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What Is Digital Communication? Developing a Conceptual Definition of the Term

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ABSTRACT

This inductive paper seeks to develop a conceptual definition of the term ‘digital communication,’ enriching the literature that lacks a definition. To that end, the authors collected twenty-five manifestations, or insufficient fragmented pieces of knowledge, from the literature, employing the theme-rheme concept to analyze the manifestations collected and (employing the same formula) to condense and synthesize the themes and rhemes found in a working conceptual definition of the term. The ‘theme-rheme’ concept proposed for analysis and synthesis was utilized from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Based on the analyses of the manifestations collected, this paper defines digital communication as the process through which a source, using an interactive channel, sends a purposive, binarily programmed, greased, measurable, widely accessible, and retrievable message to a destination that has unlimited opportunity to provide feedback. The working definition developed here is expected to delineate the scope of digital communication and deepen the understanding of the term among theorists, practitioners, researchers, instructors, and students. Ontologically, delineating the scope of digital communication clarifies what falls within it as a field of study and what lies outside. In addition, the definition paves the way for developing a model for digital communication (in which the message is socially and cross-culturally constructed) and courses for teaching it.

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 15 November 2024 | Revised: 17 December 2024 | Accepted: 19 December 2024 | Published Online: 3 January 2025
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i1.7766>

CITATION

El-Astal, M., El-Youssef, H., 2025. What Is Digital Communication? Developing a Conceptual Definition of the Term. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(1): 471–479. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i1.7766>

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Keywords: Digital Communication Definition; Theme-Rheme; Social Constructionism; Cross-Cultural Constructionism; Language Learning; Ontology; Inductive Method

1. Introduction

The term ‘communication’ is a polysemous term. In the social sciences, it is understood as a human activity through which information is transmitted from a source to a destination, a shaper of public opinion, and a relationship developer^[1]. Epistemologically, our knowledge of the world is created and shared through communication^[2], and language carries that knowledge to us. In the social sciences, communication is a dynamic and complex process emphasizing the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. For Caron and Caronia, cultures are constructed through language and daily interactions (communication of all types)^[3].

In engineering, it denotes the technical process through which signals are transmitted from a source to a destination, focusing on signal transmission’s efficiency, reliability, and accuracy. According to Gallager, engineering provides humans with technological aids to share information^[4]. That is to say, engineer communicators provide humans with technological aids, and humans use those aids to share information, ideas, and emotions (with and without those technological aids). In other domains, the term is employed differently.

Over time, human communication developed from the verbal exchange of meaning to the digital exchange of meaning, passing through intermediary stages such as written, printed, and analog—analog includes television and radio. Neuman depicts this shift as a shift from ‘push’ to ‘pull’ and from one-way to two-way communication^[5]. Each stage contributed to how meanings were conveyed and how information, ideas, and emotions were shared. This paper concerns human digital communication (HDC). It is not about how signals are technically transmitted from a source to a destination. Reviewing the literature on digital communication shows no clear, coherent conceptual definition of the term as a human activity. To define it, this paper seeks to collect as many manifestations of digital communication as possible, analyze them, and then condense them into a definition that provides a fuller understanding of the term.

In what follows, we will explain the theoretical concept utilized to orient analysis, followed by the research’s

methodology. Next, we will display, analyze, discuss the findings, and draw conclusions.

2. Framework for Analysis

El-Astal used the theme-rheme analysis, adapted from Halliday’s (1985) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), to analyze tens of definitions of the term ‘curriculum’ he collected to build a broader understanding of the term^[6]. In his paper, El-Astal recommended the theme-rheme formula for defining undefined or unclearly defined terms.

SFL, according to Eggins, identifies three meta-functional meanings of language: ideational (relating to representing the world and conveying ideas), interpersonal (relating to expressing relationships and social interaction), and textual (about texts’ organization and coherence)^[7]. This study focuses on the textual meanings of language, which are realized from the wordings of the manifestations examined. For Eggins, clauses usually contain two functional components: theme and rheme. Halliday and Matthiessen describe the theme as the portion of the clause that serves as the starting point^[8], and Eggins describes the rheme as the portion where the theme is explained further^[7].

For this study, we reviewed the literature, especially social sciences literature, and could not find clear and coherent definitions of ‘digital communication.’ We sent emails to more than a hundred experts (academic and non-academic), asking them to define the term the way they understand it to analyze the collected definitions and then condense them into a more comprehensive definition. Unfortunately, we received two replies. This being the case, we decided to do an inductive study collecting the insufficient or fragmented knowledge, as Elo and Kyngäs describe it^[9], available about the term in the literature and then analyze the information gathered using the theme-rheme concept, aiming to condense and synthesize the ideas found in a more coherent working definition of digital communication employing the same formula—theme-rheme. This approach is useful when the existing literature is fragmented or lacks a coherent and precise definition. It helps researchers build knowledge from

the ground up.

