Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Empathy without Presence? Metacommunication, Language, and the Psychological Limits of Online Interaction

Erzsébet Németh[1], Szilvia Szoták[2], Dezső Cs. Dér[3]

Abstract

The increasing dominance of digitally mediated communication has fundamentally altered how individuals perceive, express, and respond to the emotions of others. This review paper examines how structural characteristics of online interaction influence the emergence and functioning of empathy, with particular attention to verbal expressiveness, metacommunication, feedback, and psychological consequences. Drawing on research from social psychology, cyberpsychology, communication studies, and sociolinguistics, the paper systematically compares offline, face-to-face communication with online, technology-mediated interaction.Online communication environments typically restrict spontaneous non-verbal cues, that play a crucial role in empathic understanding. Although users employ compensatory digital tools such as emojis, GIFs, abbreviations, and visual symbols, these consciously selected signals cannot fully replicate the automatic and embodied nature of metacommunication. As a result, emotional signals are more easily distorted, misunderstood, or overlooked, weakening mutual attention and empathic engagement.The paper also highlights the role of language in empathy development. Accelerated, fragmented, and reduced textual communication may limit nuanced emotional expression and negatively affect linguistic richness, particularly during early socialisation. This process may influence not only interpersonal understanding but also the development of inner speech, emotional self-reflection, and emotional regulation.Finally, the review discusses the broader psychological and social consequences of empathy deficits in online environments, including increased misunderstanding, dehumanisation, online disinhibition, cyberbullying, and social polarisation. The findings suggest that while digital platforms offer new forms of connection, they cannot fully replace the empathic depth enabled by embodied, synchronous, and multichannel human interaction. Understanding these limitations is essential for promoting healthier online communication and psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Cyberpsychology, Online Communication, Empathy, Metacommunication, Online Disinhibition, Digital Interaction, Psychological Well-Being, Empathy Deficit.*

Introduction

Digitally mediated communication has become a dominant form of social interaction, fundamentally reshaping how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to one another's emotions. From a cyberpsychological perspective, online environments alter not only communication channels but also the psychological processes underlying social understanding, empathy, and emotional regulation. While digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for connection, they simultaneously transform the structural conditions of interaction by limiting non-verbal cues, altering feedback mechanisms, and accelerating communicative exchanges. These changes raise important questions about how empathy—a core component of social functioning and psychological well-being—operates in the absence of physical presence.

Empathy relies on the continuous integration of verbal content, metacommunicative signals, and immediate feedback. Face-to-face interaction provides a multichannel communicative environment in which facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, gaze, and timing jointly support emotional attunement and mutual understanding. In contrast, online communication is often characterised by textual brevity, asynchrony, and the reduction or absence of spontaneous non-verbal cues. Although users employ compensatory strategies such as emojis, GIFs, abbreviations, and visual symbols, these consciously selected signs cannot fully reproduce the automatic, embodied nature of empathic communication. From a psychological standpoint,

[1] Budapest Metropolitan University, Hungary, 1148 Budapest Nagy Lajos király 1-9, ORCID: 0000-0003-4427-9827, Email: enemeth@metropolitan.hu, Phone: +36203665067

[2] Budapest Metropolitan University, Hungary, 1148 Budapest Nagy Lajos király 1-9, ORCID: 000-0003-3218-9525, Email: sszotak@metropolitan.hu, (Corresponding Author), Phone: +36204086137

[3] Budapest Metropolitan University, Hungary, 1148 Budapest Nagy Lajos király 1-9, ORCID: 0000-0002-2873-3586, Email: cder@metropolitan.hu, Phone: +36207726057

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

this structural shift may increase the risk of emotional misinterpretation, reduce empathic engagement, and weaken social bonding.

Building on research in cyberpsychology, social psychology, communication studies, and sociolinguistics, the present paper offers a theoretical review of how online communication environments influence empathic processes. By systematically comparing offline and online interaction, the study explores the psychological consequences of reduced metacommunication, constrained linguistic expressiveness, and delayed or fragmented feedback. Particular attention is given to the potential implications of these changes for emotional understanding, inner speech, social relationships, and mental well-being.

This review contributes an integrative cyberpsychological framework linking communication structure, linguistic reduction, and empathy-related psychological outcomes in online environments. This paper adopts a theoretical review approach, aiming to synthesise and integrate findings across cyberpsychology, social psychology, communication studies, and sociolinguistics rather than to present new empirical data.

Encoding and decoding communication messages in and outside of social space

We live in a world dominated by digitalisation, where we are witnessing an exponential development of IT tools. The impact and influence of digitalisation can be seen in language use, communication habits, media use and media preferences, as well as in information gathering practices (Vieru, 2015). We also must face the fact that in a globalised world we are constantly in touch with artificial intelligence, we use a wide range of IT tools and the number of interactions in the online communication is increasing. AI and the use of IT tools have an impact on our language use, our language performance and the quality of our language performance, but overall, the process described above has and will have a huge impact on our human interactions.

