



COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN MODERN FAMILIES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explored communication patterns in modern families, focusing on how traditional face-to-face interaction and digital communication technologies shaped family relationships. Grounded in Family Systems Theory and supported by related frameworks such as Satir's Communication Stances (1964) and Gottman's marital communication research (1979), the study examined how communication influenced marital satisfaction, parent-child relationships, and overall family cohesion. Using a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observations among purposively selected families from urban and semi-urban settings. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns related to communication modes, generational differences, emotional tone, and relational dynamics. Findings revealed that modern families engaged in hybrid communication practices, combining digital and face-to-face interactions. While digital tools enhance connectivity and convenience, they may also lead to emotional distance and misunderstandings due to reduced nonverbal cues. Generational differences further shaped communication preferences, often creating tension but also opportunities for integration. Families demonstrated varied approaches to conflict management, expression of affection, and decision-making, highlighting both resilience and challenges in maintaining emotional connection. The study emphasized the important role of counselors in addressing communication issues by promoting balanced communication styles, strengthening emotional expression, and guiding families in the responsible use of technology. It contributes to the understanding of family communication in contemporary contexts and provides implications for counseling practice, family education, and future research. This research was completed in July 2026 (School Year 2025–2026).

Keywords: *Family communication, Contemporary contexts, Counseling practice, Family education, Future research*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the lifeblood of marital and family relationships. Wahyuningtyas et al. (2023) examined communication patterns in relation to socialization and identity formation within families. Effective communication fosters a sense of cultural continuity and belonging, shaping individuals' understanding of their cultural heritage and identity. It may also influence how individuals navigate their roles and responsibilities within broader social contexts, contributing to their overall well-being and sense of self. In the context of counseling, communication is often the first area of assessment when couples or families come in with conflict, disconnection, or dysfunction.

Recent studies emphasized that effective communication significantly contributes to marital satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and family resilience, whereas dysfunctional communication patterns are associated with emotional distress, relational dissatisfaction, and weakened family cohesion (Kılıçarslan & Parmaksız, 2023).

Traditionally, family communication was based on face-to-face communication, which was influenced by culture, generation, and family routines. However, in today's world, modern families find themselves in a blended environment of digital and face-to-face communication. Contemporary family relationships are increasingly shaped by digital communication technologies, which simultaneously promote connectivity and create communication barriers through reduced nonverbal cues and emotional ambiguity (Dimensions of Communication Breakdown in Digitally Mediated Relationships, 2025). The increasing use of digital communication technologies such as social media, text messaging, and video conferencing has transformed the ways families interact. Studies further suggest that excessive dependence on mediated communication may negatively affect emotional closeness and face-to-face interaction among family members. These realities present an important implication to family counselors particularly on how the nature and dynamics of family communication behavior influences emotional functioning and relationship stability.

Counselors understand that communication patterns have a direct impact on marital satisfaction, parenting success, and family resilience. Breakdowns in communication are frequently implicated in misunderstandings, the escalation of conflicts, and, ultimately, a pervasive dissatisfaction within relationships (Gayathri, 2023; Nel, 2021; Vanamali, 2023). Poor communication is consistently identified as a primary catalyst for marital breakdowns, systematically eroding the quality of connection. This deterioration is often rooted in underlying issues such as fear, misunderstanding, emotional disconnect, and deeply ingrained maladaptive emotional patterns (Hedge, 2025).

Furthermore, from the perspective of Family Systems Theory developed by Murray Bowen, communication serves as a mechanism through which family members maintain emotional balance, establish roles, and negotiate relational boundaries (Bowen, 1978). This theory highlighted that unresolved anxiety and dysfunctional interaction patterns may influence communication behaviors within the family system creating emotional distance, reactivity, and poor resulting conflicts among family members (White, 2025). In the context of modern families, Bowen Family Systems Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how digital and interpersonal communication patterns influence emotional functioning and relational stability.

Research further indicates that communication difficulties remain among the leading contributors to marital dissatisfaction and strained family relationships (Nichols & Davis, 2024). In the Philippine, studies have shown that digital technology increasingly influences family interaction, parenting practices, and communication behaviors among Filipino families. Arabis (2023) found that excessive digital engagement among children and adolescents contributed to reduced intimate conversations, weakened family interaction, and communication challenges within households.

