

UDK 159.913:004

159.942:004.773

<https://doi.org/10.53745/bs.95.5.11>

Received: 21. 7. 2025

Accepted: 3. 12. 2025

Review Article

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Empathy in Digital Communication¹

Empatija u digitalnoj komunikaciji

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Abstract

Empathy is a fundamental human ability that combines perception, understanding and emotional response to other people's experiences. As a complex phenomenon, it encompasses both affective and cognitive components and plays a key role in ethical behaviour, social connectedness, prosocial behaviour and building interpersonal relationships. Today's digital communication, which is increasingly replacing face-to-face contact, is significantly changing the way empathy is expressed and raises questions about the possibility of maintaining emotional authenticity in technologically mediated environments. In digital communication, empathy is mostly conveyed through text messages, emoticons (emojis) and other symbolic expressions, while physical presence and non-verbal cues are largely absent. This affects the relationship between cognitive and affective empathy and poses challenges for the understanding, perception and expression of emotions. Digital empathy theory emphasises that technology does not preclude empathy, but requires new approaches that include conscious emotional responsiveness, developed communication sensitivity and a supportive environment. The article analyses the key differences between traditional and digital empathy, highlighting the influence of communication channels, time dynamics, technological mediations and user practises. Given the tendencies towards depersonalisation, fragmentation and asynchrony in digital communication, it highlights the importance of developing strategies to maintain empathic skills as a fundamental element of quality interpersonal connection in the digital age.

Key words: empathy, digital communication, digital empathy, intersubjectivity, embodiment

¹ This article was written in the framework of the research project J6-60105 Theology and digitalization: anthropological and ethical challenges, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS).

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Sažetak

Empatija je temeljna ljudska sposobnost koja obuhvaća percepciju, razumijevanje i emocionalno reagiranje na iskustva drugih. Ona kao složen fenomen uključuje afektivnu i kognitivnu komponentu te ima ključnu ulogu u etičkom ponašanju, društvenoj povezanosti, prosocijalnom djelovanju i izgradnji međuljudskih odnosa. Suvremena digitalna komunikacija, koja sve više zamjenjuje izravan kontakt licem u lice, značajno mijenja načine izražavanja empatije i otvara pitanja o mogućnosti očuvanja emocionalne autentičnosti u tehnološki posredovanim okruženjima.

U digitalnoj komunikaciji empatija se najčešće prenosi putem tekstualnih poruka, emocija i drugih simboličkih izraza, dok su fizička prisutnost i neverbalni znakovi u velikoj mjeri odsutni. To utječe na odnos između kognitivne i afektivne empatije te predstavlja izazov za razumijevanje, percipiranje i izražavanje emocija. Teorija digitalne empatije naglašava da tehnologija ne isključuje empatiju, već zahtijeva nove pristupe koji uključuju svjesnu emocionalnu osjetljivost, razvijenu komunikacijsku kompetenciju i podržavajuće okruženje.

U članku se analiziraju ključne razlike između tradicionalne i digitalne empatije, s naglaskom na utjecaj komunikacijskih kanala, vremenske dinamike, tehnološkog posredovanja i korisničkih praksi. S obzirom na tendencije depersonalizacije, fragmentacije i asinkronosti u digitalnoj komunikaciji, ističe se važnost razvoja strategija za očuvanje empatičkih sposobnosti kao temeljnog elementa kvalitetne međuljudske povezanosti u digitalnom dobu.

Ključne riječi: empatija, digitalna komunikacija, digitalna empatija, emocionalna inteligencija, intersubjektivnost

1. Empathy

1.1. Definition of Empathy

Empathy as both a capacity and concept, occupies an extremely important place in contemporary humanistic thought, as it goes beyond the everyday experience of interpersonal understanding and has become an important theoretical framework for understanding social connectedness, ethical behaviour and even political action in pluralistic societies. The concept refers to the ability to perceive and understand the inner world of another person, i.e. their feelings, thoughts, intentions and experiences (Simonič 2010, 42). However, the concept of empathy is not limited to the psychological framework. It has become a central point of discussion in various disciplines, including philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience, sociology, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Researchers from these different disciplines agree that empathy is one of the fundamental human abilities that enables us to live together in society and build interpersonal relationships.

