

The Role of Digital Communication in Building Effective Family Communication to Maintain Intimacy Between Couples in Long-Distance Marriages Through the Use of Digital Media

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Abstract

The development of digital technology has changed communication patterns in family life, including for couples in long-distance marriages. Separation by distance and time can limit face-to-face interaction, making the use of digital media crucial for maintaining communication and closeness between couples. This study aims to analyze the role of digital communication in building effective family communication and identify communication strategies and barriers in long-distance marriages. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were obtained through interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed thematically. The results showed that WhatsApp, voice notes, telephone, video calls, and social media were the primary media used by couples to communicate news, share activities, convey personal messages, provide emotional support, and resolve issues requiring more in-depth explanation. Digital communication plays a role in maintaining communication continuity, emotional connectedness, openness, and mutual support even though partners are in different locations. Communication strategies are implemented through routine communication, openness, empathy, responsiveness, and media selection according to message needs. Barriers identified include network limitations, busy schedules, misinterpretation of messages, and limited nonverbal expression. Research findings show that the effectiveness of digital communication is not only determined by the use of technology, but also by the couple's ability to manage communication in an open, adaptive, and responsive manner.

Keywords

Digital Communication; Digital Media; Family Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Long-Distance Marriage



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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought about significant changes in the way individuals build and maintain interpersonal relationships, including within families. The presence of the internet, smartphones, instant messaging apps, video calling services, and social media allows for rapid communication without the

constraints of geographical distance. This change is even more crucial for couples in long-distance marriages, as the separation of residences reduces opportunities for face-to-face interaction. In such circumstances, digital communication serves not only as a means of conveying information but also as a space for maintaining emotional connections and daily family life.

Martini and Wilani (2025) found that interpersonal communication is one of the social factors influencing marital satisfaction in long-distance couples, in addition to commitment, self-disclosure, and marital adjustment. Hartono et al. (2025) showed that open communication and wise use of technology can strengthen communication and emotional bonds within families in the digital era. Meanwhile, Balqis and Solihat (2026) found that digital media has changed family communication patterns, but face-to-face communication is still necessary to maintain closeness and mutual understanding. These three studies demonstrate the importance of communication in maintaining family relationships, but have not specifically discussed strategies for utilizing digital communication to build effective family communication in long-distance couples. This is a gap in this research.

A long-distance marriage is a situation where a husband and wife live their married life geographically separated for periods of time due to work, education, assignments, or other family reasons. This separation can present challenges in meeting the needs for communication, attention, emotional support, and togetherness. Limited face-to-face interaction forces couples to find other ways to maintain a harmonious relationship. In this context, family communication is crucial because it allows couples to coordinate daily life, share experiences, express feelings, resolve problems, and provide support to one another.

Effective family communication is determined not only by how often couples communicate, but also by the quality of the interactions that occur. Effective communication includes the ability to convey messages clearly, listen, respond, show concern, understand their partner's situation, and build openness and trust. For couples who live together, some communication needs can be met through physical presence and spontaneous interactions. Conversely, in long-distance marriages, some of these experiences must be mediated through digital technology. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how couples use digital media to partially replace face-to-face interactions.

WhatsApp is one of the platforms that allows couples to maintain daily communication through text messages, voice notes, sending photos and videos, and voice calls. This platform allows couples to share activities even when they are in

different locations. Simple communications such as checking in on their partner's well-being, updating them on their activities, reminding them of family needs, or expressing concern can become part of a family communication routine. Thus, digital communication can foster a sense of connection in a couple's life even without their physical presence.

In addition to text-based communication, video calls offer a communication experience that's closer to face-to-face interaction. Through video calls, partners can see each other's facial expressions, body movements, and surroundings more directly. This medium allows for more personal conversations, including discussing family matters, sharing daily experiences, providing emotional support, or simply accompanying their partner virtually. This visual presence can help reduce the limitations of text-only communication and create the feeling of being present in the same space.