Man is a social being, and the actual or perceived presence and communication of others influences his behaviour and opinions every minute of his life (Aristotle, 1969; Aronson, 2023). The essence of communication is that people in contact with each other can communicate what is going on around them and within them – thoughts and feelings – by means of an arbitrary system, language and other non-verbal communicative signals, and in this way regulate and influence each other's behaviour and thinking (Buda, 1993). Communication is a process whereby one person consciously or unconsciously influences the thinking and feelings of another person. Various means are used to convey the effect. We use signs, symbols, which carry ideas as content. However, in most of our social situations, our communication is not always conscious. Whether we want to or not, we are constantly sending signals to other people (Németh, 2005). Our interlocutor not only influences us but also with his whole appearance, the gestures that accompany his speech, his smile, his voice, and even his smell. We orient ourselves in several ways at once, which gives communication its multichannel character with his words.

In the online communication, we can also distinguish between individuals and online communities. The latter the same interests and characteristics who is understood as a group of individuals with interact with each other through channels (Rekettye social media et al 2019). Munk, for example (2009, p9), points out that in these groups, individuals have the opportunity to maintain a semblance of community, to participate in the group, to as close. experience the lives of some people Thus, by joining these digital spaces of experience, one can experience a real sense of community without having to interact personally with anyone in the group (Törőcsik & Szűcs 2022; Prónay 2023). There are many examples in the literature of parasocial online communities in which empathy plays an important role (Németh 2025). Examples include online patient communities or online brand communities, where empathy has a positive effect on e.g. the doctor-patient relationship (Lu & Zhang, 2021) or member engagement (Wong & Lee, 2021). However, the authors of this study do not deal with online communities in this paper.

Empathy is the ability that enables us to understand and feel other people's emotions and to respond appropriately to them (Davis, 1996). Empathy consists of three main components, emotional, cognitive and behavioural. Emotional empathy is the ability to feel the emotions of others as if they were our own. It is the basis of the affective response that promotes social bonding and prosocial behaviour (Decety &

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Jackson, 2004). The cognitive empathy is the skill that enables us to understand the perspective and thinking of others (Batson, 2009). This is particularly important for effective communication and conflict resolution, and behavioural empathy is a behavioural manifestation of empathic understanding, such as active listening or emotional support (Rogers, 1957).

Communication in the online space, especially among young people, has brought about significant changes in social interactions and the expression of empathy, as teenagers use social media to express their emotions and opinions online through text messages - likes and emojis (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020: 327). Thus, it is no coincidence that conversations on digital platforms often use abbreviations, emojis and other visual elements – linguistic landscapes, in the terminology of the recent field of sociolinguistics (Szoták 2018) – as a substitute for metacommunication. This raises the question of how effective these tools are in conveying emotions and understanding the other party. Online communication can help empathy to generate through social comparisons as well as envy, anxiety and depression (Chou & Edge, 2012). In this way, visual communication through emoji can lead to misinterpretation with emotional impact (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020: 327). Indeed, digitalised communication in online spaces typically and significantly limits the use of both verbal and non-verbal means of communication, changing the means of transmitting, receiving and giving feedback (cf. Dér & Márkus 2020).

The study suggests that the specificities of online communication, such as the lack of non-verbal cues and abbreviated message exchanges, can pose challenges to the expression and understanding of empathy. Metacommunication elements such as body language, tone of voice and facial expressions, which help to accurately convey emotions in face-to-face communication, are often absent or limited in the online space. As a result, messages may be misunderstood or the emotional content may not be conveyed properly to the other party.

At the same time, those using this form of secondary verbality have adapted to these challenges and developed new communication tools and methods for conveying emotions in the online communication. The use of emojis, GIFs and other visual elements help to replace non-verbal cues and supports the expression of emotions. In addition, users often use specific language codes and abbreviations that are easily understood within the community and foster a sense of belonging.

This can pose a significant challenge for the development of mutual attention, understanding and empathy in the online communication. It is important to note that the impact of online communication on empathy and understanding is complex and depends on several factors, such as the communication skills of the individual, the characteristics of the platforms used and the context of the communication. This paper reviews research that helps us understand how online communication affects empathy and peer relationships.

Verbal Communication

Of the two levels of communication, the first is the one we tend to pay attention to: direct or intentional (or content) communication. The language used in online chats is often reduced and fragmented, which may limit nuanced emotional expression and increase cognitive load during emotional interpretation.

Its linguistic tools are words, phrases, symbols, cultural signals (choice of objects, clothing, make-up). In principle, the lack of metacommunication can be compensated for by oral or linguistic communication, which has the most complex code of all communication channels. Through this channel, conventional common agreement we transmit signals based on which are themselves capable of conveying any information. One of the keys to expressing and evoking empathy is linguistic richness, since, given the right vocabulary and expressive skills, the lack of metacommunication can be partially compensated for. Written text, especially when nuanced and precise, can convey emotions, paint moods and even evoke visual or auditory meanings.

