

The Relationship Between Social Media Use Intensity and Interpersonal Communication Skills among Generation Z

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Abstract. This study examines the relationship between social media use intensity and interpersonal communication skills among Generation Z, particularly university students. Although previous studies have discussed the effects of social media on communication behavior, limited reviews have specifically synthesized how intensive, controllable, and text-based digital interaction reshapes face-to-face interpersonal competence among university students. This study addresses that gap by identifying communication patterns, psychological consequences, and emerging trends in Generation Z's social interaction. A descriptive qualitative literature review was conducted through indirect observation and systematic documentation of scholarly articles published between 2016 and 2026. Articles were selected from [mention databases] using keywords related to social media intensity, Generation Z, interpersonal communication, communication anxiety, loneliness, and student interaction. The selected literature was screened based on relevance, publication year, academic quality, and focus on university students, then analyzed using thematic synthesis. The findings show that frequent social media use encourages preference for chat-based communication because it allows control over timing, wording, and self-presentation. However, excessive dependence on digital interaction may reduce face-to-face practice, weaken emotional depth, increase communication anxiety, and intensify loneliness. The review highlights that the main issue is not social media use itself, but imbalance between mediated and direct interpersonal interaction.

Keywords: *Generation Z; communication anxiety; digital communication; interpersonal communication; social media*

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally reorganized the everyday communication ecology of young people. For Generation Z, who grew up with mobile internet, instant messaging, image-sharing platforms, and short-video applications, social interaction increasingly occurs through screens rather than through prolonged face-to-face encounters. Digital platforms offer speed, accessibility, and spatial flexibility; they allow students to maintain large networks, exchange information instantly, and perform identity in a highly visible public space. However, these advantages also produce a new interpersonal problem: interaction becomes easier to initiate but not necessarily deeper, warmer, or more psychologically secure. The uploaded manuscript identifies this transformation as a shift from direct verbal communication toward text-based interaction, especially among university students who prefer chatting to speaking directly or receiving phone calls.

Interpersonal communication is not merely the exchange of information. It is a psychologically rich process through which individuals negotiate meaning, regulate emotions, build trust, and confirm one another's social existence. In face-to-face interaction, people do not rely only on words; they also interpret eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, bodily posture, silence, timing, and spontaneous emotional responses. These cues create what Media Richness Theory describes as a rich communicative environment because ambiguity can be reduced through immediate feedback and multiple sensory channels (Daft & Lengel, 1986). By contrast, text-based digital communication filters out many of these cues. Although emojis, stickers, GIFs, and reaction buttons may simulate emotion, they cannot fully replace the embodied immediacy of voice, gaze, and gesture.

The implications of this cue reduction are significant for Generation Z students. In the original article, students are described as increasingly comfortable with chat features because such features give them time to think, edit responses, and avoid the pressure of spontaneous speech. This finding is consistent with studies showing that social media and mobile communication alter patterns of interpersonal engagement among adolescents and university students (Ali Nashihudin, 2022; Bakar & Rusdin, 2025; Manurung et al., 2025; Sasfira & Salas, 2025). In the academic context, this shift can be observed in students who are highly expressive on Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, or Twitter/X, yet become hesitant when required to engage in classroom discussion, group deliberation, oral presentation, or informal conversation with lecturers and peers.

The theoretical importance of the topic lies in the tension between connection and competence. Social media expands connection by enabling frequent contact and easy access to

others. Nevertheless, interpersonal competence is developed through practice in real-time social situations. Skills such as listening actively, interpreting nonverbal cues, managing disagreement, responding spontaneously, and repairing misunderstanding require repeated embodied interaction. When students substitute most of these experiences with asynchronous texts or curated short videos, their opportunities to train direct communication may decline. This is why the intensity of social media use should not be examined only as a behavioral frequency, but also as a possible predictor of changes in interpersonal communication habits.

