

**Face-to-Face Communication Versus Digital Communication in Relationship Building
Among College Students**

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Introduction

Communication plays a central role in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Throughout history, face-to-face interaction has been the primary method through which individuals establish trust, express emotions, resolve conflicts, and maintain social connections. Face-to-face communication allows individuals to exchange verbal messages while interpreting nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and tone of voice. These cues strengthen understanding and reduce misunderstandings. However, technological advances over the past several decades have changed how people communicate. Text messaging, social media platforms, video calls, and other forms of computer-mediated communication are now common methods of interaction among friends, family members, and romantic partners.

The increasing use of digital communication has generated considerable interest among researchers seeking to understand how technology influences relationship development and maintenance. College students are a particularly important population for studying these changes because they rely heavily on smartphones, social media, and messaging applications. Digital communication offers convenience, accessibility, and the ability to remain connected across distance, but some researchers question whether it may also reduce opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interaction and weaken relationship quality.

The literature presents mixed findings on communication methods and relationship outcomes. Some researchers argue that face-to-face communication is most effective for developing trust, emotional intimacy, and relationship satisfaction due to its rich social and

emotional cues (Goodman-Deane et al., 2016; Pollmann et al., 2021). Others suggest that digital communication can support relationship development and maintenance when used appropriately (McGee, 2014; Wilson et al., 2006), while still others emphasize that it is most effective when it supplements rather than replaces in-person interaction (Russett & Waldron, 2017; Sutcliffe et al., 2023). **This literature review examines research on face-to-face and digital communication among college students and young adults across four categories: trust and honesty, emotional closeness and intimacy, relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution, and communication methods and relationship maintenance.**

Trust and Honesty

Trust and honesty are essential components of healthy relationships. Face-to-face and digital communication influence how trust develops and is maintained, but they do so in different ways. Researchers have examined whether communication methods affect willingness to trust others and whether digital platforms introduce new challenges for honesty within relationships.

Norton et al. (2018), in *Computer-Mediated Communication in Intimate Relationships: Associations of Boundary Crossing, Intrusion, Relationship Satisfaction, and Partner Responsiveness*, found that “participants’ reports of online boundary crossing were linked with lower relationship satisfaction and partner responsiveness” (p. 165). This suggests that privacy violations or monitoring behaviors online can weaken trust and reduce relational satisfaction. The authors define online intrusion as “when a partner monitors an individual’s use of social networking sites, blogs, and other technologies” (p. 168), highlighting how digital communication can introduce surveillance-like dynamics that undermine relational security.

Novak et al. (2016), in *The Impact of Texting on Perceptions of Face-to-Face Communication in Couples in Different Relationship Stages*, found that “the more an individual used texting to discuss serious issues, broach confrontational subjects, and apologize, the more conflictual face-to-face communication behaviors existed for both themselves and their partners” (p. 274). This indicates that using texting for emotionally complex conversations may carry over into in-person interactions, increasing misunderstandings and conflict due to the absence of tone, facial expression, and body language.

Wilson et al. (2006), in *All in Due Time: The Development of Trust in Computer-Mediated and Face-to-Face Teams*, define trust as “confident positive expectations about the conduct of another” (p. 18). They found that “trust started lower in computer-mediated teams but increased to levels comparable to those in face-to-face teams over time” (p. 16), suggesting that although digital communication may slow initial trust formation, it does not prevent trust from developing when interaction is consistent. They also report that there was “little support for the prediction that teams with face-to-face interaction would ultimately exhibit higher levels of trust than teams interacting electronically” (p. 27), challenging the assumption that in-person communication is inherently superior for trust building.

Face-to-face communication still plays an important role in early relationship development. Pollmann et al. (2021), in *A Daily-Diary Study on the Effects of Face-to-Face Communication, Texting, and Their Interplay on Understanding and Relationship Satisfaction*, found that “texting, by contrast, did not predict relationship satisfaction” (p. 1), suggesting that texting alone is not sufficient for establishing strong relational quality. In contrast, in-person

interaction provides richer emotional cues that support clearer interpretation of intentions and help reduce misunderstandings during trust formation.

Wright (2004), in *Computer-Mediated Social Support, Older Adults, and Coping*, found that “openness and positivity were the most frequent” relational maintenance behaviors (p. 249). Openness, involving honest self-disclosure, supports trust development regardless of communication medium. **This suggests that communication style may be more influential than the platform used.**

Emotional Closeness and Intimacy

Emotional closeness and intimacy are central to relationship development, particularly among college students forming new friendships and romantic relationships. Face-to-face and digital communication differ in how they support feelings of connection and understanding, and research has examined whether intimacy develops more effectively through in-person interaction or computer-mediated communication.

Pollmann et al. (2021), found that “texting was positively associated with understanding, but only when face-to-face communication was relatively low” (p. 1). This suggests that texting supports emotional closeness primarily as a supplement to in-person interaction rather than as a standalone method. Understanding is a key component of intimacy because it contributes to feelings of validation and emotional security within relationships. Face-to-face communication strengthens this process by providing simultaneous verbal and nonverbal cues such as facial expression, tone of voice, and body language, which help reduce misinterpretation and deepen emotional connection.