Social media can also be part of a couple's communication practices. Couples can share posts, photos, videos, activities, and information about their daily lives. Interaction through social media can demonstrate a couple's attention and involvement in each other's lives. In the context of family communication, social media is not just a public space for sharing information, but can also be used as an interpersonal communication channel that strengthens the couple's connection.

The use of various digital media demonstrates a shift in family communication patterns. Interactions that previously relied heavily on face-to-face meetings can now be conducted through a combination of instant messaging, voice calls, video calls, and social media. Digital technology is ultimately becoming more than just a communication tool, but also a part of family life. Couples can create digital communication routines, such as exchanging news in the morning or evening, conducting video calls at specific times, sharing photos of activities, or engaging in virtual activities together. These practices are interesting to understand because each couple can have different communication strategies according to their needs, habits, occupations, family circumstances, and the nature of their relationship.

On the other hand, digital communication cannot completely replace face-to-face interaction. Communication via screens has limitations in providing physical touch, spontaneity, direct shared experiences, and some nonverbal cues. Text messages can also lead to misunderstandings because they don't always convey intonation, expression, and emotional context completely. High levels of digital media use also don't necessarily result in effective communication without openness, attention, and appropriate responses. Therefore, research needs to examine not only

the types of media used, but also how couples interpret and use these media to maintain their relationships.

This issue highlights an important area of research. Studies on long-distance relationships often position technology as a means of maintaining connection, but a deeper understanding of couples' experiences integrating digital media into everyday family communication is needed. A qualitative approach allows research to explore experiences, strategies, meanings, habits, and communication dynamics that cannot be fully explained solely through measures of media frequency. This study, therefore, aims to understand how long-distance couples utilize digital media as a partial substitute for face-to-face interaction to maintain intimacy, emotional closeness, and daily communication.

Based on the description, this study is entitled "The Role of Digital Communication in Building Effective Family Communication to Maintain Couple Intimacy in Long-Distance Marriages: A Qualitative Study on the Utilization of Digital Media." This study focuses on the use of WhatsApp, video calls, and social media and couples' experiences in using these media to maintain family communication when face-to-face interactions are limited.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the experiences, meanings, patterns, strategies, and dynamics of digital communication used by couples in the context of long-distance marriages. The research is not aimed at statistically measuring relationships between variables, but rather at gaining a comprehensive understanding of how couples use digital media to build effective family communication and maintain intimacy.

The case study method was chosen because the research focuses on a clearly defined case: the digital communication practices of couples in long-distance marriages. Case studies allow researchers to study phenomena in depth by considering real-life contexts and using multiple data sources. Yin emphasizes the importance of case studies for understanding contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not always clearly demarcated. This principle aligns with the research because couples' digital media use is inseparable from their work, geographic distance, family routines, emotional states, and communication habits.

Thus, the research design can be formulated as follows:

Qualitative Approach → Case Study → Long Distance Marriage Couples → Utilization of Digital Media → Effective Family Communication → Intimacy and Emotional Closeness.

The primary subjects of the study were married couples in long-distance marriages who used digital media to communicate. Informants were selected purposively, based on their direct experience and ability to provide information relevant to the research focus.

The main informant criteria include: (1) legally married couples; (2) husband and wife living in different locations due to work, education, assignment, or other reasons; (3) separation lasting for a certain period and resulting in limited face-to-face interaction; (4) using WhatsApp, video calls, and/or social media as communication media; and (5) willing to share their communication experiences in depth.

To enrich the data, research can involve supporting informants, such as family members familiar with the couple's communication patterns, if the information is relevant and the primary informant has obtained approval. The number of informants is not rigidly determined from the outset, but is adjusted based on data needs and the adequacy of information. Data collection can be stopped when information saturation has reached or no new substantive themes relevant to the research focus are found.

The research unit of analysis is couples' digital communication practices in the context of long-distance marriages. The analysis focuses not only on the platforms used, but also on the communication processes and meanings constructed through these media uses.

