RECONFIGURING EMPATHY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITIES AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOURS

Simona STANCU[1]

[1]Lecturer, PhD, "Apollonia" University of Iaşi, Romania
Corresponding author: Simona Stancu; e-mail: sim_simonel@yahoo.it

Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed interpersonal interactions, reshaping the ways individuals express, perceive, and respond to emotions. While online environments facilitate unprecedented levels of connectivity, they also generate new challenges regarding empathy, emotional regulation, and social engagement. This study explores the relationship between empathy and emotional vulnerabilities in online communication, focusing on the effects of digitally mediated interactions on affective resonance and interpersonal understanding. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from communication studies, social psychology, and media research, the paper examines how the absence of nonverbal cues, the predominance of textual exchanges, and the phenomenon of online disinhibition influence empathic processes. The empirical component is based on a questionnaire administered to 120 young adults aged between 18 and 35, active users of social networking platforms. The findings indicate a significant distinction between cognitive empathy and affective empathy in digital environments. While participants generally maintained the ability to understand the emotions of others, their capacity to emotionally resonate with those experiences appeared diminished. Furthermore, increased levels of online disinhibition were associated with higher emotional vulnerability, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. The study argues that digital communication does not eliminate empathy but rather reconfigures its forms of manifestation, favouring rapid and fragmented emotional responses over deep interpersonal engagement. These findings contribute to current debates regarding the social and emotional consequences of digital communication and highlight the need for developing digital emotional literacy as an essential competence in contemporary society

Keywords: *digital empathy, online communication, emotional vulnerability, social media, online disinhibition, affective communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The digitalization of communication has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary society. Social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, online forums, and collaborative digital environments have profoundly altered the ways individuals interact, exchange information, and build social relationships. Communication is no longer constrained by geographical distance or temporal limitations (Castells, 2010); instead, it occurs continuously through technologically mediated channels that connect individuals across diverse social and cultural contexts.

Although these developments have expanded opportunities for interaction and participation, they have also generated significant concerns regarding the quality of interpersonal relationships in digital environments. Researchers increasingly observe phenomena such as online hostility, cyberbullying, emotional detachment, anxiety associated with social media use, and declining sensitivity towards the suffering of others. Paradoxically, individuals appear to be more connected than ever before while simultaneously reporting increased feelings of loneliness, emotional exhaustion, and social isolation (Turkle, 2011).

Within this context, empathy emerges as a particularly relevant concept for understanding the emotional dimensions of digital communication. Traditionally regarded as a fundamental component of interpersonal interaction, empathy enables individuals to understand and share the emotional experiences of others, facilitating cooperation, solidarity, and social cohesion. However, the migration of communication into digital environments raises important questions regarding the ways empathic processes are transformed when face-to-face interactions are replaced by mediated exchanges.

The absence of nonverbal cues, including facial expressions, tone of voice, eye contact, and body language, significantly alters the

communicative context in which empathy develops. Online communication often relies on textual messages, emojis, and abbreviated forms of expression that may simplify emotional content and reduce opportunities for affective resonance. As a result, empathic responses may become increasingly cognitive and less affective, emphasizing the intellectual recognition of another person's emotional state rather than genuine emotional involvement.

The present study investigates the relationship between empathy and emotional vulnerabilities in online communication. Its primary objective is to explore how digital environments influence empathic behaviour and contribute to the emergence of emotional vulnerabilities such as anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and the need for social validation. Particular attention is given to the distinction between cognitive and affective empathy, as well as to the role of online disinhibition in shaping communication behaviours.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does digital communication influence the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy?
2. What is the relationship between online disinhibition and emotional vulnerability?
3. To what extent does prolonged exposure to digital interactions contribute to emotional fatigue and reduced empathic engagement?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and emotional consequences of digital communication and to enrich current discussions concerning empathy in technologically mediated environments.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Empathy has long been regarded as one of the fundamental mechanisms that sustain interpersonal communication and social cohesion. Beyond its psychological dimension, empathy functions as a communicative process through which individuals interpret, understand, and respond to the emotional states of others. In communication studies, empathy is frequently associated with the capacity to create meaningful social connections and to facilitate mutual understanding in interpersonal interactions.

