changes to interpersonal dynamics. The increasing reliance on digital platforms has been associated with reduced face-to-face interaction, multitasking, and fragmented attention, which can weaken emotional connection and relational depth. Additionally, algorithmic filtering and performative communication behaviours may distort authenticity and trust in interactions. Thus, digital communication simultaneously represents both an advancement in communicative efficiency and a potential source of challenges that raise concerns about the quality of human relationships (Nordmann, 2025; Bratina, 2023).

"Deeply Troubling" Effects of Internet Communication

The concept of "deeply troubling" effects refers to the profound negative psychological, social, and societal consequences associated with Internet-mediated and digital communication. These effects go beyond surface-level inconveniences to include outcomes that significantly undermine the quality, authenticity, and effectiveness of human interaction. They encompass issues such as diminished empathy, reduced interpersonal closeness, misinformation, polarization, and the erosion of trust within communication processes (Uslu, 2025; Metwally, 2025). Scholars argue that these outcomes are often shaped by structural features of digital communication, including reduced non-verbal cue richness, algorithm-driven content exposure, and passive consumption patterns that amplify existing human vulnerabilities.

Within the context of this study, "deeply troubling" effects provide a critical evaluative lens for assessing whether the Internet's transformation of communication has led to harmful consequences. Empirical evidence links excessive reliance on digital communication to increased anxiety, social disconnection, and the "loneliness paradox," where heightened connectivity coexists with feelings of isolation (High et al., 2023). Additionally, the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and the weakening of meaningful public discourse further illustrate the societal implications of these effects (Oksanen, 2024). However, these outcomes are not uniform, as they may be moderated by patterns of use and levels of digital engagement. As such, the concept enables a balanced assessment of whether the Internet's impact on communication constitutes a deeply troubling shift or an evolving adaptation of human interaction in the digital age.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), initially propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in 1974. UGT posits that media users are active

participants who select media to satisfy specific needs such as information seeking, social interaction, entertainment, and personal identity. In the context of Internet-mediated communication, this theory explains why individuals consciously engage with digital platforms social media, messaging apps, and online community to maintain relationships, achieve social validation, or access timely information. Recent empirical studies highlight that gratifications derived from immediacy, connectivity, and interactive capabilities can both strengthen social bonds and facilitate positive outcomes (Sundar & Limperos, 2021). At the same time, excessive or uncritical use can lead to dependency, reduced face-to-face interaction, or exposure to misleading content, which aligns with the study's focus on assessing "deeply troubling" effects.

Complementing this, Technological Determinism, primarily associated with Marshall McLuhan, asserts that technology itself actively shapes human behaviour, social structures, and communication patterns. McLuhan's principle that "the medium is the message" underscores the idea that the Internet's structural features speed, interactivity, global reach, algorithmic filtering, and reduced non-verbal cues directly influence how messages are transmitted, interpreted, and experienced. From this perspective, both beneficial and troubling outcomes in digital communication can be attributed to the medium's inherent characteristics rather than solely user intentions. Together, UGT and Technological Determinism provide a balanced lens: the former explains why people engage with Internet technologies, while the latter explains how these technologies inherently shape communication, making them ideal for analysing the dual nature of Internet-mediated interactions and evaluating their potential to produce deeply troubling effects.

Empirical Review

Empirical evidence demonstrates that the Internet has significantly transformed patterns of communication. Li et al. (2022), using data from the Chinese General Social Survey, found that Internet use increases both the frequency and duration of interpersonal communication, particularly among family and friends, thereby expanding interaction beyond traditional physical boundaries. Complementing this, Hohenstein et al. (2023), through two randomized experiments on AI-assisted messaging, revealed that algorithmic features such as smart replies further reshape communication by increasing interaction speed, encouraging positive emotional language, and enhancing perceptions of relational closeness. Together, these studies indicate a clear shift from conventional, face-to-face communication to more continuous, technology-mediated, and efficiency-driven interaction patterns that redefine how individuals connect and evaluate relationships.

With regard to positive impacts, studies consistently highlight the benefits of Internet-mediated communication in enhancing connectivity and social engagement. Ambhore (2025) found that digital communication improves accessibility, speed, and convenience, enabling individuals to maintain relationships across geographical distances and sustain ongoing interaction. Similarly, Uslu (2025), through a synthesis of empirical and theoretical perspectives, identified that purposeful use of digital platforms fosters collaboration, strengthens social bonds, and supports personal development, particularly in professional and educational contexts. These findings collectively suggest that Internet-mediated communication, when used intentionally, enriches communication channels, promotes social cohesion, and enhances overall well-being.

However, empirical literature also reveals significant negative or "deeply troubling" effects associated with Internet use in communication. A study on problematic Internet use among young adults (2025) found that excessive engagement is linked to increased anxiety, stress, and impaired social functioning, indicating disruptions in emotional and interpersonal well-being. Supporting this, Metwally (2025), in a study of 423 university students, reported that problematic social media use is positively associated with depression, with social anxiety and loneliness acting as key mediating factors. These findings underscore the paradox of digital communication, where increased connectivity may coexist with psychological distress and social disconnection, highlighting the potential for Internet-mediated communication to produce profound negative consequences when use becomes excessive or maladaptive.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative integrative review design to examine whether the Internet has reshaped communication in ways that are deeply troubling or not. Relevant literature was sourced from academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus, focusing on peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 that address Internet-mediated communication, digital communication, and interpersonal interaction. The selected studies were analysed using a thematic approach, with findings organised around the study objectives: transformation of communication patterns, positive impacts, and negative or "deeply troubling" effects, to enable a balanced evaluation of existing evidence.