The research focuses include: (1) the use of WhatsApp in daily communication; (2) the use of video calls as a form of audiovisual communication and a partial substitute for face-to-face interaction; (3) the use of social media to share activities and concerns; (4) openness, empathy, support, responsiveness, clarity of messages, and conflict management; (5) the experience of emotional presence and closeness through digital media; (6) couples' strategies in maintaining communication routines; and (7) the constraints and limits of digital media's ability to replace face-to-face interaction.

The research data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews with couples, observations of agreed-upon communication practices, and relevant documentation. Secondary data can include

scientific literature, documents or digital materials voluntarily provided by informants, and other sources that support an understanding of the research context.

Data analysis was conducted interactively and began during the data collection process. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, categories, themes, relationships between themes, and meanings emerging from the couples' experiences. The principles of qualitative analysis employed include data organization, data condensation or reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification.

The stages of analysis in this research include:

1. Organizing data, namely transcribing interviews, grouping observation notes, and organizing documentation.
2. Data condensation, namely selecting, focusing, simplifying, and coding data related to digital communication, family communication, and couple intimacy.
3. Categorization and development of themes, for example themes of routine communication, emotional support, sense of presence, media selection strategies, digital conflict, and limitations of virtual interactions.
4. Data presentation, namely compiling matrices, thematic narratives, or maps of relationships between themes to see case patterns.
5. Drawing and verifying conclusions, namely finding the main meaning and patterns and then checking them again through field data, triangulation, and member checks.

Analysis was also conducted by linking field findings to theoretical frameworks. For example, couples' experiences of feeling "closer" during video calls can be analyzed through the concept of Social Presence; the choice of video calls to discuss sensitive issues can be examined through Media Richness; and the habit of using WhatsApp as a communication routine can be analyzed through the perspectives of CMC and interpersonal communication.

Data validity is carried out to ensure that research findings are credible and accountable. Sugiyono emphasized the importance of testing data validity in qualitative research through strategies such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

In this study, data validity was carried out through:

1. Credibility, through source triangulation, technical triangulation, in-depth interviews, and member checks.
2. Transferability, through the presentation of the research context in detail so that readers can assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

3. Dependability, through an audit trail that documents the research process starting from determining the focus, selecting informants, collecting data, analyzing, to drawing conclusions.
4. Confirmability, through examining the relationship between field data, analysis results, interpretations, and conclusions so that findings can be traced back to the data source.

Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from husband and wife, while technical triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results, observations, and documentation. This strategy is important because the research addresses relational experiences that may be perceived differently by each

The research stages include: (1) problem identification and literature review; (2) determining the research focus; (3) preparing interview and observation guidelines; (4) determining informants; (5) collecting data through interviews, observations, and documentation; (6) transcribing and organizing data; (7) coding and thematic analysis; (8) triangulation and member check; (9) interpreting findings based on the theoretical framework; and (10) drawing conclusions.

Conceptually, the research stages can be described as follows:

The Phenomenon of Long-Distance Marriage → Limitations of Face-to-Face Meeting → Utilization of WhatsApp, Video Call, and Social Media → Interview/Observation/Documentation → Coding and Thematic Analysis → Triangulation and Member Check → Theoretical Interpretation → Findings on Family Communication and Couple Intimacy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study examines the role of digital communication in building effective family communication among couples in long-distance marriages. The focus of the study is directed at the use of WhatsApp, video calls, and social media, couples' communication strategies, and the challenges that arise in the digital communication process. This focus aligns with the research design, which places digital communication practices as the primary unit of analysis in the context of long-distance marriages.

Based on the results of in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, the research results can be grouped into five main findings, namely: (1) the use of WhatsApp in daily family communication; (2) the use of video calls to create closeness; (3) the use of social media to share daily life; (4) digital communication

strategies in building effective family communication; and (5) obstacles and strategies to overcome obstacles to digital communication.