The concept has been approached from multiple theoretical perspectives. Among the most influential models is that proposed by Mark Davis, who distinguishes between cognitive empathy and affective empathy (Davis, 1994). Cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand another person's perspective, thoughts, and emotional state, whereas affective empathy involves the capacity to emotionally resonate with another individual's experiences. Although analytically distinct, these dimensions operate together in face-to-face interactions, allowing individuals to interpret emotional cues and respond appropriately.

Empathy is closely connected to communication because it relies on the exchange of verbal and nonverbal information. Facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, posture, and eye contact contribute significantly to the interpretation of emotional meanings. Research in social neuroscience has demonstrated that such cues activate the neural mechanisms associated with emotional mirroring, facilitating the recognition and sharing of emotional experiences (Decety & Ickes, 2009). Consequently, empathy can be understood not merely as an individual psychological trait but as a dynamic communicative phenomenon emerging through interaction.

In contemporary societies, where digital communication increasingly mediates interpersonal relationships, understanding empathy as a communication process becomes particularly important. The transition from face-to-face encounters to technologically mediated interactions raises questions regarding the extent to which empathic engagement can be maintained when traditional emotional cues are diminished or absent.

2.1. Digital Communication and Emotional Mediation

The emergence of digital communication technologies has transformed the communicative environment in unprecedented ways. Social media platforms, messaging applications, and online communities enable continuous

interaction, yet they also alter the mechanisms through which emotional information is transmitted and interpreted.

According to Marshall McLuhan, communication technologies do not merely transmit messages; they reshape the social environments in which communication occurs. His well-known assertion that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964) suggests that technological media influence not only the content of communication but also the structure of human experience itself. Applied to contemporary digital platforms, this perspective implies that online communication may fundamentally alter emotional processes, including empathy.

One of the defining characteristics of digital communication is the reduction of nonverbal information. In face-to-face interactions, emotional meanings are conveyed through a rich combination of verbal and nonverbal signals. Online communication, particularly text-based interaction, significantly limits access to these cues. Although emojis, GIFs, and reaction buttons attempt to compensate for this absence, they rarely reproduce the complexity of direct emotional expression.

Research conducted by Sherry Turkle suggests that digital communication encourages what she describes as "connection without full presence." (Turkle, 2015) Individuals remain permanently connected through technological devices, yet the depth of interpersonal engagement may diminish. Communication becomes faster and more frequent, but not necessarily more meaningful (Bauman, 2003). This phenomenon contributes to the emergence of what may be described as emotionally compressed communication, characterized by abbreviated emotional expressions and reduced affective involvement.

Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of many digital interactions affects emotional responsiveness. Unlike face-to-face conversations, where feedback is immediate, online exchanges often involve delays between message transmission and response. Such interruptions may weaken emotional synchronization between interlocutors and reduce opportunities for spontaneous empathic reactions.

These transformations suggest that empathy is not eliminated by digital communication but rather reconfigured. Emotional understanding increasingly relies on cognitive interpretation rather than direct emotional resonance, producing new forms of empathic engagement adapted to technologically mediated environments.

2.2. Online Disinhibition and Emotional Vulnerability

A significant body of research has highlighted the relationship between digital communication and behavioural disinhibition. Individuals frequently behave differently online than they do in face-to-face settings, expressing opinions, emotions, and attitudes with fewer social constraints.

One explanation for this phenomenon is provided by the theory of deindividuation developed by Philip Zimbardo (Zimbardo, 2007). According to this perspective, anonymity and reduced social visibility weaken self-awareness and diminish the influence of social norms. In online environments, users often experience a reduced sense of accountability, which may facilitate impulsive behaviour, hostility, or emotional detachment.