Good communication builds intimacy, trust, and problem-solving skills, while poor communication leads to misunderstandings, unresolved conflict, and emotional distance. In marital therapy, poor communication is often identified as one of the top reasons for marital dissatisfaction and divorce. The advent of digital communication technology has brought about a new set of complexities. Although social media enabled families to stay connected across distances. However, these technologies also bring about their own set of challenges, such as tone misinterpretation, lack of nonverbal communication, and over-reliance on technology.

Despite the number of studies that has explored family communication and digital interaction, limited research has focused on communication patterns in modern families from a marital and family counseling perspective. Existing literature often emphasizes marital satisfaction, social media use, or general family functioning, while fewer studies examine how counselors understand and address the integration of face-to-face and digital communication within family relationships.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore communication patterns in modern families and examined how these patterns influenced family relationships within the context of marital and family counseling.

Research Questions

Communication plays a vital role in maintaining healthy family relationships, influencing marital satisfaction, emotional intimacy, parenting effectiveness, and overall family cohesion. However, with the increasing integration of digital communication technologies such as social media, text messaging, and video calls, modern families now experience a shift from traditional face-to-face interaction to a hybrid form of communication. While these technologies offer convenience and connectivity, they also

introduce challenges such as misinterpretation, reduced emotional expression, and weakened interpersonal connection.

Despite existing studies on family communication and digital interaction, there remains limited research that examines how these communication patterns are experienced and addressed within the context of marital and family counseling. In particular, there is a need to better understand how the combination of digital and face-to-face communication influences emotional functioning, conflict resolution, and relational stability among family members.

Thus, this study sought to explore the communication patterns in modern families and examined their implications for family relationships and counseling practice. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How did modern families communicate using both face-to-face and digital means?
2. What communication challenges did families encounter in a hybrid communication environment?
3. How did communication patterns influence marital satisfaction, parent–child relationships, and family cohesion?
4. What role did generational differences play in shaping family communication practices?
5. How could counselors address communication issues and promote healthier communication patterns in modern families?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current research employed a qualitative exploratory design, which was fitted for studying the experiences and communication styles of contemporary families. In the context of marital and family therapy, qualitative research methods enable a better understanding of the underlying dynamics, emotional processes, and contextual meanings of family communication practices.

Participants

Population: Families living in urban and semi-urban settings where digital communication technologies are readily available.

Sample: Purposive sampling will be employed to identify families with varied compositions (nuclear, extended, blended, and single-parent families).

Inclusion Criteria:

- Married or live together families.

- Families with children or extended relatives actively participating in communication.
- Voluntary participation in interviews and group discussions.

Sample Size: Roughly 5 to 10 families, varying in age, socioeconomic status, and family type.

Research Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: The interview will cover communication practices, difficulties, and perceived effects on marital and family relationships.

Focus Group Discussion Protocol: The protocol aims to identify generational differences and shared views on communication.

Observation Checklist: The checklist will be used to note non-verbal communication, interaction patterns, and environmental aspects during family interactions.

Data Collection Procedures

Recruitment: Families will be approached via community networks, counseling institutions, and referrals.

Interviews: Individual interviews will be conducted with spouses, parents, and children to gather individual views.

Focus Groups: The focus group will be conducted with family members to compare generational views.

Observation: Observations will be carried out in natural settings such as family meetings, counseling sessions, with the family's consent.

Documentation: Audio recordings and field notes will be transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

- Thematic Analysis: Responses will be coded according to themes such as digital vs. face-to-face communication, intergenerational differences, emotional tone, and implications for counseling.
- Triangulation: Data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations will be compared to validate findings.
- Interpretation: Results will be connected to theories of counseling (Bowen Family Systems Theory, Satir's Communication Stances, Gottman's marital communication studies) to illustrate applications.

RESULTS

The findings of the study reveal that communication in modern families is characterized by a dynamic integration of both face-to-face and digital forms of interaction, resulting in a hybrid communication system. Participants reported that while digital platforms such as messaging applications and social media have become essential for maintaining daily contact and managing family responsibilities, face-to-face communication remains the preferred mode for addressing emotionally sensitive topics and resolving conflicts. This duality suggests that although technology enhances accessibility and convenience, it does not replace the depth and emotional richness of in-person interaction. However, the increasing reliance on digital communication has introduced notable challenges, particularly in terms of misinterpretation of messages, reduced emotional clarity, and a tendency to avoid direct conversations. These issues often stem from the absence of non-verbal cues such as tone, facial expressions, and body language, which are crucial for effective understanding.