Although the concept of empathy seems to be familiar to everyone today, scientific and philosophical analysis has revealed numerous layers that are often lost in everyday use. The concept found its way into philosophy through 19th century German aesthetics, where it was understood as »Einfühlung« or empathising with an artistic object (Verducci 2000, 75). This meaning was later extended to the understanding of interpersonal relationships, changing significantly from the passive experience of the viewer of art to active empathy with another person (Gallese 2003, 175). With its translation into English and the development of empirical psychology in the 20th century, empathy also became a central concept in the social sciences. In the context of an increasingly atomised society and fragmented communities created by the modern and postmodern world, empathy has become a mechanism for maintaining connectedness and building relationships. Traditional social ties that bound people together through kinship, shared history and space have loosened, so that the ability to understand others must take a more conscious and structured form (McLeod 2002, 389).

In contemporary phenomenology, particularly in the work of Edmund Husserl, empathy occupies an extremely important place as the basis for the experience of the other and the shared world. Husserl's analysis of intersubjectivity is based on the idea that an individual's consciousness is not formed in isolation, but in relation to others. The key moment is the realisation that an individual only experiences himself in the world through encounters with others, whom he recognises empathically as similar to himself, but as autonomous subjective carriers of experience. Husserl thus emphasises that we live in a world that is not just a private projection of the individual, but an intersubjective space created together with others. Through empathy, we not only perceive others as individuals with their own inner experience, but this experience also influences our self-perception (Hribar Sorčan 2008, 18–20). In this sense, empathy opens the field of ethics, as it results from recognising the subjectivity of others and their autonomy.

Empathy is a universal human ability, the foundations of which are present already in early childhood. Soon after birth, infants demonstrate basic forms of emotional attunement to others, confirming that it is a biologically determined ability (Meltzoff and Moore 1998, 47). Empathy is therefore not merely something that is learnt later in life, but an innate ability that is developed and deepened through life experiences. Mirror neurons in the human brain enable us to perceive the emotional and intentional states of others when we observe their behaviour and thus have an experience as if we were in their

body (Gallese 2003, 171–174). Neuroscientific research has linked this physiological basis of empathy to the evolutionary function of empathy as a means of survival in a community. Communities whose members are able to respond emotionally to each other and understand the needs of others have a greater chance of effective co-operation and cohesion, which is crucial for long-term survival (de Waal 2005, 6–8).

Empathy is expressed both at the level of spontaneous experience and at the level of reflective consciousness. Contemporary models of empathy emphasise the intertwining of two fundamental components – the emotional (affective) and the cognitive. The emotional component involves emotional attunement to another person, the ability to feel similar emotions or resonance with another person, while the cognitive component involves the ability to take another person's perspective, to understand their intentions, thoughts and emotions on a rational level. Integrative models emphasise that empathic responsiveness requires the functioning of both components: perception, understanding and emotional-affective response (Tangney and Dearing 2002, 79–81). Such an integrative view allows for a more comprehensive understanding of empathy as a complex psychological process.

Nevertheless, empathy remains an elusive and ambiguous concept. The difficulty in defining it stems from the fact that it is a complex experience that unfolds on multiple levels – from the physical and emotional to the cognitive and reflexive. One of the most important dimensions of empathy is its temporal dynamics: it is not a one-time event, but a process that develops over the course of a relationship, within a specific context and with the active participation of both people (Simonič 2010, 147–150). Furthermore, there is a danger of confusing empathy with other similar phenomena such as sympathy, compassion, identification, projection or even telepathy. It is important to understand that empathy is about recognising and witnessing the experience of another while maintaining the difference between the self and the self of the other (Clark 2007, 14–16; DeYoung 2003, 55). It is precisely this difference that prevents empathy from turning into fusion or loss of identity, which in extreme cases could lead to psychological destabilisation.

1.2. The Meaning of Empathy

Empathy is of great importance for all aspects of human existence. It has become the basis for discussions about ethical human behaviour. It is not merely a passive experience of another person's inner mental and emotional states, but rather a capacity that leads to ethical reflection and response. In a society

often dominated by selfish interests and growing inequalities, empathy functions as a counterbalance to selfishness, a tool for recognising others as bearers of equal worth and dignity – others as persons (Thompson 2001, 13). The ability to empathise with another person enables understanding and acceptance of differences, which has direct consequences for strengthening democratic processes, multicultural coexistence and building the common good. O'Hara (1997, 303–309) points out that empathy is not only emotional resonance, but also a means of changing consciousness that leads to concrete actions that can prevent social disasters and violence.