The online disinhibition effect extends beyond aggressive communication (Suler, 2004). It also influences emotional self-disclosure, encouraging individuals to share personal experiences and vulnerabilities more openly than they might in offline contexts. While this can foster social support and community building, it may simultaneously increase exposure to emotional risks, including rejection, criticism, and dependency on external validation.

Theoretical perspectives concerning emotional vulnerability in digital environments also emphasize the growing importance of social approval mechanisms embedded within social media platforms. Likes, comments, shares, and follower counts function as symbolic indicators of social recognition, creating conditions in which self-esteem becomes increasingly dependent on online feedback (Wellman & Rainie, 2012). Such dynamics contribute to anxiety, emotional insecurity, and the constant need for validation.

Additionally, prolonged exposure to emotionally charged content may generate what researchers describe as compassion fatigue or emotional exhaustion. Continuous encounters with conflict, negative news, and emotionally intense interactions can gradually diminish individuals' willingness or capacity to engage empathically with others. In such contexts, emotional detachment may emerge as a coping mechanism, further contributing to the fragmentation of empathic responses.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that digital communication environments simultaneously facilitate connection and vulnerability. While they offer unprecedented opportunities for interaction, they also reshape emotional experiences in ways that influence empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal behaviour. Understanding these processes is essential for evaluating the broader social consequences of communication in the digital age.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The present study employs a quantitative exploratory approach aimed at investigating the relationship between empathy and emotional vulnerability in digitally mediated communication environments. The research was motivated by the increasing prevalence of online interactions and by concerns regarding the potential transformation of empathic processes in contexts characterized by reduced interpersonal proximity and limited emotional feedback.

The study seeks to identify the extent to which online communication influences empathic engagement and to examine the associations between digital communication practices, online disinhibition, emotional regulation, and emotional vulnerability.

Three research questions guided the investigation:

RQ1: How does intensive online communication influence the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy?

RQ2: What is the relationship between online disinhibition and emotional vulnerability?

RQ3: To what extent does prolonged exposure to online interactions contribute to emotional exhaustion and reduced empathic responsiveness?

Based on the theoretical framework presented above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Individuals who predominantly engage in text-based online communication display lower levels of affective empathy compared to those who frequently use audio or video communication channels.

H2: Higher levels of online disinhibition are positively associated with increased emotional vulnerability.

H3: Extended exposure to online communication environments is associated with elevated levels of emotional exhaustion and reduced empathic engagement.

3.2. Participants

The study involved a sample of 120 participants aged between 18 and 35 years. Respondents were selected on the basis of their active engagement with digital communication platforms and social networking sites. The age group was chosen because young adults represent one of the categories most exposed to intensive digital interaction and to the emotional dynamics associated with social media use.

All participants reported daily use of social networking platforms, with the majority spending between three and six hours per day online. The sample included both male and female respondents and encompassed individuals from diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

Although the sample cannot be considered representative of the general population, it provides valuable exploratory insights into the emotional and communicative behaviours of active digital users.

3.3. Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 35 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

The instrument was designed to assess four major dimensions:

1. **Cognitive and affective empathy**, referring to participants' ability to understand and

emotionally resonate with the experiences of others;
2. **Online disinhibition**, understood as the tendency to express opinions, emotions, or behaviours in digital environments that might not be manifested in face-to-face interactions;
3. **Emotional regulation**, referring to the capacity to manage emotional reactions and maintain self-control during online exchanges;
4. **Digital emotional vulnerability**, including indicators such as anxiety related to online interactions, dependence on social validation, emotional exhaustion, and discomfort following negative online experiences.

Examples of questionnaire items include:
- "I try to imagine how another person feels when reading their online messages."
- "I often react impulsively when someone challenges me online."
- "After tense online discussions, I feel emotionally drained."
- "The reactions I receive on social media influence my emotional state."