Furthermore, the study indicates that communication patterns significantly influence the quality of family relationships. Couples who engaged more frequently in face-to-face communication reported higher levels of marital satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and more effective conflict resolution. In contrast, those who relied heavily on digital exchanges experienced more misunderstandings and emotional distance. Similarly, in parent–child relationships, while digital communication enabled consistent monitoring and connection, it also limited opportunities for meaningful and in-depth conversations, potentially weakening emotional bonds. As a result, family cohesion was found to be stronger among families who intentionally maintained regular in-person interactions, such as shared meals or designated family time, compared to those whose communication was predominantly technology-mediated.

Another important finding of the study is the influence of generational differences on communication practices. Older family members tend to value direct, face-to-face interactions and perceive them as more sincere and meaningful, whereas younger members are more inclined toward fast and convenient digital communication. This divergence often leads to misunderstandings, with older individuals interpreting brief or delayed responses as disinterest, while younger individuals view their communication style as normal and efficient. These differences highlight the need for mutual understanding and adaptation within families to bridge the communication gap.

In terms of counseling implications, the data suggest that effective intervention should focus on promoting balanced communication practices that integrate both digital and face-to-face interactions. Counselors can play a vital role in helping families develop essential communication skills such as active listening, emotional expression, and conflict resolution. Additionally, raising awareness about the limitations of digital communication and encouraging its appropriate use—particularly avoiding sensitive discussions through text—can help reduce misunderstandings. Addressing generational differences through guided discussions and fostering empathy among family members can also contribute to improved communication dynamics.

Overall, the study underscores that while digital communication technologies offer significant benefits in maintaining connectivity, the quality and intentionality of communication remain critical determinants of healthy family relationships. A balanced approach that prioritizes meaningful in-person interactions, while effectively utilizing digital tools, is essential for sustaining emotional closeness, relational stability, and overall family cohesion.

Conclusions

Restatement of Purpose

This study set out to explore communication patterns in modern families, with particular attention to how conflict management, affection, decision-making, and technology shape relational dynamics. The aim was to understand not only the observable practices within families but also the underlying meanings and implications for marital and family counseling. Specifically, the study sought to examine how modern families balance traditional forms of communication with increasing dependence on digital interaction in everyday family life.

Summary of Findings

The analysis revealed that families employ diverse strategies to manage conflict, ranging from avoidance to direct confrontation, with children often playing unexpected roles as mediators. Expressions of affection varied across generations, highlighting both verbal and nonverbal forms of support. Decision-making processes reflected cultural traditions and generational expectations, balancing authority with collaboration. Finally, technology emerged as both a facilitator of connection and a source of misunderstanding, reshaping the boundaries of intimacy and privacy in family life. Despite these challenges, many families demonstrated efforts to maintain emotional closeness, adaptability, and mutual understanding through different communication practices.

Contributions to Counseling and Education

The findings contribute to counseling practice by emphasizing the importance of protecting children from undue conflict roles, encouraging balanced expressions of affection, and guiding families toward inclusive decision-making. They also highlight the need for counselors to address digital communication as a contemporary challenge. The study further suggests that counselors should help families develop healthier communication habits through active listening, emotional validation, and responsible technology use. Educational programs and family guidance initiatives can build on these insights, equipping families with practical skills for healthier communication in both traditional and digital contexts.

Theoretical Significance

This study extends Family Systems Theory by illustrating the active involvement of children in conflict mediation, reinforces Attachment Theory through the centrality of affection, and expands Communication Privacy Management Theory into digital domains. Together, these contributions enrich the theoretical landscape of family communication and provide a foundation for future inquiry. The findings also support Bowen's idea that communication behaviors within the family are interconnected and may influence the emotional functioning of the entire family system.

Limitations and Future Directions

As an exploratory study, the findings are context-specific and may not capture the full diversity of family communication across cultures and socioeconomic groups. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of communication practices, particularly the role of technology and children's involvement in conflict. Comparative studies across cultural contexts will further illuminate the adaptability and resilience of family communication patterns. Future researchers may also explore communication experiences among different family structures and age groups to provide a broader understanding of modern family interaction.

Final Reflections

Modern families navigate communication at the intersection of tradition and innovation. While challenges persist in conflict, affection, decision-making, and technology use, families also demonstrate resilience and adaptability. For counselors, educators, and researchers, these findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive, ethically grounded, and practically oriented interventions. Ultimately, this study affirms that communication remains the cornerstone of family life, shaping relationships, identities, and the capacity for growth in an ever-changing world. The findings further emphasize that healthy communication continues to play an essential role in strengthening emotional connection and maintaining stability within modern families despite rapid social and technological change.