Computer-mediated communication research provides a nuanced foundation for understanding this issue. High et al. (2023), in a systematic meso-level review, emphasized that the association between computer-mediated communication and well-being is complex and context-dependent. Digital communication can support social capital, disclosure, and social support under certain conditions, yet it can also become problematic when it displaces meaningful interaction, intensifies social comparison, or supports compulsive use. Therefore, this study does not treat social media as inherently harmful. Rather, it examines how high-intensity and avoidance-based use may weaken direct interpersonal communication, especially when digital spaces become a psychological refuge from social discomfort.

One central mechanism discussed in the original manuscript is asynchronous control. Text-based communication allows users to delay, revise, delete, or reshape messages before sending them. This temporal control is experienced as psychological safety. Students who fear being judged may prefer chat because it reduces the immediate risk of saying something wrong. In communication theory, however, this safety can become ambivalent. It may lower anxiety in the short term, but it can also reinforce avoidance of spontaneous interaction. Over time, reliance on delayed responses may reduce confidence in real-time communication and intensify the perception that face-to-face conversation is threatening.

This dynamic can be explained through communication apprehension theory. Communication apprehension refers to fear or anxiety associated with actual or anticipated communication with others (McCroskey, 1977). The uploaded article highlights several manifestations of this phenomenon among Generation Z, including discomfort with phone calls, reluctance to speak directly, fear of spontaneous response, and preference for texting. These patterns are not simply technological preferences; they may indicate a psychological tendency to avoid communicative situations that cannot be controlled. Phone calls are particularly anxiety-inducing because they demand immediate verbal response while still lacking the visual cues

available in face-to-face interaction. For some students, therefore, telephone interaction becomes a hybrid threat: it is synchronous like direct conversation, but cue-poor like digital text.

Social anxiety theory deepens this interpretation. Students with social anxiety tend to overestimate negative evaluation, monitor their own performance excessively, and interpret minor communication difficulties as signs of social failure (Clark & Wells, 1995). Social media may offer a compensatory space where self-presentation can be edited and perfected. Leary's self-presentation perspective suggests that anxiety emerges when individuals want to make a favorable impression but doubt their ability to do so (Leary, 1995). This helps explain why visually curated platforms are attractive to students who feel uncertain in offline interactions. Online, they can select images, captions, responses, and timing; offline, they must manage unpredictable social feedback in real time.

Recent empirical literature supports the relevance of this concern. O'Day and Heimberg (2021) found that socially anxious and lonely individuals often prefer online social interaction, even though social media use may also maintain loneliness and anxiety under particular conditions. Shannon et al. (2022) reported significant associations between problematic social media use and higher depression, anxiety, and stress among adolescents and young adults. Du et al. (2024) found moderately positive associations between problematic social networking use and several anxiety subtypes, including social anxiety and fear of missing out. Wu et al. (2024) also reported a positive association between social anxiety and problematic social media use in a meta-analysis. These studies indicate that high-intensity or problematic use cannot be separated from students' psychological condition.

Nevertheless, the relationship is not linear and should not be reduced to a simple claim that "more social media use automatically causes poorer communication." Lai et al. (2023) showed that different types of social media use may have different relationships with social anxiety, and communication capacity may mediate the relationship. Active, purposeful, and supportive use may strengthen connection, while passive scrolling, comparison-oriented use, or avoidance-based chatting may weaken social confidence. This distinction is important because Generation Z does not use social media in one uniform way. Some students use it for collaboration, learning, activism, and maintaining supportive relationships; others use it to escape discomfort and reduce exposure to face-to-face interaction.

The phenomenon is also relevant to Social Penetration Theory. Altman and Taylor (1973) argued that relationship development depends on the breadth and depth of self-disclosure. Social media can increase breadth because users interact with many people and many topics. However, it does not always increase depth. Short replies, reactions, memes, and short videos may sustain

contact without producing emotional intimacy. The uploaded article identifies this condition as digital loneliness: students may appear socially connected through many online contacts but feel emotionally isolated in daily life. This paradox is central to contemporary student experience, where networks are wide but relationships may feel psychologically thin.