The questionnaire was developed specifically for the purposes of this exploratory study and was informed by existing literature on empathy, online behaviour, and emotional well-being.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online using a digital survey platform. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study. No personally identifiable information was collected.

Data collection took place over a period of four weeks. Participants completed the questionnaire individually, and the average completion time was approximately ten minutes.

The online format was selected because it allowed access to active users of digital communication technologies and ensured consistency between the research topic and the data collection environment.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures aimed at identifying patterns of association between empathy, online disinhibition, and emotional vulnerability.

Particular attention was paid to the differences between cognitive and affective empathy, as well as to the emotional consequences of prolonged exposure to digital communication environments. In addition to quantitative indicators, qualitative comments provided by respondents were examined to contextualize the statistical findings and to offer a more nuanced understanding of the participants' subjective experiences.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis focused primarily on identifying tendencies and interpretative patterns rather than establishing causal relationships. The findings are therefore intended to contribute to a broader discussion regarding the transformation of empathic processes in contemporary digital communication.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Cognitive and Affective Empathy in Online Communication

The findings indicate a significant distinction between cognitive empathy and affective empathy among the participants engaged in frequent online communication. Respondents generally demonstrated a relatively high capacity to recognize and understand the emotional states of others, suggesting that cognitive empathy remains largely preserved within digitally mediated interactions.

However, the results reveal lower levels of affective empathy, particularly among participants who reported spending more than four hours per day communicating primarily through text-based platforms. These respondents expressed greater difficulty in emotionally connecting with the experiences of others when communication occurred exclusively through written messages.

The data suggest that while participants were generally able to identify emotions conveyed in online communication, they experienced reduced emotional resonance compared to situations involving direct interpersonal contact. This finding supports the assumption that digital environments facilitate the cognitive processing

of emotional information while simultaneously limiting affective engagement.

Such a pattern points to a gradual separation between understanding and feeling, whereby users recognize emotional states without necessarily experiencing a corresponding emotional response.

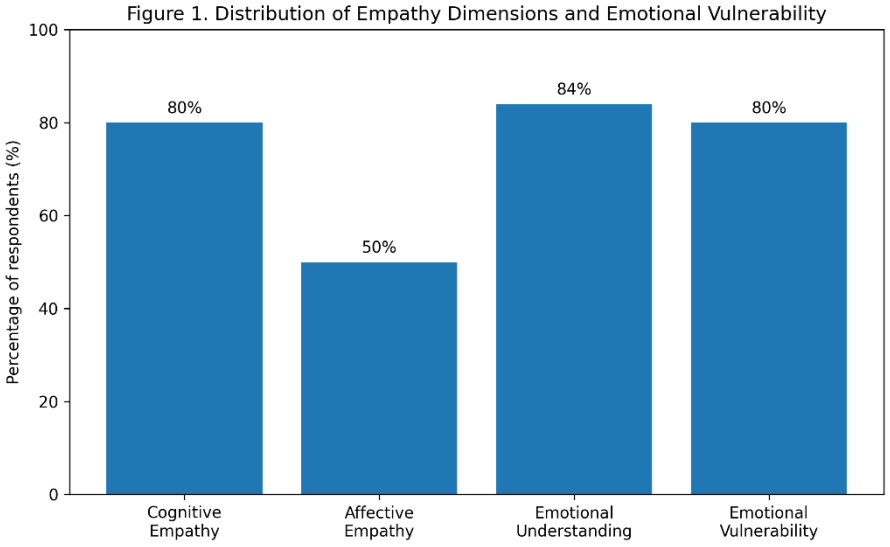


Figure 1. Distribution of Empathy Dimensions and Emotional Vulnerability among Respondents

Figure 1 highlights the differences identified between the main dimensions investigated in the study. Cognitive empathy reached 80%, whereas affective empathy recorded only 50%, indicating a substantial discrepancy between emotional understanding and emotional resonance in digitally mediated interactions. Emotional understanding obtained the highest score (84%), while emotional vulnerability reached 80%, suggesting that participants remain emotionally affected by online experiences despite a reduced capacity for affective engagement.