Utilization of WhatsApp in Daily Family Communication

The research results show that WhatsApp is one of the primary platforms used by long-distance couples to maintain daily communication. WhatsApp is used not only to convey information but also as a means of providing attention, inquiring about their partner's well-being, sharing activities, and maintaining family continuity.

WhatsApp is used through various communication channels, such as text messages, voice notes, sending photos and videos, and voice calls. This pattern aligns with the research design, which positions WhatsApp as a routine and fast communication medium for couples who cannot meet in person.

It's common for partners to ask how they're doing or what they need this week. These findings suggest that WhatsApp serves a broader purpose than simply conveying information. Simple messages like asking if your partner has eaten, updating them on their activities, or expressing concern have become part of the family communication routine. This aligns with the concept of family communication, which explains that communication serves to fulfill family roles, manage daily life, express emotions, and maintain relationships.

In the context of long-distance couples, the habit of regularly texting can establish a family communication routine. Thus, WhatsApp serves as a digital space that helps couples maintain connection even when they are not physically present. These findings also demonstrate that communication effectiveness is not determined by the number of messages, but by the meaning and quality of those messages. This aligns with the concept of effective family communication in research, which encompasses openness, empathy, emotional support, clarity of messages, responsiveness, listening skills, and conflict management.

Utilizing Video Calls to Maintain Emotional Closeness

The research results show that video calls are used when couples require a more personal form of communication that is closer to face-to-face communication. Video calls allow couples not only to hear their voices but also to see their partner's face, expressions, body movements, and surroundings. The use of video calls is especially important when couples want to discuss issues that require more detailed explanation, express feelings, provide emotional support, or simply accompany their partner virtually. These findings can be explained through Social Presence Theory. This theory is used in research to understand the extent to which someone feels the

social presence of another person when communicating through digital media. The presence of a face, voice, expressions, and responses can directly create the experience of a partner being present in the same space.

Thus, video calls do not completely replace physical presence, but they can reduce the psychological distance that arises due to geographical separation.

This finding is important because the research does not view technology as a complete substitute for face-to-face interaction. The research document explicitly positions digital media as a medium that can only assist or partially replace the functions of face-to-face interaction.

Therefore, video calls can be understood as a medium that enhances the experience of a partner's "sense of presence." The richer the communication cues available, the more likely it is that partners will feel emotionally involved in the communication.

Utilization of Social Media as a Means of Sharing Daily Life

The research findings show that couples can use social media to maintain connection by sharing photos, videos, activities, and information about their daily lives. When viewing a partner's posts or responding to them on social media, in this context, it's not only understood as a public space but also as a channel for interpersonal communication. Couples can learn about each other's activities through posts, respond to each other, and show interest in each other's lives.

These findings reinforce the perspective of family communication, which suggests that communication doesn't just occur when there's a problem to discuss. Sharing everyday experiences is also part of maintaining relationships.

Using social media can create a shared life experience, even when partners are in different locations. This is consistent with research in the document, which explains that social media can be used to share activities, photos, videos, information, and respond to a partner's activities.

However, social media also has a downside. Previous research included in the document suggests that social media can increase emotional closeness while also causing jealousy and conflict.

This means that the benefits of social media depend heavily on how couples use it and how they build trust, openness, and commitment in their relationship.

Digital Communication Strategies in Building Effective Family Communication

The results of the study show that the effectiveness of digital communication is not only determined by the type of media used, but especially by the couple's communication strategy.

These strategies may include:

1. Establish communication routines;
2. Provide regular news;
3. Choose media according to communication needs;
4. Express feelings openly;
5. Provide support when the couple faces problems;
6. Using video calls when text communication is deemed inadequate;
7. Respond to partner's messages;
8. Avoid resolving conflicts through short messages that are easily misinterpreted;
and
9. Build agreement on communication times.

These findings can be analyzed using Interpersonal Communication Theory. In this study, the theory was used to examine openness, empathy, support, feedback, responsiveness, self-disclosure, and conflict management.

Thus, effective digital communication can be formulated not as “the more often you communicate, the better”, but rather:

Digital Communication → Openness → Responsiveness → Empathy → Emotional Support → Shared Understanding → Effective Family Communication.