Communication Privacy Management Theory further clarifies the issue. Petronio (2002) argued that people manage privacy by regulating boundaries around personal information. Social media complicates this boundary management because private emotions can be shared publicly for validation, while direct interpersonal disclosure may feel more threatening. As a result, students may disclose highly curated versions of themselves online but remain closed, guarded, and awkward in offline relationships. This mismatch between digital self-disclosure and embodied interpersonal openness can create relational instability, especially when online validation replaces reciprocal, sustained, and emotionally responsible communication.

Indonesian studies cited in the source manuscript show that this phenomenon is visible across platforms and age groups. Instagram use has been linked to changes in interpersonal communication patterns among students (Ali Nashihudin, 2022; Fadillah, 2024; Yoga Ardianto, 2022), while TikTok has been discussed in relation to public speaking, articulation, and communication patterns (Hidayati & Ramadhan, 2024; Kadri & Andika, 2022; Ontoh et al., 2024; Zahroh & Saleh, 2025). Twitter/X and Facebook have also been associated with shifts in interpersonal communication among adolescents and university students (Hasibuan et al., 2023; Rahmadillah et al., 2021). These studies suggest that the transformation is not limited to one application. Rather, it reflects a broader digital communication culture characterized by speed, visibility, curation, and reduced embodied immediacy.

The educational implications are considerable. Universities expect students to collaborate, discuss, present arguments, negotiate group roles, and build professional networks. These tasks require interpersonal communication skills that cannot be fully replaced by digital fluency. A student who is articulate in written chat may still struggle with maintaining eye contact, managing disagreement, expressing empathy through tone, or responding to feedback during a live conversation. If higher education institutions overlook this difference, they may assume that digitally active students are also interpersonally competent, even when many of them experience anxiety in direct communicative settings.

This study therefore positions interpersonal communication as an educational and psychological competence that must be protected in the digital era. The aim is not to reject social media but to examine how intensity, dependence, and avoidance-based use are related to

communication skills among Generation Z. The research problem is formulated as follows: how does the intensity of social media use relate to the interpersonal communication skills of Generation Z, and what psychosocial mechanisms explain the preference for digital text-based communication over direct face-to-face interaction? Based on this problem, the study seeks to analyze the shift in communication patterns, identify social and communication anxiety as underlying mechanisms, and synthesize the implications of digital reliance for interpersonal relationship quality.

The novelty of this article lies in its focus on the psychological paradox of digital communicativeness. Many previous studies have examined public speaking, online ethics, social media addiction, or general mental health outcomes. This article specifically foregrounds the tension between expressive online behavior and inhibited offline interaction. It argues that the most important issue is not merely the amount of time students spend on social media, but the function that social media serves in their interpersonal lives. When chatting functions as a temporary bridge, it may support communication. When it functions as a permanent shield against direct social exposure, it may contribute to the weakening of interpersonal competence, the growth of communication apprehension, and the persistence of loneliness in a hyperconnected generation.

Methods

This study used a descriptive qualitative design based on indirect observation and documentation study. The design was selected because the phenomenon under investigation concerns meaning, preference, anxiety, and interpersonal experience rather than only numerical frequency. The focus was to synthesize how social media use intensity is represented in the literature as a factor associated with interpersonal communication skills among Generation Z students.

The data consisted of secondary sources, including national and international journal articles, theses or dissertations, proceedings, and relevant research reports published between 2016 and 2026. The main search keywords were social media use intensity, Generation Z, interpersonal communication, communication apprehension, social anxiety, digital communication, telephone anxiety, loneliness, and computer-mediated communication. The selection of documents was purposive. Sources were included when they discussed at least one of the following topics: social media use among adolescents or university students, interpersonal communication skills, communication anxiety, social anxiety, digital self-disclosure, loneliness, or changes in face-to-face interaction.