4.2. Online Disinhibition and Emotional Vulnerability

A second major finding concerns the relationship between online disinhibition and emotional vulnerability. Participants who reported greater tendencies towards impulsive expression, direct criticism, irony, or emotionally charged reactions in online interactions also displayed higher levels of emotional discomfort and psychological vulnerability.

These respondents frequently reported feelings of regret, anxiety, frustration, or emotional distress following intense online exchanges. The results suggest that online disinhibition may not represent emotional resilience or confidence, but rather a behavioural manifestation associated with reduced emotional regulation.

The findings support the hypothesis that individuals who communicate more impulsively in digital environments may simultaneously be more sensitive to negative feedback and interpersonal conflict. This apparent contradiction highlights the complex emotional dynamics of online communication, where expressive freedom coexists with heightened vulnerability.

Furthermore, participants with elevated disinhibition scores were more likely to report dependence on external validation, including reactions, comments, and social approval indicators available on social media platforms.

4.3. Emotional Exhaustion and Digital Fatigue

The analysis also identified a relationship between prolonged exposure to online communication and indicators of emotional exhaustion. Participants who spent extended periods engaging with social media content reported symptoms associated with emotional fatigue, including reduced patience, emotional detachment, irritability, and diminished willingness to engage with emotionally demanding content.

Many respondents described a feeling of emotional saturation after prolonged exposure to online discussions, negative comments, and conflictual interactions. Qualitative responses frequently included statements such as "I feel emotionally drained after spending too much time online" or "After a day of scrolling, I no longer have the energy to react to other people's problems."

These responses reflect a phenomenon commonly described in the literature as *compassion fatigue*, referring to the gradual depletion of emotional resources following repeated exposure to emotionally intense situations.

The findings suggest that digital communication environments may contribute to the accumulation of emotional strain, particularly when users are continuously exposed to large volumes of emotionally charged information.

4.4. Emerging Profile of Digital Empathy

Taken together, the results outline a distinctive profile of what may be termed *digital empathy*. This form of empathy appears characterized by the preservation of cognitive understanding alongside a reduction in affective engagement.

Participants demonstrated the ability to interpret emotional messages and recognize the experiences of others, yet they reported lower levels of emotional resonance and sustained empathic involvement. At the same time, frequent online interaction was associated with increased emotional fatigue, dependence on social validation, and greater emotional sensitivity following conflictual exchanges.

These findings suggest that empathy in digital environments is not necessarily diminished but rather transformed. The empathic response becomes more fragmented, more context-dependent, and often mediated by technological constraints that shape the nature of interpersonal communication.

Consequently, digital communication appears to encourage rapid emotional reactions and symbolic expressions of support while reducing opportunities for deeper emotional engagement and long-term empathic connection.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study suggest that digital communication does not eliminate empathy but fundamentally transforms the conditions under which empathic processes develop and operate. The distinction identified between cognitive empathy and affective empathy confirms the observations made in previous research regarding the changing nature of interpersonal relationships in technologically mediated environments.

One of the most significant outcomes of the study is the persistence of cognitive empathy alongside a decline in affective resonance. Participants generally demonstrated the ability to understand the emotional experiences of others, yet reported difficulties in emotionally engaging with those experiences. This result supports the argument that digital communication environments encourage a form of empathic processing that privileges interpretation over emotional participation.

The phenomenon may be explained by the structural characteristics of online communication. Unlike face-to-face interaction, digital exchanges often occur in the absence of facial expressions, eye contact, vocal intonation, and other nonverbal cues that traditionally facilitate emotional synchronization. As a consequence, individuals rely more heavily on cognitive inference when interpreting emotional content. Understanding remains possible, but emotional immersion becomes less intense.