Research shows that empathy, as the ability to perceive the distress and emotions of others, promotes moral motivation and guides individuals towards responsible behaviour. When someone recognises another person's suffering through empathy, this can trigger emotions such as compassion, guilt or anger at injustice and lead to an active response (Zahn-Waxler 2002, 224). Edith Stein (1989, 88–89) particularly emphasises that empathy enables us to understand the negative consequences of our actions for others, which is the basis for taking responsibility and repairing the damage. In this sense, empathy is not just an emotional response, but has the potential to change the ethical attitude of the individual.

However, empathy is not always directed towards the well-being of others. There are cases where it can be misused for manipulative or even destructive purposes. Sadists, for example, use their empathetic perception of others' pain to seek and increase suffering because it gives them pleasure (Bloom 2016, 197–201). It is therefore necessary to distinguish between empathy as a capacity and its ethical evaluation – it is not good or bad in itself, but its meaning depends on the intentions and values of the individual.

Empathy is also essential for the development of prosocial behaviour, which includes altruism, helpfulness, solidarity and cooperation. Research confirms that people with higher levels of empathy are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour, as their ability to perceive the plight of others motivates them to help (Anderson and Keltner 2002, 21–22). However, it should be noted that empathy is not always a sufficient condition for prosocial behaviour – personality factors, upbringing, social norms and the context of the situation are also important. It should also be mentioned that excessive emotional engagement can lead to burnout, especially in people working in helping professions such as healthcare, therapists and teachers (Stosic et al. 2022, 89). In these cases, it is crucial to develop the ability to regulate empathy so that it remains effective and sustainable.

Empathy plays a key role in recognising and resolving conflicts and in reconciliation processes. As Edith Stein (1989, 88–89) points out, it allows us to feel the consequences of our actions for others and to recognise when we have wronged them. This inner insight opens up the possibility of repairing the damage done and is fundamental to dealing with tensions and deeper personal or social conflicts. Empathy therefore goes beyond mere emotional resonance – it becomes a tool for understanding the complexity of relationships, behaviours and circumstances in which individuals or groups find themselves. In this way, it enables destructive patterns of blame and recrimination to be broken and encourages cleansing, forgiveness and reconciliation. It creates space for genuine and constructive dialogue that can lead to a holistic understanding and healing of relationships – both in broader societal contexts and in private, intimate interpersonal relationships, such as partner, family or friendship relationships (Simonič 2020, 319).

In contemporary discourse, empathy is increasingly seen as a key competence, not only in private life, but also in the professional and public sphere. A society that promotes empathy as a value creates the conditions for more inclusive politics, fairer educational and social systems and a greater awareness of the vulnerability of individuals and groups. In times of global crises – wars, migration, climate change – empathy becomes a necessary condition for solidarity, for the development of a global ethos that transcends particular interests and recognises our common humanity (Rifkin 2009, 1–3). Here, empathy is transformed from a psychological concept into a political force: the ability to see the world through the eyes of another enables an understanding that leads to fairer decisions and greater social cohesion.

In this context, empathy also has the potential to change the discourse on identity, diversity and difference. In today's multicultural society, where there are many tensions due to ethnic, religious, cultural and other differences, empathy is the ability to empathise with another's world without prejudice (Bobba and Crocetti 2022, 1977–1978; O'Hara 1997, 295–296). We do not necessarily have to agree with others, but we can try to understand them and recognise their perspective as legitimate. Empathy helps us to have a respectful dialogue with everyone because it helps us to understand the complexity of others' situations and to acknowledge that others, who are human beings like us, have a right to their individuality (Calloway-Thomas 2010, 3–6). In this sense, empathy does not mean renouncing one's own identity, but rather expanding the ability to understand the other as different and at the same time

recognising them as someone who reflects certain aspects of ourselves. Such a conception of empathy opens up the space for the creation of a shared subjectivity in which identities are not mutually exclusive but complementary (Stern 2004, 75–77).

