# Digitally Captive Society

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With the proliferation of smartphones, apps, and internet-connected devices, there is a growing popular consensus that digital devices impact our society’s interpersonal communication in a negative way. Face-to-face communication is on decline because we choose to communicate through digital communication rather than interpersonal communication.

The purpose of this research paper is to identify the negative impacts that digital devices have on society’s interpersonal communication skills. I chose this topic because I see people on their phones at restaurants and in coffee shops. They are glued to their screens, instead of being present in the conversation. These changes have affected both the young and old: parents toss their kids a phone with a YouTube video to keep them occupied, and increasingly the social media habits of certain politicians regularly dominate the news cycle. I wanted to find out what research had to say about digital devices and communication. Are digital devices having a negative affect on communication? How are they affecting social interactions, the workplace, and youth?



Figure 1-Photo by Hught Han, People inside train https://unsplash.com/@hughhan

I have identified and researched three major points that show the negative effects of technology on interpersonal communication. These include: (1): the decline of face-to-face communication amongst friends and family; (2): how the lack of face-to-face communication affects the workplace; and (3): how communication through digital devices negatively affects the younger generation, the future of our society.

# Face-to-face communication amongst friends and family is degrading due to digital devices.

Iris Adler, the executive director for programming, podcasts and special projects at WBUR, a Boston NPR affiliate, wrote an article in which she points to research from JSPR that has shown the presence of a cellphone in face-to-face communication really affects the way a person’s relationships develops with whoever they are communicating with. Research shows that the mere presence of a cell phone can hinder the development of trust and reduced the empathy we feel for one another. This affects both youth as well as adults, as it's not only young adults that use their cellphones during family time. Children point out that their parents will miss out on important times during sporting events because they were on the phone. Texting or using social media to communicate instead of face-to-face conversations also has its negative impacts. In her article, How our digital devices are affecting our personal relationships, Adler interviewed Boston University student Ciera Wade, who stated that she would rather text than have face-to-face conversation. Ciera stated that it was easier for her to mask her feelings in a text. Ciera also said that she does not recall when she last spoke to her parents on the phone, she only text. If she is feeling sad, no one will know because they can’t see her or hear her on a text message. This also creates an issue for her socially because she gets nervous when she must have a face-to-face conversation (Adler, 2013). Wade is like many young people in that she would rather text then engage in an in person conversation. Digital communication takes the humanity out of communicating. Emotional exchanges such as laughter, being sad when telling someone bad news, or apologizing will not translate in a text message or email the same way it does when you are face-to-face. The bond that is formed through face-to-face communication that gets lost in the digital space.

# Communication in the workplace is degrading due to digital devices just as it is between family and friends.

Problems with face-to-face communication at work can negatively affect the ability of future and currents employees to meet each other’s needs. Research conducted on the reliance on digital communication in the workplace points to how digital communication can hinder an employee’s ability to communicate in a professional setting, which can negatively impact the organization. If supervisors and employees do not effectively communicate, the performance will suffer, conflicts can arise, and employee morale can plummet (Kick, Contacos-Sawyer, & Thomas, 2015, p. 217). Currently, many employers are noticing that newer generations of employees are using email and texting instead of calling or communicating face-to-face. This hinders the ability for employees and managers to create a bond and a trust that is developed through face-to-face communication. Additionally, Kick, Contacos-Sawyer, and Thomas show that important skills and experience gained through years of previous on the job training are not being shared and transferred to new employees. This loss occurs because this tacit knowledge and skills are best transferred through direct face-to-face communication (Kick, Contacos-Sawyer, & Thomas, 2015, p. 218). Employee’s increasing dependence on communication through digital social networks has limited their ability to gain the knowledge and skills required through personal development. This has become apparent to companies that have to consistently retrain employees on interpersonal and communication skills that were previously learned through day-to-day interactions. Interpersonal communication is required in almost every position of employment.

# Our future generations are choosing to communicate through digital devices instead of interpersonal communication.

Replacing interpersonal communication with texting can keep teens from learning how to read facial expressions, body language, or nuances in speech, all key components that are required to develop empathy for our fellow humans. Studies by the Pew Research center indicate that the “typical American teen is sending and receiving a greater number of texts… Overall, 75% of all teens text” (Lenhart, 2012). With more teens relying on texting and not communicating face-to-face, their emotional growth can become stunted. Emotional growth is a key soft skill learned by observing behavior in other people. Self-confidence might also be underdeveloped due to constant texting and use of social media. Teens use cell phones anywhere from 4-8 hours per day. This means when they are not in class or in extracurricular activities they are on their phones (Lenhart, 2012) The widespread use of digital devices has limited our youth’s ability to develop interpersonal communication skills. This screen dependence can limit their future interactions with the world as they age and enter the workforce and negatively impact society in general.

# Conclusion

After examining the research on how digital devices impact how we as individuals and as groups communicate, these devices impact interpersonal communication in a negative way. Our face-to-face communication is on a decline due to choosing digital communication instead of interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is on decline due to the constant use of digital devices. Face-to-face communication between family, friends and coworkers is declining, and as a result of this decline there is a marked loss of quality in communication. Effective interpersonal communication is in jeopardy, teenagers prefer to use digital devices for communication, businesses and families are relying on social media to communicate. All these factors combined demonstrate that digital devices are impacting interpersonal communication in a negative way.

# References

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