These findings are consistent with the work of Sherry Turkle, who argues that digital technologies facilitate continuous connection while simultaneously reducing opportunities for authentic emotional presence. Communication becomes increasingly efficient and immediate, yet emotional depth may be compromised by the fragmentation of attention and the accelerated rhythm of online interactions.

The results also contribute to current debates regarding the emergence of what may be described as *surface empathy*. (Čekić, 2025) This concept refers to forms of empathic expression that remain primarily symbolic and reactive rather than deeply affective. In digital

environments, individuals often respond to emotional content through likes, emojis, brief comments, or standardized expressions of support. While such responses may indicate awareness of another person's emotional state, they do not necessarily involve sustained emotional engagement.

The distinction between symbolic reaction and genuine emotional resonance is particularly relevant in social media contexts, where visibility and speed frequently take precedence over reflection. Expressions of compassion may become routinized, functioning as socially expected responses rather than manifestations of authentic empathic involvement. Consequently, empathy risks becoming performative, shaped by platform norms and interactional conventions rather than by interpersonal connection.

Another important contribution of the study concerns the relationship between online disinhibition and emotional vulnerability. The findings reveal that participants who displayed higher levels of impulsivity and expressive freedom in digital environments also reported greater emotional discomfort and anxiety following online interactions. This observation challenges the common assumption that aggressive or confrontational online behaviour reflects confidence or emotional strength.

Instead, the data suggest that online hostility may function as a compensatory strategy masking underlying emotional insecurity. The apparent freedom offered by digital environments reduces immediate social accountability while simultaneously exposing individuals to continuous evaluation and public scrutiny. As a result, users may oscillate between uninhibited expression and heightened sensitivity to negative feedback.

This paradox illustrates the complex emotional architecture of contemporary digital communication. Individuals may feel empowered to communicate more openly while becoming increasingly dependent on social validation mechanisms embedded within digital platforms. Likes, comments, shares, and follower counts operate as symbolic indicators of social acceptance, transforming interpersonal communication into a space where emotional well-being is frequently negotiated through quantifiable feedback.

The study also highlights the growing relevance of emotional exhaustion as a consequence of prolonged digital engagement. Participants frequently described feelings of fatigue, emotional saturation, and reduced willingness to engage with emotionally demanding content. These findings correspond with the concept of *compassion fatigue*, originally associated with helping professions but increasingly applied to digital communication environments.

The continuous exposure to emotionally charged information, social conflicts, crises, and negative commentary may gradually diminish emotional responsiveness. In this context, emotional detachment emerges not necessarily as a sign of indifference but as a protective mechanism aimed at preserving psychological resources. However, this adaptive response may simultaneously reduce empathic availability and contribute to a more fragmented experience of social relationships.

Taken together, the findings support the idea that contemporary digital communication fosters what may be termed *emotionally compressed interaction*. Emotional experiences are transmitted rapidly, often reaching large audiences, but the duration and intensity of empathic engagement tend to decrease. Users are exposed to an unprecedented volume of emotional stimuli, yet their capacity to process and respond meaningfully to these stimuli may become increasingly limited.

From a communication studies perspective, these developments raise important questions regarding the future of interpersonal relationships in digitally mediated societies. If empathy becomes progressively fragmented, symbolic, and dependent on platform-specific interaction patterns, communication itself may undergo significant transformations. The challenge is no longer merely technological but profoundly relational: how can meaningful emotional connections be maintained in environments designed for speed, visibility, and continuous engagement?

The findings suggest that addressing this challenge requires the development of what may

be called *digital emotional literacy*. Beyond technical competencies, individuals increasingly need the ability to recognize emotional cues in mediated communication, regulate their own emotional responses, and engage empathically with others despite the limitations imposed by digital environments. Such competencies may become essential not only for individual well-being but also for the quality of public discourse and social cohesion in contemporary networked societies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The digital transformation of communication has generated profound changes in the ways individuals establish, maintain, and experience interpersonal relationships. While digital technologies have expanded opportunities for interaction and connectivity, they have also altered the emotional mechanisms that traditionally support human communication. Within this context, empathy emerges as one of the social competencies most affected by the transition from face-to-face communication to technologically mediated interaction.