Analysis and Discussion

Transformation of Communication Patterns

The findings reviewed in this study indicate that the Internet has significantly transformed patterns of communication, shifting interaction from predominantly face-to-face exchanges to digitally mediated and networked forms. Empirical evidence from Li et al. (2022) demonstrates that Internet use increases both the frequency and duration of communication, suggesting that individuals are more connected than ever before. Similarly, Hohenstein et al. (2023) show that algorithm-driven features, such as AI-assisted messaging, further reshape communication by increasing interaction speed and influencing the tone of conversations. These developments illustrate a transition toward more efficient, continuous, and technology-dependent communication processes.

This transformation aligns with the assumptions of Technological Determinism, which posits that communication technologies shape social interaction and human behaviour. The structural features of Internet platforms such as immediacy, scalability, and algorithmic mediation have redefined how individuals communicate, reducing reliance on physical presence while expanding relational reach. However, while these changes enhance accessibility and convenience, they also raise questions about the depth and authenticity of communication, as digital interactions often lack the richness of non-verbal cues inherent in face-to-face exchanges.

Positive Impacts of Internet-Mediated Communication

The literature reveals substantial evidence supporting the positive impacts of Internet-mediated communication on interpersonal relationships and social connectivity. Studies such as Ambhore (2025) highlight that digital communication enhances accessibility, speed, and convenience, enabling individuals to maintain relationships across geographical boundaries.

In addition, Uslu (2025) demonstrates that purposeful use of digital platforms fosters collaboration, strengthens social bonds, and supports personal and professional development. These findings suggest that Internet-mediated communication serves as a valuable tool for sustaining relationships and facilitating social interaction in an increasingly globalised world. These outcomes are consistent with the propositions of Uses and Gratifications Theory, which emphasises that individuals actively use media to satisfy specific needs such as social interaction, information seeking, and emotional support. The Internet provides diverse platforms that allow users to achieve these gratifications effectively, particularly through instant messaging, social media, and video communication. Consequently, when used intentionally, Internet-mediated communication enhances relational continuity, promotes social engagement, and contributes positively to overall well-being.

Negative or "Deeply Troubling" Effects

Despite these benefits, the analysis also reveals significant negative or "deeply troubling" effects associated with Internet-mediated communication. Empirical studies indicate that excessive or maladaptive use of digital platforms is linked to adverse psychological and social outcomes. For instance, research on problematic Internet use (2025) shows that high levels of engagement are associated with increased anxiety, stress, and impaired interpersonal functioning. Similarly, Metwally (2025) finds that excessive social media use contributes to depression, with social anxiety and loneliness acting as key mediating factors. These findings highlight the paradox of digital communication, where increased connectivity may coexist with emotional distress and social disconnection.

From a theoretical perspective, these outcomes can also be explained through Technological Determinism, as the design and structure of digital platforms such as algorithmic filtering and reduced non-verbal cues shape communication in ways that may undermine relational depth and authenticity. Furthermore, the absence of immediate feedback and contextual cues in online communication can lead to misinterpretation, superficial engagement, and weakened interpersonal bonds. These dynamics underscore the potential for Internet-mediated communication to produce profound negative consequences, particularly when usage patterns are excessive or passive.

Integrated Evaluation of Findings

Taken together, the findings of this study reveal that the Internet has indeed reshaped communication in both beneficial and troubling ways. On one hand, it enhances connectivity, increases interaction frequency, and provides platforms for maintaining relationships across distances. On the other hand, it introduces challenges related to reduced communication depth, psychological strain, and the erosion of authentic social interaction. This duality suggests that the impact of the Internet on communication cannot be categorised as entirely positive or entirely negative.

Rather, the extent to which Internet-mediated communication is "deeply troubling" depends on factors such as usage patterns, user intentions, and platform design. Consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory, individuals who engage with digital platforms purposefully are more likely to experience positive outcomes, while passive or excessive use tends to amplify negative effects. At the same time, Technological Determinism highlights that the structural characteristics of communication technologies themselves play a crucial role in shaping these

outcomes. Therefore, the Internet's influence on communication is best understood as a complex and context-dependent phenomenon, requiring a balanced and nuanced evaluation rather than a one-sided judgment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Internet has fundamentally reshaped communication patterns, transforming interaction from predominantly face-to-face exchanges to digitally mediated, networked forms. While this transformation has enhanced connectivity, accessibility, and the maintenance of social relationships, it has also introduced significant challenges, including reduced communication depth, psychological strain, and the potential erosion of trust and authenticity in interpersonal interactions. These outcomes reveal that the Internet's impact on communication is neither entirely beneficial nor wholly detrimental, but rather complex and context-dependent. Therefore, while the Internet has indeed reshaped communication in ways that can be deeply troubling, these effects are largely influenced by patterns of use, user intentions, and the structural design of digital platforms.

In light of these findings, this study recommends that individuals adopt more intentional and balanced patterns of Internet use to maximise benefits while minimising negative effects. Digital platform designers should prioritise features that promote meaningful interaction, reduce misinformation, and support users' psychological well-being. Policymakers and educators should also promote digital literacy and awareness to help users navigate online communication environments more critically and responsibly. Furthermore, future research should explore context-specific experiences, particularly in developing regions, to better understand how cultural and technological factors shape the impact of Internet-mediated communication.

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