Empathy also has a profound connection with the Christian attitude and life, because it essentially embodies the fundamental commandment to love one's neighbour. In this context, empathy means putting yourself in someone else's shoes, listening to their suffering, their joy and their doubts – and staying with them with an open heart. This is not just an emotional response, but active compassion that calls for service, solidarity and justice, because empathy has effective power (Farley 1996, 304–305). Empathy in the Christian life means that we see others not only with our eyes but also with our hearts – as brothers and sisters. It also means that we do not rush to judgement, but seek the truth that lies behind human woundedness. Empathy thus leads us to the realisation of God's kingdom here and now: a kingdom of compassion, respect and dignity for all.

In the spirit of Christianity, empathy is not only a human ability, but also a spiritual attitude: a reflection of God's love, which manifests itself in closeness, attentiveness and compassion towards every human being, especially those who are marginalised (Heise 2000, 28–29). The life and work of Jesus is the deepest school of empathy – when he weeps at the death of Lazarus, when he touches the leper, when he listens to the Samaritan woman, when he forgives from the cross: »Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing.« (Lk 23,34) Empathy here is not just emotional compassion for others, but a deep understanding of the inner state of those who harm him. Jesus sees his tormentors not just as murderers or enemies, but as people acting in ignorance – as people suffering from their own limitations, delusions or blindness. And instead of condemning them, he understands them and even asks for their forgiveness.

Empathy is not just one of many psychological concepts, but a central concept of modern humanity. It is the place where biological conditions, personal experiences, cultural patterns and social structures meet. It is a capacity that is developed, tested and realised through relationships in which individuals transcend the boundaries of their subjectivity to gain understanding of others. This creates space for a genuine encounter – one that heals, transforms and connects. Empathy is therefore fundamental not only to the well-being of the individual, but also to the future of our shared human civilisation.

2. Challenges and Changes in Empathy in the Age of Digital Communication

Digital communication is increasingly replacing personal contact, which affects the quality of interpersonal relationships (Kraner 2023, 1016–1017). The main problem is that social networks and modern technologies contribute to the depersonalisation of communication and at the same time pose a challenge to the development and maintenance of empathy. The intensive use of social networks and digital technologies can lead to depersonalisation of communication, with negative consequences for the development of empathy and the overall quality of interpersonal relationships (Turkle 2011, 1–8). A link has been found between problematic social network use and reduced empathy, indicating the possibility of a gradual erosion of basic social skills (Gutiérrez-Puertas et al. 2020). The replacement of face-to-face interactions with digitally mediated communication leads to greater social disconnection and even dehumanisation as communication loses its personal dimension (Laura and Hannam 2017, 1–2).

One of the main challenges of digital communication is the loss of physical presence, as the body retreats behind the screen and is no longer tangible in such interactions. The presence of the other person is mediated by technology, which limits the direct perception of physical and emotional signals that are essential for empathy (Gumbrecht 2004, 80–85). Such depersonalisation means that emotional responses may become mechanical and algorithmic and lack affective depth. Although the body is not erased in the digital environment (except in interactions with automated systems or bots, where the bodily presence of the other is entirely absent), its presence assumes a different form, affecting the quality of interpersonal relationships. Embodiment remains an important prerequisite for comprehensive (especially emotional) empathy, as it enables sensory, somatic and affective resonance (Marson et al. 2024, 217). In the digital space, however, this dimension is often lost or replaced by reduced signs. Empathy without physical presence is possible, but it is often less intense and less visceral. Research shows that cognitive empathy – the ability to understand another person’s perspective – is more common in the digital environment, while emotional empathy, which is based on physical perception, is significantly more limited (Genzer et al. 2023; Rørstad Torbjørnsen and Hipólito 2025, 23–26).

When we compare empathy in traditional face-to-face communication with empathy in digital contexts, we encounter significant differences. These differences create specific challenges that make it difficult to create a comprehensive and authentic empathic experience in the virtual space.