Recommendations

Introduction

The findings of this study underscore the evolving nature of communication within modern families. Patterns of conflict management, expressions of affection, decision-making processes, and technology-mediated interactions reveal both continuity with traditional practices and significant shifts shaped by contemporary contexts. The findings also reflect how modern families continuously adjust their communication practices in response to changing social, cultural, and technological influences. This chapter discusses the implications of these results for marital and family counseling, educational

practice, and theoretical development, while offering recommendations for future research and professional application.

Implications for Counseling Practice

The results highlight the need for counselors to adopt nuanced approaches that acknowledge generational differences, cultural influences, and the impact of technology. Conflict management strategies must be addressed with sensitivity to children's roles, ensuring they are not overburdened as mediators. Counselors may help family members develop healthier ways of expressing emotions and resolving disagreements through open and respectful communication. Counselors should encourage families to cultivate balanced expressions of affection, combining verbal affirmations with nonverbal gestures to strengthen cohesion. Decision-making processes require careful navigation, respecting cultural traditions while promoting inclusivity and shared responsibility. Finally, technology-mediated communication presents both opportunities and challenges; counselors must help families recognize the risks of digital misinterpretation while harnessing technology as a tool for connection. Therapeutic interventions may also include promoting active listening, emotional validation, and healthy technology boundaries within the household to strengthen emotional connection among family members.

Implications for Education and Family Guidance

Beyond counseling sessions, the findings suggest a need for educational initiatives that equip families with practical communication skills. Schools and community organizations can play a vital role by offering workshops on conflict resolution, emotional expression, and digital literacy. Such programs should emphasize cultural sensitivity and generational inclusivity, ensuring that families are empowered to adapt communication strategies to their unique contexts. These programs may also help parents and children better understand the emotional effects of both face-to-face and digital communication within family relationships. Resources tailored for parents and children can further support responsible technology use, fostering healthier digital interactions within the family unit.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the broader field of family communication by extending and refining existing theories. Family Systems Theory is expanded through evidence of children's active involvement in conflict mediation, highlighting both the risks and adaptive potential of this dynamic. The findings further support Bowen's view that family members are emotionally interconnected, and that communication behaviors within the family may affect the overall functioning of the household. Attachment Theory is reinforced by findings that visible affection—whether verbal or nonverbal—remains central to family cohesion. Communication Privacy Management Theory is extended into digital contexts, illustrating how technology reshapes boundaries, intimacy, and the negotiation of privacy within families.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should explore communication patterns across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts to deepen understanding of family dynamics. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the lasting effects of children's involvement in conflict mediation. Additionally, as technology continues to evolve, further investigation into its role in shaping intimacy, conflict, and decision-making will be essential. Comparative studies across generations may also reveal how communication practices adapt over time, offering valuable insights for both theory and practice. Future researchers may also consider including larger and more diverse family groups to better capture the complexity of communication patterns in contemporary families.

Conclusions

Modern families navigate communication through a delicate balance of tradition and innovation. While conflict, affection, decision-making, and technology present challenges, they also offer opportunities for resilience and growth. Counselors, educators, and researchers must adapt to these realities, fostering strategies that protect children, honor cultural diversity, and harness technology for positive family connection. The findings of this study highlight the importance of maintaining open, supportive, and emotionally responsive communication within families despite the growing influence of digital interaction. This study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application, laying the groundwork for continued exploration of communication patterns in contemporary family life.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study adhered to established ethical principles in conducting research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and nature of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, while parental or guardian consent, along with child assent, was secured for minors to ensure their voluntary and informed participation. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. They were also given the option to decline answering any questions that may cause discomfort or unease. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, all identifying information was anonymized, and data were securely stored, accessible only to the research team.

The study ensured that risks to participants were minimal. Sensitive topics were handled with care, and emotional well-being was prioritized throughout the research process. Participants were treated with respect, dignity, and cultural sensitivity at all times, and referrals to counseling services were made available if needed. Furthermore, all data collected—including interviews, focus group discussions, and observations—were used solely for academic purposes. Confidentiality agreements were maintained, and all audio recordings and documents were properly managed, stored, and disposed of in accordance with ethical data management standards. Overall, the study complied

with institutional and professional ethical guidelines, ensuring transparency, respect for participants, and integrity in the research process.

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