However, research shows that the language of chats is often very reduced. Because of the rapid exchange of messages, many people minimise sentences, use abbreviations and use forms less suited to expressing

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

deeper emotions or thoughts. While emojis and GIFs can help convey an emotional charge, they are complementary rather than a substitute for nuanced verbal expression. Indeed, emojis are not spontaneous but consciously chosen signals, and are not a substitute for the subtle, non-conscious responses (e.g. facial expressions, vocal inflections, body language) that play a key role in personal communication in experiencing empathy and accurately decoding emotions, as the communicator selects and inserts the right icon from an increasingly diverse set. The most used and now worn icon, the heart, is losing its emotional value. In this case, habituation means that it is becoming less and less pleasing to see and more and more painful to miss.

The language used on social media is often more informal and shorter than face to face communication. Crystal, (2011) points out that the use of slang, abbreviations and colloquialisms is common on online platforms. This stems partly from character limits, such as Twitter's (currently X) 280 character limit, but also from the need to communicate faster and more effectively (Tagg, 2015), but the accelerated world and the impatience of 21st century man also play a role, as children today are born into a hyper-fast world, growing up in an online and audiovisual environment, and unlike previous generations, they do not learn to wait (Steigervald 2023). In addition, social media posts are often fragmented, as users formulate short, to-the-point messages to maintain attention

With particularly good linguistic expressiveness, we are able to communicate emotions, emotions, visual phenomena, which are not naturally communicated channels through verbal.

In linguistic communication, precise expression, nuanced wording and the vocabulary used are of the utmost importance. This is also fundamental to how what we say is understood and whether our emotions are understood. However, a lot of research points to the fact that online communication is more limited in the use of language, which also makes it more difficult to understand the other person. This reduces the development of linguistic and verbal expressiveness and the appropriate development of empathy, especially in the early stages of language socialisation (Bódi, 2020; Tari, 2015).

Different groups in society know, use and prefer different amounts of the language's massive code fragments. Earlier sociolinguistic studies have shown that language use between different social classesvaries, generally the higher the sociocultural status of individuals, the greater the vocabulary they have, the more they are able to their experiences and observations in abstract terms verbalise (Bendix-Lipset, 1953). Online interactions, as we have seen, restrict the use of verbal means of communicative expression, i.e. a restricted language code they result in, and (Bernstein 1971) this can be particularly problematic in the early stages of language socialisation. If the young child does not learn enough verbal means to present his/her feelings, problems and experiences, not only is comprehension affected, but expression is also affected. The development of inner speech is a particularly important issue. Without adequate verbal expression, people are not able to express and interpret adequately not only to the outside world but also to themselves the processes, attitudes, emotions, experiences, etc. within themselves. The problem of inner speech is a very underestimated area, especially in research on the effects of new media use. If a person communicates from an early age with highly simplified visual and short textual elements, does he or she develop the internal language structure necessary for self-reflection, a nuanced understanding of emotions and the internal processing of problems? After all, inner speech is a kind of 'inner dialogue' through which one understands one's own emotions and thoughts - if this is not developed properly, it can affect not only empathy but also emotional intelligence.

Differences in linguistic expressiveness may also result from different socialisation conditions, so it is important to know who uses the communication platforms offered by social media, how much and at which stage of socialisation. Early research has shown that lower the speech of people of tends to less status educated socio-cultural be concrete, with many logical digressions, redundant and stereotypical. In linguistic situations that require, these people have more difficulty understanding themselves and others' verbal cues, and they also have more difficulty recognising written abstractions. It would also be important to examine the impact of online communication in the light of the above. The relationship between social stratification and language use is addressed in the work of Bernstein (1971), who argues that lower linguistic culture acquired during primary socialisation (socialisation within the family) is a significant factor in the