2.1. Communication channels and modalities

Empathy in the digital environment relies on written and often asynchronous communication via email, chat, online forums, and social networks. In the absence of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions, users employ alternative forms of expression, including emoticons (emojis), memes, GIFs, and text formatting (such as bold, italics, font size, and the number of letters). These elements are frequently used in online communities to express empathy and build emotional support (Pfeil and Zaphiris 2007, 924). In contrast, traditional empathy is based on direct, face-to-face contact, where the full range of verbal and non-verbal cues is present, allowing for a more comprehensive and authentic emotional exchange. These differences in communication channels shape the basic conditions under which empathy can emerge in digital contexts, but they do not yet explain how empathic processes are psychologically formed within these constraints.

2.2. Temporal dynamics

Digital communication is often asynchronous – responses come with a delay, giving users more time to think and formulate thoughtful responses. Luetke Lanfer et al. (2024, 8) emphasise that this time delay enables the development of higher quality and more reflective empathy, although it can also weaken the sense of immediate emotional presence and support. In traditional communication, which is usually synchronised, there are immediate responses in real time. Such conversations allow for more natural emotional dynamics and immediate responses, which contributes to a sense of emotional closeness and understanding.

2.3. Mechanisms of expression

In the digital environment, mechanisms for expressing empathy are largely limited to the written word and visual digital elements. This environment primarily fosters cognitive empathy – the ability to understand another person’s perspective – while affective empathy and active compassion are often constrained (Powell and Roberts 2017, 410). Consequently, digital empathy demands greater cognitive effort, as individuals must actively infer emotional states from symbolic and often ambiguous cues. Empathic engagement thus shifts from embodied emotional resonance to interpretative and reflective processes. The use of digital tools such as emojis, GIFs, and various interactive

responses partially substitutes for emotional cues but requires more effort to convey and perceive authenticity. Simultaneously, the perception of empathy becomes more fragile, as misunderstandings, delayed responses, or the absence of expected signals may easily be interpreted as emotional distance or lack of concern. Traditional communication includes verbal and non-verbal cues that contribute to a deeper and more intuitive understanding of the interlocutor's emotional state.

2.4. Interface and environment

In the digital environment, the user interface plays a key role in expressing empathy. Elements such as reaction buttons, emojis, avatars or even anonymous chat features have a significant impact on how emotions are expressed and perceived (Feng et al. 2004). Each platform has its own characteristics and social norms. Reddit, for example, encourages short, positive responses, while deeply emotional messages may seem inappropriate (Zhou and Jurgens 2020, 452–453). The physical environment in traditional communication allows for physical proximity, a safe space, and nonverbal cues that reinforce feelings of trust and understanding. Technological mediation therefore requires more planning and a conscious use of tools to effectively experience and express empathy.

2.5. Building relationships

Empathy is an important building block of relationships in digital and traditional environments, but different dynamics are at play in the digital world. The presence and expression of empathy in online communities are critical to building strong, safe, and trustworthy connections (Sharma et al. 2020, 4787). Users often experience a sense of belonging despite a lack of physical proximity, which is made possible by regular, emotionally empathetic responses. In traditional relationships, on the other hand, bonds are built through physical presence, shared experiences and rich emotional interaction enabled by direct communication.

2.6. Development of trust

Trust in digital communication is based on empathic accuracy – the ability to recognise emotions and respond appropriately. Consistent, emotive and timely communication has a significant impact on the perceived reliability of the

interlocutor (Feng et al. 2004, 3). Authenticity in the digital environment can be both a challenge and an opportunity – anonymity allows for greater openness and expression of emotion, but at the same time makes it difficult to verify sincerity. Moreover trust in digital empathy is strongly shaped by the recipient’s interpretation of the message, as empathic understanding depends on whether the expressed response is perceived as credible and meaningful. Nevertheless, research (Sperandeo et al. 2021, 5) has shown that perceived empathy can be even higher in digital contexts than in face-to-face interactions, as users feel safer expressing their emotions. In traditional communication, however, trust is built primarily through repeated face-to-face interactions, where physical presence and observation of non-verbal reactions are crucial.

Table 1 summarises the most salient differences in non-verbal indicators of empathy between traditional and digital communication.