The analysis used qualitative content analysis. First, the documents were read repeatedly to identify recurring ideas. Second, relevant statements were coded according to thematic categories: digital communication preference, avoidance of direct communication, communication apprehension, reduction of nonverbal cue sensitivity, social anxiety, loneliness, and relational quality. Third, similarities and differences across sources were compared. Fourth, the themes were interpreted using interpersonal communication theory, Media Richness Theory, Social Penetration Theory, Communication Privacy Management Theory, and communication apprehension theory. Source triangulation was used by comparing findings from different types of publications and platforms discussed in the literature.

Results

The synthesis shows that high-intensity social media use is associated with a shift in interpersonal communication patterns among Generation Z students. The most dominant pattern is preference for text-based communication, especially chat features, over phone calls and direct conversation. Students perceive chat as safer because it offers time to think, edit words, regulate emotion, and manage self-presentation before responding. This preference does not necessarily indicate poor communication ability in all contexts, but it shows that digital communication offers psychological control that direct interaction does not provide.

The second finding concerns the reduction of face-to-face communicative practice. When students rely heavily on text, emojis, short videos, and brief responses, they have fewer opportunities to interpret vocal tone, facial expression, gesture, posture, and immediate feedback. The literature reviewed indicates that this reduction may weaken spontaneous speaking confidence, active listening, and sensitivity to nonverbal cues. In this sense, interpersonal communication skill may become undertrained even when digital interaction frequency is high.

The third finding is the emergence of communication anxiety and avoidance behavior. The documents analyzed describe students who avoid phone calls, postpone direct conversation, or replace verbal interaction with written messages. This avoidance is closely related to fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and discomfort with spontaneous response. Digital communication becomes a short-term coping mechanism, but repeated avoidance may strengthen the belief that direct communication is threatening.

The fourth finding is the paradox of digital connectedness and emotional loneliness. Social media enables continuous contact and broad networks, yet many interactions remain superficial. Students may feel connected through notifications, comments, likes, and messages, but still lack emotionally meaningful support in offline life. This finding supports the argument that

interpersonal relationship quality depends not only on frequency of contact but also on depth, empathy, responsiveness, and embodied presence.

Table 1
Synthesis of Observed Phenomena, Behavioral Forms, and Interpersonal Implications

Observed phenomenon	Behavioral expression	Implication for interpersonal communication
Preference for text-based communication	Students choose chat rather than phone calls or direct conversation.	Verbal interaction and spontaneous response practice decrease.
Avoidance of direct communication	Students ignore calls, delay responses, or ask others to text instead.	Communication apprehension increases in synchronous situations.
Dependence on digital platforms	Daily communication is mediated by social media and instant messaging.	Face-to-face interaction becomes less frequent.
Use of symbolic shortcuts	Emojis, abbreviations, reactions, and short replies become dominant.	Messages become efficient but less emotionally rich.
Perceived safety of digital communication	Students feel safer when they can edit messages and control self-presentation.	Confidence in direct conversation may decline.
Reduced offline relational quality	Students focus on mobile phones during gatherings.	Presence, empathy, and interpersonal closeness weaken.
Communication anxiety	Students feel nervous when speaking without preparation.	Digital communication becomes an avoidance-based coping strategy.
Loneliness despite online connection	Students remain emotionally distant despite wide online networks.	Relationships become less meaningful and less supportive.

Discussion

The findings confirm that social media use intensity should be interpreted through both behavioral and psychological dimensions. From a behavioral perspective, frequent social media use shifts communication toward text, symbols, visual posts, and short-form video. From a psychological perspective, this shift is reinforced because digital communication reduces uncertainty, allows message editing, and protects users from immediate social judgment. This explains why many Generation Z students are not simply choosing chat because it is faster, but because it gives them greater control over interpersonal risk.

The results are consistent with Ali Nashihudin (2022), Bakar and Rusdin (2025), Manurung et al. (2025), and Sasfira and Salas (2025), who found that social media use is related to changes in interpersonal communication patterns. They are also aligned with studies on specific platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X, which show that each platform contributes to the restructuring of social interaction in different ways (Fadillah, 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2023; Hidayati & Ramadhan, 2024; Kadri & Andika, 2022; Rahmadillah et al., 2021; Zahroh & Saleh, 2025). While platform designs differ, all of them can normalize mediated communication and reduce the perceived necessity of direct conversation.