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

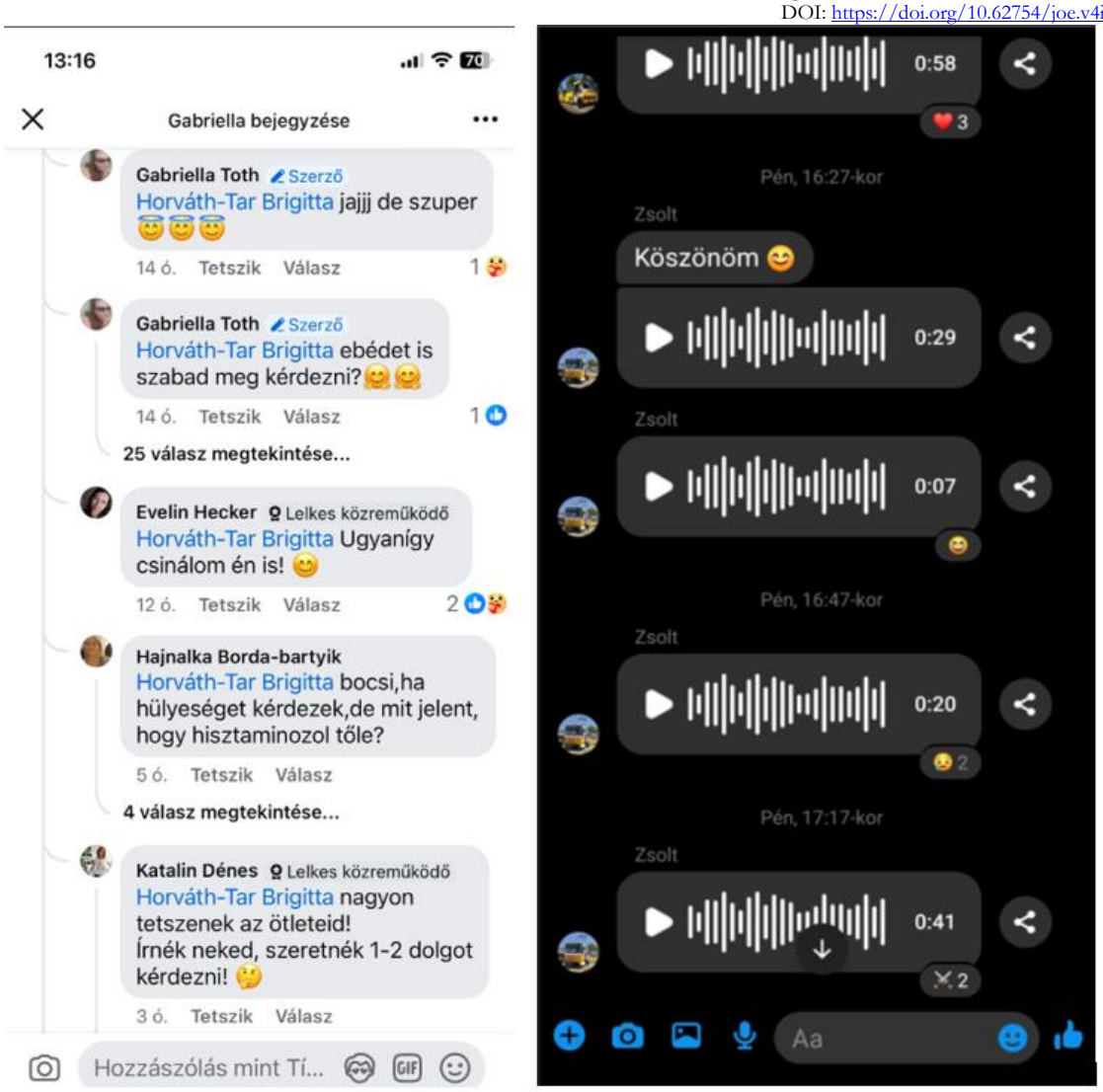
maintenance of a person's stratification. In general, language deficiencies are a barrier to learning at school and to meeting the requirements to a degree that enables further learning and then promotion. isolation

Several linguistic works have analysed the changes in interactions that characterise social media communication (Zappavigna 2012; Calude 2023; Meier-Vieracker et al. 2023; Yus 2011). In general, research points to the quantitative and qualitative changes in speech acts, in the verbal and visual codes observed in them, which are transformed by social media use and which nowadays typically override the previously known rules of social linguistic behaviour, changing the politeness of social interactions and transforming the traditionally accepted structures of human interaction.

In their study, Kegyes and Hervé-Lóránth (2023) focused on the process of new media use and the deformation of information, the conflict between the intention of the communicator and the interpretation of the receiver, the consequences of distorted information and distorted interpretation. The flowchart drawn up based on the results of the research shows a negative shift in communication habits on social platforms, rearranging their qualitative and quantitative indicators. The research shows that the number of speech acts used is decreasing, and that this narrowing may lead to a monotony and degradation of expressions. The authors agree with Guillén & Nieto (2023) that the speech acts of everyday communication have been transformed by social media may increase the risk of negative direction.

The study by (2108) highlights that language is an important feature of dynamism and creativity, but their research shows that different language use on interactive platforms such as Facebook can have a negative impact on, and even determine, language habits, especially in formal situations. This study Adejoke et al. examines the conversations and posts of Technical College students on Facebook from a linguistic perspective. It analyses the stylistic features of "socialised" language: how punctuation marks and special characters are used, how words are abbreviated, what factors influence these abbreviations and what meaning they carry. The paper uses the stylistic linguistic concepts of foregrounding and deviation to explain the use of language in students' Facebook comments and how these "social" abbreviations violate the standard rules of the English language. The research shows that university students spend a significant proportion of their time on Web 2.0 sites, and that abbreviated language is the prevailing norm for brevity, speed and exclusivity foregrounding and deviation.

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193



2A 2B

Figure 1. Online Chats: A Text Messages, B Voice Messages

– *Note A:* A typical form of online communication is writing, which consists of short text messages, often without punctuation, with spelling mistakes, supplemented by emoticons, to indicate an emotional attachment to the content and/or the communicator. In the same way, we can observe the use of new expressions, see "it makes " me hystamine

– Gabriella asks, *"Is it okay to ask for lunch?"*, followed by Evelin's comment, *"I do the same!"*, and then Hajnalka writes, *"Sorry if I ask a stupid question, but what does it mean that you're hysterical about it?"* Finally, Katalin *says: "I really like your ideas! I'd like to write to you; I'd like to ask you one or two things."* (Spelling mistakes in the original chats have not been corrected.

– Note B: More recently, young people's short, text-based messages are not in writing but in the form of spoken words. Here, too, the communicators use emoji, even though sound can reveal emotions. How this phenomenon shapes writing and expression, and whether it supports or hinders mutual understanding, requires further research.