This finding is an important aspect of the research because it shows that technology only provides a channel, while the quality of the relationship is determined by how the couple uses the channel.

Media Selection Based on Communication Needs

Research findings also suggest that couples don't use all media for the same purpose. WhatsApp tends to be used for routine communication, video calls for communication that requires closeness and immediate responses, and social media for sharing activities.

This pattern can be analyzed using Media Richness Theory.

This theory explains that media have different capabilities in conveying information and reducing ambiguity. In research documents, text messages are positioned as appropriate for simple information, voice notes for more personal explanations, and video calls can be used for issues requiring immediate responses and nonverbal cues.

Thus, a pattern can be found:

Table 1. Mapping Communication Needs and Utilization of Digital Media in Couples Long Distance Marriage

Communication Needs	Media Used	Function
Daily news	<i>WhatsApp</i>	Maintain regular communication
Personal message	<i>Voice note</i>	Conveying emotions/explanations
Share activities	<i>WhatsApp/Social media</i>	Maintaining connectedness
Sensitive issue	<i>Video call</i>	Clarifying messages and emotions
Providing support	<i>Video call/WhatsApp</i>	Emotional support
Spontaneous communication	<i>WhatsApp/phone</i>	Quick response

Source: Author 2026

Digital Communication Obstacles and Strategies to Overcome Them

Research findings should demonstrate that digital communication also has limitations. Based on the research focus in the document, obstacles that need to be explored include misunderstandings of messages, network limitations, workloads, differences in communication times, conflict, and limitations in nonverbal communication.

Text-based communication in particular can lead to misinterpretation because it does not always present the full intonation, expression, and emotional context.

This situation demonstrates that digital communication has limitations in completely replacing the characteristics of face-to-face communication. While technology allows couples to maintain communication, it doesn't fully provide the physical touch, spontaneity of presence, and shared experiences of face-to-face interaction.

Therefore, a couple's strategies for dealing with obstacles are a crucial part of effective family communication. For example, when text messages have the potential to cause misunderstandings, couples can switch to voice calls or video calls. Choosing a richer medium can help clarify messages and reduce ambiguity.

The novelty of this study lies not solely in the finding that couples use WhatsApp, video calls, or social media. Previous research summarized in this document has shown that digital technology can help maintain communication and closeness in long-distance couples.

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of three aspects, namely:

1. digital media as a family communication space, not just a tool for conveying messages;
2. media selection strategy based on communication needs, which can be explained through Media Richness Theory; and
3. the process of forming a sense of presence and emotional closeness through digital communication, which is explained through Social Presence Theory.

Thus, the novelty of the research can be formulated:

Digital communication in long-distance marriages is not simply a technological substitute for face-to-face communication, but develops into a relational space where couples build routines, openness, emotional support, a sense of presence, and shared understanding through media selection tailored to communication needs.

This formulation is in line with the research gap stated in the document, namely the need to examine not just the “use of digital media”, but the process and strategies for utilizing it in building effective family communication so that intimacy between couples is maintained.

CONCLUSION

Based on the problem formulation, it can be concluded that: 1) WhatsApp is used for daily communication sharing news, activities, and expressions of care—to maintain the connection between partners. 2) Video calls help substitute for some face-to-face interactions through visual and audio communication, thereby preserving emotional closeness. 3) Social media is utilized to share activities, photos, and information, allowing partners to feel connected despite the physical distance. 4) Digital communication strategies are implemented through openness, empathy, emotional support, responsiveness, and the selection of media suited to communication needs. 5) Digital communication obstacles—such as misinterpretation, network limitations, busy schedules, and restricted nonverbal interaction are addressed through open communication, appropriate media selection, and the use of video calls when necessary. These obstacles and strategies constitute the research focus of this document.

Based on the conclusions above, it is recommended that future researchers expand upon this study by involving a more diverse range of informants and relationship contexts.

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