Table 1. *Non-verbal Indicators of Empathy in Traditional and Digital Communication*

Non-verbal indicator of empathy	Traditional empathy	Digital empathy
<i>Facial expressions</i>	Present; direct and rich in informational value	Absent; replaced by emojis, symbols, graphic expressions and textual formatting
<i>Body language</i>	Present; an important source of emotional and relational information	Absent
<i>Eye contact</i>	Present; a key element in establishing empathy	Absent (partially present only in video communication)
<i>Tone of voice</i>	Present; conveys emotional nuance, rhythm and intensity	Absent (partially present in audio or video communication)
<i>Proxemics (physical proximity)</i>	Present; influences the perception of the relationship and emotional closeness	Absent
<i>Touch</i>	Present; an important regulator of emotions and sense of safety	Absent
<i>Somatic resonance</i>	Present; enables bodily and emotional attunement	Very limited or absent
<i>Synchronisation (rhythm, responsiveness)</i>	Present; spontaneous and bodily grounded	Limited; often disrupted due to asynchronicity
<i>Emotional atmosphere of the space</i>	Present; co-created through physical presence	Absent
<i>Digital symbolic supplements (emojis, GIFs, etc.)</i>	Absent or unnecessary	Present; a key compensatory mechanism for expressing empathy

3. Digital Empathy?

Digital communication is playing an increasingly important role in modern society, as it enables fast, efficient and often global connections between individuals. At the same time, we can observe changes in the experience and expression of empathy. Given the characteristics of the digital environment in which interpersonal communication takes place, it makes sense to ask whether we can speak of so-called digital empathy in this context. In the theory of digital empathy (Rachmad 2017), digital empathy is defined as the capacity to understand and recognise others' emotional states and to respond sensitively and appropriately through digitally mediated communication. The central idea of the theory is that despite the technological intermediaries, the human element of empathy is crucial. Digital empathy involves the ability to listen, understand and react emotionally in the context of digitally mediated communication. The question is therefore how to be empathetic in the face of the change in human communication brought about by digital technology.

The integration of technology and human empathic skills is the key to digital empathy (Rachmad 2017). The theory addresses communication practices that emphasise genuine emotional understanding and response, including through digital media. By focusing on empathy, people can build deeper and more meaningful relationships even in digital contexts. This makes digital empathy a key component of modern communication, as it enables the expression of emotional connection even in the absence of physical presence. Its successful implementation requires more than just technical knowledge – it requires an awareness of the importance of compassionate communication and a supportive social and organisational environment (Terry and Cain 2016, 58).

Conclusion

As we have seen, empathy is not just a psychological concept, but a multi-layered human capacity that has philosophical, theological, neuroscientific and ethical dimensions. It is the basis for interpersonal relationships, social cohesion and ethical behaviour, as well as a source of inner transformation for individuals and communities. In a time of fragmented identities, pluralistic values and rapidly changing communication practices, empathy remains an important tool for understanding others and building relationships based on respect, compassion and responsibility.

However, this fundamental human skill faces new and complex challenges today. The digital age is changing the way we communicate by reduc-

ing physical presence, delivering messages through screens and algorithms, and often dissolving the contexts in which empathy has traditionally been expressed. Technology does not eliminate the possibility of empathy, but it changes it significantly. It emphasises the cognitive component of empathy, while the emotional component and physical dimension often remain compromised. This shift increases the risk of depersonalisation, superficial reactions – understood here as brief, standardised or symbol-based responses that replace deeper emotional engagement – and reduced sensitivity to others, which requires our conscious attention and responsibility.

The theory of digital empathy (Rachmad 2017) offers a useful response to these challenges. It emphasises that technologically mediated communication does not exclude human closeness, but requires the development of new forms of expressing emotional sensitivity. For empathy to not only survive but thrive in the digital environment, it is crucial to create conditions that enable it: developing educational programmes for digital empathy skills, fostering organisational cultures that value compassion even in virtual spaces, and ensuring access to technologies that enable safe, emotionally responsive communication.

Empathy cannot be taken for granted in the digital age, but that is precisely why it is all the more valuable. It needs to be encouraged, consciously practised and widely recognised by society for its role in everyday life. In this sense, the digital transformation of communication does not distance us from our human nature, but challenges us to express this nature in new, creative and responsible ways. Only in this way will it be possible to preserve the complexity and integrity of empathetic exchange as a fundamental aspect of quality interpersonal communication in digitally mediated environments.

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Language editor: Tatjana Jarc, BA