Sutcliffe et al. (2023), in *Investigating the Use of Social Media in Intimate Social Relationships*, found that “communication with best friends was either face to face or by conversational media (phone, text) in both normal use and emergencies” (p. 379). They also note that “when interacting with strong ties, people often choose richer media, affording more social cues and synchronicity to improve emotion and affection expression” (p. 380). Together, these findings indicate that emotionally close relationships tend to rely on communication methods that allow greater emotional expression and immediacy, particularly during moments of support or conflict.

Russett and Waldron (2017) highlight the developmental challenges that shape intimacy in emerging adulthood, explaining that “developing intimacy in emerging adulthood is challenged by instability of residence and the formation of new friendships and romantic partners” (p. 5). College students frequently experience transitions such as moving away from home and adjusting to new social environments, which can make sustained emotional connection more difficult. As a result, communication becomes a key mechanism for maintaining closeness during periods of instability.

McGee (2014), in *Is Texting Ruining Intimacy?*, notes that texting is “a convenient and easy way to stay in touch throughout the day” (p. 412) and that “CMC can be very intimate, and couples can potentially become acquainted faster online than through face-to-face contact” (p. 405). This suggests that digital communication can accelerate early stages of emotional bonding by increasing interaction frequency and reducing social barriers to self-disclosure.

This idea is supported by Wright (2004), who discusses earlier research indicating that “previously unknown partners were able to achieve greater intimacy via computer-mediated

communication than in parallel face-to-face interaction” (p. 246). Digital communication may facilitate this by allowing individuals more time to construct responses and reducing the pressure of immediate face-to-face interaction, which can encourage openness.

Russett and Waldron (2017) further describe intimacy as developing across communication layers, noting that social needs may be fulfilled through SNSs “from little connectivity (friending someone on SNSs), to instant messaging or texting, to connecting by phone or in person, the highest level of intimacy” (p. 5). This progression suggests that digital communication often functions as an entry point that can eventually support deeper face-to-face relationships rather than replacing them. However, limitations remain in text-based communication. McGee (2014) explains that “tone cannot be communicated well through text and is often misinterpreted” (p. 413) and that “it is very difficult to understand meaning behind a short text” (p. 413). These challenges reduce emotional clarity, particularly in situations where tone and intent are important, such as conflict or sensitive conversations.

Pollmann et al. (2021) further reinforce the importance of face-to-face interaction, finding that “the more face-to-face communication participants had with their partners, the more understood they felt and the more satisfied they were with their relationship” (p. 1). They also conclude that while texting helps maintain connection, it “does not contribute to understanding and relationship satisfaction in the same way that FtF communication does” (p. 6). **This highlights the continued importance of in-person interaction for deeper emotional understanding.**

Relationship Satisfaction and Conflict Resolution

Relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution are central to how individuals evaluate the quality of their relationships, and communication plays a major role in both processes. Researchers have examined whether face-to-face or digital communication better supports satisfaction and helps couples navigate disagreements, with findings suggesting advantages and limitations in both modes depending on how they are used.

Joy Goodman-Deane, Anna Mieczakowski, Daniel Johnson, Tanya Goldhaber, and P. John Clarkson (2016), in *The Impact of Communication Technologies on Life and Relationship Satisfaction*, found that “richer communication methods that include nonverbal cues, such as face-to-face interaction, phone calls, and video calls, were positively associated with both life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction” (p. 3). They further note that face-to-face communication is “arguably the richest communication method” because it includes “instant feedback...intonation, gesture, body language and touch” (p. 34). These findings suggest that communication methods allowing immediate feedback and nonverbal expression tend to support higher relationship satisfaction, particularly in early-stage or developing relationships where interpretation of intent is important.

Traci L. Anderson and Tara M. Emmers-Sommer (2006), in *Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in Online Romantic Relationships*, found that “intimacy, trust, and communication satisfaction were the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction” (p. 153). This shifts emphasis away from communication medium and toward communication quality, indicating that digital communication can support satisfying relationships when trust and effective communication are present.

However, communication methods can still shape how conflict unfolds. Novak et al. (2016) found that “the more an individual used texting to discuss serious issues, broach confrontational subjects, and apologize, the more conflictual face-to-face communication behaviors existed for both themselves and their partners” (p. 274). This suggests that using texting for emotionally complex conversations may carry tension into in-person interactions. Without nonverbal cues, meaning can be misinterpreted, increasing the likelihood of misunderstanding during conflict. At the same time, the same study found that “when couples used texting to express affection, the less conflictual face-to-face communication behaviors existed for both partners” (p. 274). This indicates that the impact of digital communication depends heavily on its purpose, with supportive messaging contributing to smoother interactions.

Norton et al. (2018) further highlight how certain digital behaviors can undermine relationship quality, finding that “participants’ reports of online boundary crossing were linked with lower relationship satisfaction and partner responsiveness” (p. 165). Monitoring or intrusive online behavior is associated with reduced trust, suggesting that digital communication can introduce relational risks not typically present in face-to-face interaction.