The findings of the present study indicate that empathy does not disappear in digital environments; rather, it undergoes a process of reconfiguration. Participants generally maintained the ability to understand the emotions and perspectives of others, suggesting that cognitive empathy remains relatively stable in online communication contexts. However, affective empathy—the capacity to emotionally resonate with another person's experiences—appears more vulnerable to the structural limitations of digital interaction.

The study also revealed significant associations between online disinhibition and emotional vulnerability. Individuals who reported higher levels of impulsive or uninhibited communication online were also more likely to experience anxiety, emotional discomfort, and dependence on social validation. These findings challenge the simplistic interpretations of online behaviour and suggest that apparent communicative freedom may coexist with increased emotional fragility.

Furthermore, prolonged exposure to digital communication environments was associated with indicators of emotional fatigue and reduced empathic engagement. The continuous flow of information, emotional stimuli, and social interaction characteristic of contemporary digital platforms may contribute to the gradual depletion of emotional resources, generating forms of emotional exhaustion that influence both personal well-being and interpersonal relationships.

From a theoretical perspective, the research supports the argument that empathy in digital environments becomes increasingly fragmented, accelerated, and mediated by platform-specific communication practices. The emergence of symbolic forms of emotional expression, such as reactions, emojis, and brief supportive comments, reflects a shift towards more immediate but often less profound forms of empathic engagement. Consequently, online communication tends to privilege emotional visibility over emotional depth.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual communication practices. They raise broader questions concerning the quality of social relationships, the sustainability of empathic engagement in networked societies, and the emotional consequences of permanent connectivity. As digital communication continues to occupy a central place in everyday life, understanding the mechanisms that facilitate or inhibit empathy becomes increasingly important for both researchers and practitioners.

The study also highlights the need to promote digital emotional literacy as a fundamental component of contemporary communication competence. Educational institutions, media organizations, and digital platforms can play an important role in encouraging the forms of communication that support emotional awareness, responsible interaction, and empathic engagement. Developing such competencies may contribute not only to individual psychological well-being but also to the cultivation of healthier digital communities.

Several limitations of the present research should be acknowledged. The exploratory character of the study and the relatively limited sample size restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal research designs, and comparative analyses across different digital platforms. Additionally, qualitative approaches may provide deeper insights into the subjective experiences that shape empathic behaviours in online environments.

In conclusion, the study suggests that the central challenge of contemporary communication is not merely to remain connected through technology, but to preserve meaningful emotional connections within increasingly mediated social environments. In an era defined by digital interaction, empathy remains an essential condition for dialogue, understanding, and social cohesion. Its future, however, depends on the capacity of individuals and institutions to adapt communicative practices to the emotional realities of the digital age.

References

Bauman, Z. (2003) Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Castells, M. (2010) The rise of the network society. 2nd edn. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Čekić, E. (2025) Virtual empathy: A systematic review of the impact of digital communication on interpersonal relationships and social dynamics, International Journal of Psychology, 10(2), pp. 11–29.

Davis, M.H. (1994) Empathy: A social psychological approach. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Decety, J. & Ickes, W. (eds.) (2009) The social neuroscience of empathy. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

McLuhan, M. (1964) Understanding media: The extensions of man. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Suler, J. (2004) 'The online disinhibition effect', CyberPsychology & Behavior, 7(3), pp. 321–326.

Turkle, S. (2011) Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other. New York: Basic Books.

Turkle, S. (2015) Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age. New York: Penguin Press.

Wellman, B. & Rainie, L. (2012) Networked: The new social operating system. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Zimbardo, P.G. (2007) The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil. New York: Random House.