3. Methodology

This is an inductive theoretical study. Theoretically, the paper addresses ontological questions such as what digital communication is and what makes it digital. Inductively, it seeks to develop a definition of the term ‘digital communication’ from what Elo and Kyngäs described as fragmented knowledge embedded in the literature about the term^[9]. To that end, tens of manifestations of digital communication and its synonymous words and phrases, such as internet communication, online communication, digital communication media, digital communication channels, new media, and digital communication technologies, were collected from the literature. Manifestation here refers to every clause, sentence, or paragraph that explicitly or implicitly describes the term and its synonymous words and phrases in the literature—every piece or fragment of knowledge that works as a theme or rheme, as Halliday put it^[10].

The strategy followed in this study involved four stages: (a) the authors gathered as many manifestations as possible from the literature on digital communication, (b) broke the manifestations collected into themes and rhemes, (c) identified the patterned ideas within the themes and rhemes found, and finally, (d) condensed and synthesized the identified

patterns into a final working definition of the term ‘digital communication.’

It is worth mentioning here that the authors’ varied educational backgrounds equipped them with the interdisciplinary knowledge to conduct this study. The first author has expertise in communication, public relations, technical writing, applied linguistics, and discourse studies, and the second author has expertise in science and applied linguistics.

4. Results and Discussion

In this part of the study, the manifestations of the term ‘digital communication’ collected from the literature will be displayed, explained, discussed, and then synthesized into a clear definition using the theme-rheme or, as El-Astal dubs it, the trunk-branch formula^[6]. El-Astal proposed using the phrase ‘trunk-branch’ to help those without a background in linguistics understand the concept, as the theme-rheme is a linguistic concept. The manifestations collected are displayed below (**Table 1**).

To develop a definition of the term ‘digital communication,’ we will condense and synthesize the main ideas embedded in the manifestations displayed above (**Table 1**) into a theme (to start the definition with) and a rheme in which we will develop that theme.

Table 1. Manifestations of digital communication and synonymous terms.

#	Manifestations
1.	Greased digital information can slide quickly and easily to a large number of ports ^[11] .
2.	According to Carly Fiorina (former HP CEO), all analog processes and content can be digitized and transmitted over the Internet, computers, satellites, or fiber-optic cables ^[12] .
3.	In digital communication, signals are usually transmitted in a simple binary form, with complex and heterogeneous content ^[13] .
4.	Digital communication packages contain data, images, film, sound, or combinations of the same ^[13] .
5.	Digital communication can be cheaply and easily measured ^[13] .
6.	When information is communicated ‘virally’ in a digital global context, controlling its flow is not easy ^[13] .
7.	Information digitalization refers to the process of transforming information into bits—a bit is a binary digit ^[13] .
8.	Digitalization redefined communication parlance with its unparalleled capabilities such as accessibility, interactivity, and measurability ^[14–16] .
9.	Kaplan and Haenlein categorize social media into six types: collaborative projects, content communities, blogs, social networking sites, virtual social worlds, and virtual game worlds ^[17] .
10.	E-mail, as a digital communication medium, remains the most used tool in today’s organizations ^[18] .
11.	Digital media, such as emails, video chats, social media, mobile phone calls, and text messages, transcend time and distance and thereby enrich social connectivity and inclusion ^[19] .
12.	Social media, networked media, and online media are seen as specific extensions of digital media ^[20] .
13.	Taiminen and Karjaluoto divide digital communication channels into: (a) one-way communication channels such as websites, e-mail newsletters, online directories, banner advertising, search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine advertising (SEA), and (b) two-way communication channels such as blogs, online communities, and social media ^[21] .

Table 1. Cont.