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Metacommunication

The other level of communication is metacommunication, which in face-to-face communication accompanies and qualifies the target communication in a continuous and spontaneous way. The most common channels are tone of voice, speed, volume, posture, facial expressions, gaze, etc.

In addition to content communication, there is usually a qualitative, metacommunicative level of communication, which is present in direct interactions, but also in some forms of secondary verbality, i.e. dialogue with the interposition of a device, such as telephoning, radio, or podcasting. Research on online communication agrees that the lack of metacommunication makes it difficult to understand and interpret the message. The Metacommunication can be described as relational or emotional communication, as its signals reveal the feelings and relationships of the parties, even unconsciously. For example, the direct communication, "Let's discuss the order of business" is interpreted quite differently if it is metacommunicatively qualified as threatening than if it is reassuring.

At the metacommunicative level, we convey several messages to our communication partner, predominantly non-verbally. For example, we give information about ourselves: our personal qualities (confidence, honesty, reliability, temperament, ambition, social status, age, gender, social group and status. We also convey information to others, our interlocutor, about our relationship our client: subordinate, superior, negative or positive emotions, cooperation, disapproval, and how we experience the situation, how we feel in the situation (anxiety, anger, resentment, numbness, tiredness, boredom.., and even informing the partner about our attitude to our own text, to what we are saying (believe it or not, understand it or not).

Metacommunication is often completely absent in the online communication, so we are less able to convey and express our true feelings, motivations and relationship with the other party. For example, a direct communication such as "I am listening, please tell me" can be accompanied by a metacommunicative signal that tells the receiver "I am impatient, I cannot wait for the message to unfold", or it can be a metacommunicative signal such as "Don't be afraid, you can say it". An emoji cannot show this difference. But it is important for the speaker to understand whether his partner is listening, understands what he is saying, follows what he is saying, likes it, agrees, etc.

In her book *The Psychology of the Internet* (2015), Patricia M. Wallace takes a comprehensive look at the psychological aspects of the Internet. She highlights that one of the biggest challenges of online communication is the lack of non-verbal cues. According to Wallace, communication without body language and facial expressions is "colder", which can often lead to misunderstandings and users tend to judge each other based on stereotypes.

Many studies on child development emphasise the importance of direct human communication in the process of imitation and social learning. Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning points out that children acquire behavioural patterns, emotional reactions and actions by observing people in their environment. Research shows that personal interactions enhance the effectiveness of imitation and social learning, as children consider the observation of live, direct examples and emotional reactions as a key factor in learning. Paulus et al. (2023), examining the development of children's social learning and imitation skills, found that responsive parental feedback and interactive situations have a strong influence on children's social and cognitive development. Human infants are particularly attentive to non-verbal cues, sounds, gestures and facial expressions. We learn to interpret metacommunicative rather than verbal cues from those around us more quickly. Meltzoff & Moore (1977) have already shown in infants that early imitation is fundamental to the human learning process. Their research has shown that infants can imitate simple facial expressions and movements as early as a few days of age, which is the basis of social connectedness and learning. Several studies show that early overuse of smart devices can result in cognitive and emotional developmental disorders, yet today one in five preschool children have a smartwatch, mobile phone or tablet of their own, and one in two regularly use their parents' (Rosen 2022, Wahyuni et al. 2024)

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Metacommunication is much more difficult to regulate than content or direct communication, because it is based on the functioning of ancient brain parts, determined by emotions. Direct communication is consciously controlled in a live communication situation and can be shaped according to our intentions, easily modified by small feedback (e.g.: I don't understand, slow down, please). In the absence of metacommunicative feedback, understanding and empathy are reduced, and it becomes more difficult to adapt to each other's emotional expressions. Metacommunication is essential for a deep understanding of others, for a nuanced expression of ourselves, of what we have to say, for the development of mutual empathy.

Asynchrony and feedback

Direct human communication is always a circular process, in which the receiver reacts to the emitter's communication moment by moment, thus giving direct or indirect feedback on how much he or she understands what is being said, how he or she feels in the situation, whether he or she wishes to speak, etc. In face-to-face communication, feedback is immediate and continuous, allowing speakers to react to each other immediately and to change the direction of communication if necessary (Clark, 1996).

But on social media, feedback is often delayed or even absent, which changes the dynamic of communication. Due to the asynchronous nature of online conversations, participants in communication do not always respond immediately, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings and communication discontinuity (Baym, 2015).

In group chat forums, feedback does not always follow the order of individual posts, so it is often difficult to know who is responding to what and to whom. Figure 2A illustrates this phenomenon.

This example illustrates that the dynamics of communication in online forums are very different from those of face-to-face conversations, especially because of the delayed and distant feedback. In traditional conversations, speaking, listening and responding are more controlled, whereas in the digital communication these elements can easily get mixed up. This phenomenon is one of the less explored areas of new media research.

Visual and auditory content can also play an important role in the communication of online platforms. Videos, images, and audio recordings can complement or replace written content, adding new dimensions to social media communication (Kietzmann et al, 2011). These elements often add a sense of authenticity and personal presence, which is important in the social media environment.