In contrast, Wright (2004) emphasizes that relational outcomes are strongly influenced by communication behaviors rather than medium alone, reporting that “positivity and openness were the most frequently used maintenance strategies” (p. 239). These behaviors support cooperation, trust, and emotional stability, reinforcing the idea that how individuals communicate matters more than where communication occurs. Similarly, Sutcliffe et al. (2023) note that “successfully maintaining relationships has been linked to several positive outcomes, including

relational satisfaction and longevity” (p. 380), highlighting that consistent interaction is central to sustaining relationship quality over time regardless of platform.

Finally, Wilson et al. (2006) found that mistrust-related behaviors were associated with “lower levels of cognitive and affective trust and lower levels of cooperation” (p. 27). This reinforces the broader pattern that trust and cooperation are foundational to both satisfaction and conflict resolution, and that breakdowns in communication, whether online or offline, can negatively affect relationship outcomes.

Overall, the literature suggests that communication quality, rather than communication medium alone, plays the greatest role in relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution.

Communication Methods and Relationship Maintenance

Relationship maintenance refers to the behaviors individuals use to preserve relationships over time and keep them stable, satisfying, and meaningful. As communication technologies have become integrated into daily life, researchers have examined how both face-to-face and digital communication contribute to maintaining interpersonal relationships. While in-person interaction remains important, digital communication is widely recognized as a key tool for sustaining relationships, particularly among college students and young adults whose schedules and mobility often limit face-to-face contact.

Wright (2004) explains that “relational maintenance is necessary to keep relationships in a stable and satisfactory condition” (Dindia & Canary, 1993, as cited in Wright, 2004, p. 244) and that “successfully maintaining relationships has been linked to several positive outcomes, including relational satisfaction and longevity” (p. 244). These findings emphasize that consistent communication is central to relationship stability, regardless of whether it occurs face-to-face or digitally.

Research by Goodman-Deane et al. (2016) similarly shows that communication methods with richer social cues are associated with higher relationship satisfaction. While face-to-face interaction provides access to nonverbal cues such as facial expression, gesture, and tone, the findings mainly highlight that communication richness supports stronger relational outcomes rather than any single dominant communication mode.

Sutcliffe et al. (2023) found that “Face to Face (FtF), phone and text were preferred by the majority of participants for social relationship maintenance” (p. 379), indicating that individuals continue to rely on direct communication methods rather than social media for maintaining close relationships. They further report that “the majority (26/30) of participants reported that dyadic communication (FtF, Phone, Text) was the most important means of maintaining social relationships” (p. 385). Together, these findings suggest that relationship maintenance is primarily sustained through direct, interpersonal communication rather than public or passive online interaction.

The role of digital communication becomes especially clear in college populations. Russett and Waldron (2017) note that social networking platforms are increasingly used to connect students before they meet in person, demonstrating how digital tools support early

relationship formation during major life transitions. They further found that digital communication serves as an important means of building relationships and sustaining community (p. 8), particularly for students adjusting to new environments and social networks.

Additional research suggests that digital communication is most effective when integrated with face-to-face interaction. Russett and Waldron (2017) cite findings that SNS use typically complements rather than replaces offline relationships, and Sutcliffe et al. (2023) similarly conclude that social media supplements, rather than supplants, offline relationships (p. 388). This indicates that digital communication is best understood as a support system for ongoing relationships rather than a standalone method of maintenance.

Wilson et al. (2006) further support the effectiveness of computer-mediated communication over time, finding “little support for the prediction that teams with face-to-face interaction would ultimately exhibit higher levels of trust than teams interacting electronically.” They also report that trust began lower in computer-mediated environments but increased to comparable levels over time. This suggests that sustained interaction, rather than communication medium, is key to long-term relationship maintenance.

Overall, the literature suggests that relationship maintenance is most effective when multiple communication methods are combined. **Across studies, the strongest relationships tend to rely on a balance of face-to-face and digital communication rather than either one alone.**

Conclusion

Overall, the literature demonstrates that both face-to-face and digital communication play important roles in relationship development and maintenance among college students. Across the studies reviewed, four consistent themes emerged: trust and honesty, emotional closeness and intimacy, relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution, and communication methods and relationship maintenance. While findings differ on which communication method is most effective, the research generally indicates that face-to-face interaction supports deeper relational understanding, while digital communication helps sustain relationships over time.

Across the research, several consistent themes emerged. Face-to-face communication was generally associated with stronger trust, emotional understanding, and relationship satisfaction because of its rich verbal and nonverbal cues. At the same time, digital communication was shown to support relationship maintenance by helping people remain connected between in-person interactions. Overall, the literature suggests that these communication methods work best when they complement one another rather than replace one another.

As communication technologies continue to evolve, further research may explore how emerging platforms and changing social norms influence relationship development among college students. Overall, the evidence suggests that face-to-face communication remains especially important for developing trust and emotional depth, while digital communication plays an essential role in maintaining relationships and enabling continuous connection in modern social life.

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