#	Manifestations
14.	The content of the traditional media such as television, newspaper, and radio will equally be available on the internet ^[5] .
15.	Since 2005, noticeable digital convergence has been witnessed as traditional media such as books, newspapers, recordings, television, and movies are increasingly being provided by the internet ^[5] .
16.	Digital media are seen as media that are programmatically produced ^[22] .
17.	Georgakopoulou and Spilioti group digital media into (a) first generation media including email, text-messaging, instant messaging, and online forums, and (b) second generation media such as social media ^[23] .
18.	Online information sources include search engines, a dealer’s website, a manufacturer’s website, a news website, an online magazine, a social networking site, an expert review website, an independent research site, an online discussion board, and YouTube ^[16] .
19.	E-marketing focuses on how companies use digital media, such as mobile media and e-mail, to interact with their audiences and achieve their goals ^[24] .
20.	Kovaitė, Šumakaris, and Stankevičienė group digital channels into six areas: enterprise social media, instant messaging, electronic media, streaming, intranet-based knowledge and performance management [systems], and online profiles ^[25] .
21.	Greased digital information is easily copied and distributed ^[26] .
22.	Digital media transform extant information (such as texts written on word-processors, voices over a phone, videos recorded and broadcast, pictures, etc.) into greased information ^[26] .
23.	Digital communication media allow multiple possibilities of feedback ^[26] .
24.	Digital media conjoin both traditional and, in some situations, new types of information sources ^[26] .
25.	Emails, personal blogs, social networking services (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.), and video and photo distribution sites (e.g., YouTube, etc.) provide ways for individuals to develop and enhance relationships ^[26] .

4.1. Theme

A cursory look at the manifestations above (Table 1) shows that all manifestations (except item 7) do not have a clear, explicit theme. Item 7 themed digital communication as a process. This is a good starting point for the definition. It is worth noting that many definitions of the term ‘traditional communication’ refer to the human act of communication as a process. The word ‘process’ implies that communication is not merely a one-step act: steps or actions that differ from one situation to another depending on the communicator (whether an individual or an organization) and the medium used (whether a mass or non-mass medium). These aspects were sufficiently discussed in the traditional communication literature.

4.2. Rheme

A careful consideration of the manifestations displayed above (Table 1) shows that the defining features of the term ‘digital communication’ explicitly and implicitly embedded can be summarized as follows:

4.2.1. Source

The source (often referred to as the sender, originator, the starter of the communication process) is the person, group, or organization that delivers the message. It is explicitly men-

tioned in item 18 (Table 1). This item tells us that digital communication changed the pattern from many-to-many or one-to-one to any-to-any communication—the idea that Cho, Furey, and Mohr highlighted^[27]. Unlike traditional communication, digital communication integrates many-to-many, one-to-many, and one-to-one forms of communication^[28].

With this in mind, it can be concluded that communication in a digital context has become one-to-one, like an email or instant messaging to a friend or a colleague; one-to-group, such as a group chat or a webinar targeting a small group of participants; one-to-public, like a speech given by a politician to a big gathering; one-to-many, such as a podcast directed at a large number of scattered recipients; group-to-one, like collective feedback provided by a team to a project manager; group-to-group, such as a team’s feedback to another team in collaborative projects; group-to-public, like a group of politicians speaking to a big gathering; group-to-many, such as a group of influencers targeting a large number of scattered recipients; or organization-to-many scattered and heterogeneous audiences, as described by Michael Gamble and Teri Gamble^[29], like any of the mass media’s messages.

In a quick comparison between the source in a digital and traditional environment, the source in digital communication can be an automated system that interacts with the audience in real time, which is impossible in traditional communication. Moreover, sources in digital communication

have greater autonomy in content creation and distribution. As technology advances, the differences between both types of communication will likely develop further.

4.2.2. Channel

The channel is the medium that carries the message to its destination. The digital channels that the manifestations above (**Table 1**) reflect include collaborative projects, blogs, social networking sites, virtual social worlds, virtual game worlds, email, video chats, social media, mobile phone calls, text messages, websites of all types, e-mail newsletters, online directories, banner advertising, search engines of all kinds, online communities, books, newspapers, recordings, television, movies, instant messaging, online forums, online magazines, online discussion boards, streaming, intranet-based knowledge and performance management systems, and online profiles (items 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20). Considering the definition of a channel provided at the beginning of this paragraph, not all these tools are channels. There is a misunderstanding of a channel and genre. For example, banner advertising is a genre, not a channel. To distinguish between a genre and a channel or medium, a genre is the form or type in which information is enclosed and organized, and the channel is the carrier of the genre. Myers defines genre as texts with specific features whose users have the same purposes^[30].

The Internet is not a medium per se but a virtual world in which all these communication channels exist. As various channels exist in the virtual world, several exist in the real world. Channels in both worlds have different characteristics and implications for communication. By recognizing the differences and similarities between these two worlds of communication and their characteristics, we can better understand how messages are shaped and how effective they are.