Social Relationships And Intimacy

Some research provides insights into the differences between online and offline communication, with a particular focus on intimacy, social bonds and relationship building. These findings highlight how online communication has fundamentally transformed human social relationships. However, further research is needed to understand how to achieve a more harmonious balance between online and offline interactions for social well-being.

According to Lieberman and Schroeder (2020), online presence has a significant impact on offline relationships. Their research found that the presence of smartphones and other digital devices often distracts attention from offline interactions, reducing the quality of peer relationships. At the same time, online communication can support the maintenance and strengthening of offline relationships, especially in cases where face-to-face contact is rare or impossible due to geographical distance.

Lenhart at al. (2015) conducted research on adolescents' online communication and its role in the formation of new relationships. Their results show that a significant proportion of teenagers formed friendships through online interactions, which in many cases continued offline. However, online communication, especially for looser, less deep relationships, was less likely to be intimate. Croes and Antheunis' (2021) research reached a similar conclusion.

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

The Phenomenon and Impact of Empathy

Empathy, empathy, or social emotion, plays a key role in interpersonal relationships and social behaviour by helping people to develop understanding and compassion for each other.

To develop empathy, we need to be able to actively listen to our partner. Active listening means that the receiver tries to direct his/her attention and interest to his/her partner, to follow and absorb his/her every expression, whether verbal or non-verbal, conscious or unconscious, in order to understand his/her emotional and emotional state and the essence of what he/she is saying (Németh, 2005). This enables us to get as much information as possible from our interlocutor, to understand what we hear accurately and even to empathise with him/her. Attention has a rewarding value for the interlocutor, being listened to and understood helps him to express his feelings, formulate his thoughts, explore his problems, and in this atmosphere, he is able to understand his own problems and find solutions. However, active listening is also essential for the listener to understand the other person, not only the content of what is being said, but also the hidden thoughts, emotions and feelings, often unconscious to the speaker (Buda, 2006). Problem-solving conversation in an understanding, empathic atmosphere is an essential tool for helping people to understand and resolve conflicts that may arise.

Empathy is therefore a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that plays a key role in human relations and social coexistence. Rankov & Regec (2020) describe online communication relationships as weak relationships and stress that the empathic function of communication has been severely affected. Empathy is a multidimensional psychological construct comprising emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components that jointly support social understanding and adaptive interpersonal behaviour.

Empathy helps people develop and maintain deeper, more meaningful relationships. Empathetic individuals are more understanding and supportive of their partners, friends, and family members. Empathy also promotes social cohesion and a sense of community, as people are more willing to help others and work together to achieve common goals. Empathetic communication can help resolve conflicts and reduce misunderstandings. Empathy allows people to better understand each other's perspectives and needs. Empathy also plays an important role in moral development, as it helps people recognize and feel the suffering of others, thereby motivating them to act appropriately.

Turkle (2017) explores the phenomenon of empathy by exploring disembodiment when we use our digital devices. Turkle questions the importance of the body's role in analysis in a world where more and more people are sending messages rather than having face-to-face conversations. Turkle, who as an analytics-trained clinician has worked closely with robotics experts and artificial intelligence advocates, has also explored the impact on the body of our increasing willingness to interact with machines "as if" they possessed the richness of human experience. This is particularly important for the future of psychotherapy, as there are already proposals to introduce automated therapists. Turkle points out that when we are seduced by automated therapy programmes, we run the risk of entering the disembodied world of "as if" and treating other people as if they are not fully present.

Empathy Deficit In Online Environments

Online communication poses particular challenges for empathy. Lack of empathy and dehumanisation are important factors in online aggression. In online communication, people often do not see the facial expressions or body language of the other party, which makes it difficult to develop empathy (Kraut et al., 1998). In faceless and anonymous interactions, short, fragmented interactions make it more difficult to recognize emotions and social cues, which can reduce empathic responses. This means that in online communication, we do not adequately perceive when we have hurt our partner, we do not feel their pain, we do not feel sorry for them, we do not feel remorse, and we do not try to make amends.

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Lieberman and Schroeder (2020) reviewed previous research on how digital tools (e.g. social media) are changing verbal interactions. They studied the structural differences between online and offline communication and their psychological and behavioural effects on human social relationships. The research identifies several differences between online and offline interactions, noting on the one hand that online communication has fewer nonverbal cues. Online communication tends to be textual, so it lacks the visual and auditory cues (e.g. facial expressions, tone of voice) that are common in face-to-face interaction. This can make it difficult to accurately interpret the emotions and intentions of the interlocutors, which can lead to misunderstandings. In addition, the authors point out that online communication is characterised by greater anonymity. It is easier to remain anonymous in the online environment, which can reduce a sense of responsibility and facilitate negative behaviours (e.g. aggression, cyberbullying). Anonymity can also hinder the development of deeper peer relationships.