Media Richness Theory helps explain why this shift matters. Face-to-face communication is rich because it provides immediate feedback and multiple cues, whereas text-based social media is relatively lean because it filters out embodied signals (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The loss of such signals can reduce emotional accuracy, increase misunderstanding, and limit the development of empathy. This does not mean that mediated communication is useless; rather, it means that certain relational tasks, especially conflict resolution, emotional disclosure, and trust building, are more difficult when interaction is reduced to text or curated visual symbols.

The study also supports the argument that social media may function as a safety behavior for students with communication apprehension. Students who fear negative evaluation may use chat to avoid spontaneous exposure. In the short term, this reduces anxiety. In the long term, however, it can prevent habituation to direct communication. The more students avoid direct speaking, the less confident they become; the less confident they become, the more they return to digital communication. This recursive mechanism resembles a vicious cycle in which avoidance temporarily relieves discomfort but strengthens future anxiety.

This interpretation is supported by recent meta-analytic and systematic evidence. O'Day and Heimberg (2021) concluded that socially anxious and lonely individuals may prefer online social interaction, while Shannon et al. (2022) found significant associations between problematic social media use and anxiety-related outcomes among adolescents and young adults. Du et al. (2024) and Wu et al. (2024) further showed that problematic social networking use is positively associated with anxiety subtypes, including social anxiety. These findings provide an updated empirical basis for the original article's claim that high-intensity digital interaction may be associated with anxiety and loneliness.

At the same time, the analysis must remain balanced. Digital communication can also support belonging, maintain long-distance relationships, and provide access to peer communities. The issue is not social media use per se, but unbalanced and avoidance-based use. Lai et al. (2023)

suggest that active and passive forms of social media use may have different relationships with social anxiety, with communication capacity playing an important mediating role. Therefore, interventions should not merely demand that students reduce screen time. They should also develop students' confidence, active listening, self-disclosure skills, and tolerance for spontaneous interaction.

The findings have practical implications for higher education. Universities can respond by designing learning activities that require safe and structured face-to-face interaction: small-group discussion, peer mentoring, oral reflection, debate, role play, counseling-based communication workshops, and gradual exposure to public speaking. Such activities should not shame students for digital habits but help them rebuild direct interpersonal competence. Lecturers and counselors can also teach students to distinguish between using chat as a bridge and using chat as a shield. A bridge supports relational continuity; a shield prevents emotional exposure and growth.

This study has limitations. Because it relies on secondary data and documentation, it cannot measure the actual level of social media intensity, communication apprehension, or interpersonal skills among a specific sample of students. The findings are conceptual and synthetic rather than causal. Future studies should use mixed methods involving surveys, interviews, behavioral observation, and validated scales of social media use, communication apprehension, social anxiety, loneliness, and interpersonal competence. Longitudinal research is particularly needed to determine whether high-intensity social media use predicts later decline in face-to-face communication skill, or whether students with lower interpersonal confidence are more likely to use social media intensively as compensation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the relationship between social media use intensity and interpersonal communication skills among Generation Z is best understood as a psychosocial balance problem: digital platforms can facilitate connection, self-expression, and practical communication, but when they become the dominant refuge from spontaneous interaction, they may weaken direct communication practice, reinforce communication apprehension, and reduce the emotional depth of relationships. The central contribution of this article is to show that the issue is not merely time spent online, but the communicative function of social media in students' lives. If chat-based interaction is used to support, not replace, embodied interpersonal contact, it can remain adaptive; however, if it becomes a permanent shield against face-to-face exposure, it may contribute to social skill atrophy and digital loneliness. Therefore, Generation Z students, families, universities, and counselors need to cultivate a healthier communicative ecology in

which digital fluency is accompanied by active listening, direct conversation, empathy, spontaneous response, and meaningful offline relational experience.

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