Interactivity distinguishes a digital communication channel from a traditional one. Three of the manifestations (**Table 1**) reflect the interactivity of digital channels (items 8, 19, and 23). Interactivity refers to users' involvement in the exchange of information. Companies use widgets, opt-in features, and social media integration to make their websites interactive and solicit feedback^[24]. Widgets include comment sections, live chat, polls, and surveys, while opt-in features include feedback forms and choosing to receive notifications, promotions, publications, and updates. Interestingly, some platforms use gamification to enhance users' engagement.

Gamification involves integrating game-like elements, such as challenges and quizzes, into a non-gaming context.

4.2.3. Message

The message refers to the information the source intends to share with the destination. Several manifestations (**Table 1**) refer to the message of digital communication indirectly using synonymous words or phrases. This is mirrored in the following excerpts (inferred from **Table 1**): (a) 'information' (items 1, 6, 7, 18, 21, and 22), (b) 'content' (items 2, 3, and 14), and (c) 'communication packages' (item 4). The words 'information,' 'content,' and 'package' depict the message as a commodity the source shares with the destination. Viewing the message as a commodity reflects the transactional nature of communication.

A careful consideration of the manifestations in **Table 1** reveals that the following features distinguish the message in digital communication contexts from traditional ones:

Purposive

A closer examination of the above manifestations (**Table 1**) reveals that only two explicitly address digital media's communicative purpose or function. These instances highlight how digital communication serves as a tool for fostering social connections and improving interpersonal relationships. Item 11 illustrates how digital communication enhances social connectivity and inclusion, emphasizing its role in bridging gaps between individuals and groups, regardless of physical or geographical barriers. Similarly, item 25 underscores digital communication's capacity to foster relationships. Whiting and Williams found ten functions of social media^[31]. These purposes and others explain how digital communication genres are purposive.

Digital communication also has an instructional function. It can be a learning, skill development, and knowledge acquisition medium. For example, experimental research has demonstrated a positive correlation between digital communication and developing strong spelling skills^[32]. This suggests that engaging in digital communication—whether through instant messaging or other written forms of online interaction—allows individuals to practice and refine their language skills in real-world contexts. For the author, the positive correlations identified in the literature between digital media and literacy skills are sufficient to question the assumption that digital communication negatively impacts

language learning.

Interestingly, Zeng^[33] identified a significant correlation between digital communication and developing learners' agency. By agency, the author meant the capacity to manipulate and employ online technologies to facilitate language learning. For McNulty and Lazarevic, video-based ESL activities improved learning in general, with a particular impact on the development of pronunciation skills^[34]. Videos combine auditory, visual, and contextual elements (such as daily conversations and idiomatic expressions), making it easier for learners to understand.

Binarily/Digitally Programmed

Programming information digitally means transforming it into bits—a bit is short for binary digit^[13]. A binary digit or bit is the smallest data unit in digital communications and computing. Converting data into a binary format enables storing, processing, and transmitting over channels. A binary digit represents one of two potential states: 0 or 1. Digital information is measured in bytes (one byte equals 8 bits), kilobytes (KB), megabytes (MB), gigabytes (GB), terabytes (TB), etc.

The extracts below (inferred from the manifestations displayed in **Table 1**) reflect this trait: (a) 'all analog processes and content can be digitized and transmitted over the Internet, computers, satellites, or fiber-optic cables' (item 2), (b) 'in digital communication, signals are usually transmitted in a simple binary form' (item 3), (c) 'information digitalization refers to the process of transforming information into bits' (item 7), (d) 'digital media are programmatically produced' (item 16), and (e) 'digital media transform extant information into greased information' (item 22).

Greased

The word 'greased' was used thrice in the manifestations examined here (items 1, 21, and 22). In the three situations, the word was employed metaphorically to describe the quality of easily, quickly, and efficiently disseminating and distributing messages in a digital environment to many ports. The word 'greased' highlights the optimized pathways that enable messages to travel to audiences effortlessly and without delay, enhancing their effectiveness in today's interconnected world, where digital environments dominate the exchange of information. Consequently, the word "greased" encapsulates a critical aspect of modern communication:

the need for seamless and efficient message dissemination, maintaining influence, and engagement in an increasingly connected and dynamic global environment.

Measurable

Measurability refers to the ability to assess the outcomes, characteristics, or attributes of a digital communication message. Digital communication tools and technologies allow for precise tracking and analysis of how the targeted audience understands and acts upon messages. Two of the manifestations displayed above (items 5 and 8, **Table 1**) emphasize that messages in digital communication contexts can be cheaply and easily measured, analyzed, and assessed compared to traditional contexts.