The lack of empathy is an increasingly important problem in the online environment, where digital mediated communication dominates instead of face-to-face interactions. Empathy is the ability to empathise with the emotional state of others and understand situations from their perspective. It is a key skill in interpersonal communication, as it promotes understanding, empathy and helps to maintain emotional connections. However, this skill is often lacking in the online communication, which can have serious consequences, including increased aggression, bullying and social isolation. A lack of empathy in the online communication can contribute to insensitive behaviour and conflict. Dehumanisation can lead to users treating the other party not as a full human being, but simply as a target. This process can contribute to rude, aggressive language and harassment.

One of the biggest drawbacks of online communication is that it often lacks the richness of emotional and non-verbal cues that are present in face-to-face conversations. The written word, such as emails, text messages or comments, does not convey the same nuances as facial expressions, body language or vocal inflections. As a result, people are less able to recognize the emotional state of others, often leading to misunderstandings or inappropriate reactions (Suler, 2004).

In addition, the anonymity of online interactions also contributes to a decrease in empathy. When people communicate anonymously, they feel less responsible for their behaviour and are more prone to harsher, more hurtful manifestations (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Anonymity allows people to avoid the real consequences that would naturally be present in a face-to-face interaction, such as guilt for hurting another person. The phenomenon of the "online disinhibition effect", which describes the unscrupulous behaviour of people in online spaces, is a good example of this phenomenon (Suler, 2004).

According to several studies, one of the most striking manifestations of this lack of empathy is cyberbullying (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen 2013). Online bullying can include intentional humiliation, threats, misuse of personal information or aggression against others. A lack of empathy plays a key role in this process, as abusers often do not perceive or care about the emotional pain of their victims. Trolling, also common in online communities, is another example of a lack of empathy.

Trolls often aim to provoke, irritate or disturb others, and in many cases have no sense of the impact their behaviour has on others. Emotional alienation during is powerful, as trolling trolls cannot directly see their victims' reactions and are thus less able to recognize the pain or distress they cause (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014).

The lack of empathy is also often observed in online discussions. Online platforms, especially social media, often promote polarisation, where people are grouped in opposing factions and are less able to understand or accept the other side's point of view (Sunstein, 2001). In such environments, people tend to see opposing views as attacks and show less willingness to empathise or sympathise with the views of others. Asch (1956) has experimentally demonstrated that people tend to follow the norms of the group, even when they conflict with their own beliefs. This can also be observed in the online environment, where group norms and lack of empathy towards outsiders can often encourage aggressive behaviour.

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Research shows that in online communication, people often take increasingly extreme positions, as interactions with like-minded people reinforce their existing views, while opposing views are perceived as hostile (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016). Lack of empathy in this context results in people being less able to understand or consider opposing views, which further increases divisions.

Funding: This study received no financial support

Disclosure: The authors report no conflict of interest.

References

Adejoke, M., Matthew, A., Adebola, T. (2018). Language use on social media: a study of Facebook interactions by Yaba College of Technology undergraduates. International Journal of Cultural Studies and Technology., 2: 16
Aristotle (1969). Politics, I. 2. 1253a. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó;
Aronson, E., Aronson, J. (2023). The social animal. Amazon;
Asch, S. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: a minority of one against a unanimous majority. Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 70: 1–70. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0093718
Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall;
Baym, N. (2015). Personal connections in the digital age. Malden: Polity Press;
Bendix, R., Lipset, S., editors (1953). Class, status and power: a reader in social stratification.
Glencoe: Free Press;
Bernstein, B. (1971). Class, codes and control. Volume 1: Theoretical studies towards a sociology of language. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul;
Bódi, Z. (2020). Digitális identitás – nyelvi identitás – digitális kommunikációs környezet.
Információs Társadalom, 20: 7–26. https://doi.org/10.22503/inftars.XX..3.1
Buckels, E., Trapnell, P., Paulhus, D. (2014). Trolls just want to have fun. Personality and Individual Differences, 67: 97–102. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid..01.016
Buda, B. (1993). A közvetlen emberi kommunikáció szabályszerűségei. Budapest: Animula Kiadó;
Buda, B. (2006). Empátia – a beleélés lélektana. Budapest: Urbis Könyvkiadó;
Calude, A. (2023). The linguistics of social media: an introduction. London: Routledge;
Chou, H., Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": the impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 15: 117–121. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber..0324
Clark, H. (1996). Using language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;
Croes, E., Antheunis, M. (2021). Perceived intimacy differences of daily online and offline interactions in people's social network. Societies, 11: 13. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11010013
Crystal, D. (2011). Internet linguistics: a student guide. London: Routledge;
Davis, M. (1996). Empathy: a social psychological approach. Boulder: Westview Press;
Davis, M. (1983). Measuring individual differences in empathy: evidence for a multidimensional approach. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44: 113–126. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113
Davis, M. (1996). Empathy: a social psychological approach. Boulder: Westview Press;
Decety, J., Jackson, P. (2004). The functional architecture of human empathy. Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews, 3: 71–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534582304267187
Dér, C., Márkus, R. (2020). Új utak a kulturális marketingben. Budapest: MMA MMKI;
Flaxman, S., Goel, S., Rao, J. (2016). Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and online news consumption. Public Opinion Quarterly, 80: 298–320. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw006
Guillén-Nieto, V. (2023). Hate speech: linguistic perspectives. Berlin: De Gruyter;
Kegyes, E., Hervé-Lóránth, E. (2023). A közösségimédia-kommunikáció anomáliái és beszédaktusainak torzulásai. Közösségi Kapcsolódások, 1: 53–68. https://doi.org/10.14232/kapocs..1.53-68
Kietzmann, J., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I., Silvestre, B. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. Business Horizons, 54: 241–251. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor..01.005
Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukophadhyay, T., Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet paradox: a social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? American Psychologist, 53: 1017–1031. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.53.9.1017
Lapidot-Lefler, N., Barak, A. (2012). Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. Computers in Human Behavior, 28: 434–443. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb..10.014
Lenhart, A., Duggan, M., Perrin, A., Stepler, R., Rainie, L., Parker, K. (2015). Teens, technology, and friendships. Washington DC: Pew Research Center;
Lieberman, A., Schroeder, J. (2020). Two social lives: how differences between online and offline interaction influence social outcomes. Current Opinion in Psychology, 31: 16–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc..06.022