Digital communication provides a range of tools that enable the measurability of messages. For example, metrics like views, clicks, likes, shares, reviews, and comments provide quantifiable and immediate feedback on how the audience engaged with the intended content. In addition, advanced analytics tools provide detailed reports on audience demographics, preferences, and behavior, enabling the sender to understand deeply how the message performed across different segments of receivers.

In fact, measurability in digital communication extends beyond quantitative metrics to include qualitative insights. Such valuable qualitative data helps communicators understand their audience's perceptions, sentiments, and emotions. To conclude, this quality gives digital communication unparalleled ability compared to traditional communication, where measurability is limited in scope, time-consuming, and expensive. Traditional communicators usually use surveys, focus groups, polls, etc., to measure their messages' effectiveness.

Widely Accessible and Retrievable

Two manifestations (**Table 1**) reflect the accessibility and retrievability of digital information (items 8 and 21). Accessibility and retrievability are closely related characteristics of digital communication messages. Accessibility means that the message can be accessed from anywhere and anytime with an internet connection. This feature is fundamental to sharing information in today's interconnected world, where individuals can access information at their own pace and on their own terms. This flexibility encourages receivers' engagement and enhances their experience.

On the other hand, retrievability refers to the ease with which users can locate and retrieve archived content. Information in digital communication is usually organized into categories and preserved in archives, repositories, and libraries. In digital communication contexts, users are provided with robust search functionalities that allow them to enter phrases or keywords into search engines to locate and retrieve relevant information with minimal effort and rapidly. Some engines allow for advanced search through filtering results based on specific criteria, such as region, subject matter, date, etc.

4.2.4. Destination

The destination refers to the message's intended endpoint or recipient. As item 1 (**Table 1**) above demonstrates, a message in digital communication targets many ports or destinations. In digital communication, the destination can be a system, such as content management systems, databases, or applications developed to handle specific types of information; an individual where information is tailored to meet a single recipient's needs, interests, or preferences, like personalized emails, messages, or notifications; a group where information targets a group of individuals who share common interests, goals, or characteristics; a public where a big gathering is targeted; or a mass where identical messages target scattered and heterogeneous audiences, usually unknown to the source. To conclude, the recipients in digital communication can be homogeneous or heterogeneous, gathered in one place or scattered, known to the source or unknown.

The channel's interactivity in digital communication offers the recipient(s) unlimited opportunities to provide feedback and participate in constructing and reconstructing meaning. In this context, social constructionism, articulated by Debra Journet and cited in Smart^[35], becomes relevant as humans construct their understanding of the world through social interaction.

It is worth noting here that digital communication's interactivity increases the possibility of constructing understandings across borders—cross-cultural constructionism. Put differently, new understandings and meanings can be created as individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds engage with each other, which makes cross-cultural constructionism relevant.

5. Conclusions

As stated above, the study seeks to develop a coherent conceptual definition of digital communication from the fragmented knowledge embedded in the literature. Based on the findings above, digital communication can be defined as a process that includes the following:

- (a) A source—can be an individual, group, or organization,
- (b) An interactive channel—that allows receivers to participate in constructing and reconstructing the message,
- (c) A purposive, binarily programmed, greased, measurable, widely accessible, and retrievable message, and finally
- (d) A destination—can be a system, individual, group, public, or mass.

These key ideas can be synthesized in the following coherent working definition of digital communication: Digital communication is the process through which a source, using an interactive channel, sends a purposive, binarily programmed, greased, measurable, widely accessible, and retrievable message to a destination that has unlimited opportunity to provide feedback.

The proposed definition of digital communication serves multiple purposes. In addition to deepening understanding and delineating its scope, it is expected to help theorists develop models and frameworks, researchers identify relevant literature and design methodologies, and educators develop courses on it. Delineating the scope of digital communication clarifies what falls within it as a field of study and what lies outside it.

The proposed definition adds to the knowledge needed to teach digital communication. Enhancing research on digital communication at the graduate and postgraduate levels is necessary to accumulate a sufficient, robust knowledge base for teaching it at the undergraduate level as disciplines develop from top to bottom. However, drawing a more valid conclusion requires sending the proposed definition to several experts from academia and industry for insightful feedback.

Author Contributions

The M.E.-A.'s contribution included writing the methodology and frame for analysis, data curation, data analysis, writing the original draft, supervision, and administra-

tion. The H.E.-Y.'s contribution included collecting data from the literature, writing the resources, and reviewing and editing the draft. The two authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research paper received no grant from any funding agency or institution.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Data can be accessed upon request. Please contact the corresponding author for further information regarding data usage and access.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for providing comments in helping this manuscript to completion.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that there are no apparent competing interests of any type. The authors will inform the journal if an issue arises while publishing this paper.

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