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 4, No: 4, pp. 6436–6447
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v4i4.7193

Lu, X., Zhang, R. (2021). Impact of patient information behaviours in online health communities on patient compliance and the mediating role of perceived empathy. Patient Education and Counseling, 104: 186–193. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pec..07.001
Meier-Vieracker, S. (2023). Bülow L., Marx K., Mroczynski R. Digitale Pragmatik. Metzler. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Link, 275 S. DOI: 10.1515/zrs--
Meltzoff, A., Moore, M. (1977). Imitation of facial and manual gestures by human neonates. Science, 198: 75–78
Moreno, M., D'Angelo, J. (2020). Digital media theory: from one-way to multi-directional communication. In: Josephson S, Kelly JD, Smith K, editors. Handbook of visual communication. New York: Routledge. p. 327–340
Munk, V. (2009). Sztárság, elméletben. Médiakutató, 10: 7–16. https://mediakutato.hu/cikk/_01_tavasz/01_sztarsag_elmeletben
Németh, E. (2005). A személyes hatékonyság fejlesztése. Budapest: Századvég–BKF;
Németh, E. (2025). Social media is a Product of a Consumer Society. Psychological Causes and Consequences. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 08: 12. 6274-6283. https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V8-i12-39
Paulus, M., et, a. (2023). Social learning and imitation in early childhood. Current Biology
Prónay, S. (2023). Az empátia jelentősége online fogyasztói közösségekben. (szerk.), https://pea.lib.pte.hu/bitstream/handle/pea/44372/EMIM-KTK--37.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
Rankov, P., Regec, M. (2020). Közösségi média vagy embertelen média? Könyv, Könyvtár, Könyvtáros, 9
Rogers, C. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21: 95–103
Rosen, D. (2022). (ed.). The social media debate: Unpacking the social, psychological, and cultural effects of social media. Routledge
Slonje, R., Smith, P., Frisen, A. (2013). The nature of cyberbullying and strategies for prevention. Computers in Human Behavior, 29: 26–32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb..05.024
Steigervald, K. (2023). Generációk harca – hogyan értsük meg egymást? Budapest: Partvonal Kiadó;
Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. Cyberpsychology & Behavior, 7: 321–326. https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295
Sunstein, C. (2001). Republic.com. Princeton: Princeton University Press;
Szoták, S. (2018). A nyelvi tájkép-kutatás mint az alkalmazott nyelvészet egyik legújabb kutatási területe. Hungarológiai Közlemények, 19: 30–42
Tagg, C. (2015). Exploring digital communication: language in action. London: Routledge;
Tari, A. (2015). #Y és Z generációk online. Budapest: Tercium Kiadó;
Törőcsik, M., Szűcs, K. (2022). Fogyasztói magatartás – mintázatok, trendek, alkalmazkodás. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó;
Turkle, S. (2017). Empathy machines: forgetting the body. In: A psychoanalytic exploration of the body in today's world. London: Routledge. p. 17–27
Vieru, D., Bourdeau, S., Bernier, A., Yapo, S. (2015). Digital competence: a multidimensional conceptualization in an SME context. Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences: 4681–4690
Wallace, P. (2015). The psychology of the Internet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;
Wahyuni, Ni'mah, et, a. (2024). The impact of social media on the learning process of children aged 6-12 years old. Journal International of Lingua and Technology, 3.1: 29-42. https://doi.org/10.55849/jiltech.v3i1.507
Williams, K. (2006). Ostracism: the power of silence. New York: Guilford Press;
Wong, A., Lee, M. (2022). Building engagement in online brand communities: the effects of socially beneficial initiatives on collective social capital. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 65: 102867. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.102867
Yus, F. (2011). Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context. Amsterdam: John Benjamins;
Zappavigna, M. (2012). Discourse of Twitter and social media: how we use language to create affiliation on the web. London: Continuum

Acknowledgements, avoiding identifying any of the authors prior to peer review

1. This is a note. The style name is Footnotes, but it can also be applied to endnotes.

References: see the journal's instructions for authors for details on style.