Empathy in Action: Fostering Digital Empathy Through Intergenerational Activities
Among Online Users

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Abstract
With the widespread adoption of online media technology, all generations have become active online users in the digital world. However, each generation's unique experiences and perspectives can create challenges in intergenerational online communication due to a lack of digital empathy - the cognitive, emotional, and social skills to be sensitive and supportive of others' feelings, needs, and concerns online. To address this issue, the study designed video clips and the 'empathy gym' activity based on digital empathy and intergenerational communication concepts. The objective is to promote digital empathy among online users and bridge intergenerational divides in communication. Twenty-eight participants from each generation, who watched video clips promoting digital empathy, joined the empathy gym. The gym included activities like the "Wall of Lives" to train social empathy and "Perspective-taking activities" to develop interpersonal empathy. After the activity, a focus group collected data, revealing that participants gained perspective-taking from different generations and understood their differences better. They recognized the importance of media campaigns to promote digital empathy and knowledge among all generations for effective communication. This shows that embedding social and interpersonal empathy in online media users through this activity enhances their digital empathy awareness. However, participants were uncertain about consistently communicating with digital empathy in online media spaces, especially when discussing sensitive political issues in Thailand's context, given its history of divergent political opinions. Further studies are required to put digital empathy into practice in real-life communication.

Keywords: Digital Empathy, Empathy, Intergenerational Communication, Online Communication

Introduction

In the contemporary era, every age group has seamlessly transitioned into a community of netizens, shaping a world where digital communication platforms serve as the primary conduit for interaction. Despite the universality of this digital experience, each age group brings forth a distinct set of experiences, personality traits, values, and worldviews that have organically evolved.

This diversity in backgrounds inevitably manifests in varied communication styles among generations within the digital space. The emergence of intergenerational communication issues has given rise to toxic communication patterns, amplifying the challenges faced by individuals from different age groups. The review of previous inter-generational communication studies, such as the work by Sivricova and Moiseeva (2018), reflects an intensification of communication challenges between different age groups. This escalation is attributed to a lack of mutual understanding and misperceptions about the lifestyles of each age group, driven by perceptions influenced by stereotypical characteristics of different age groups.

This phenomenon is evident in Thai society, as discovered by Tienthai et al. (2021), where communication expressing the viewpoints and opinions of each age group tends to show distinct ideological separations. Older generations often perceive younger ones as self-centered, uncooperative, intolerant, and lacking various skills. Conversely, the digital-native generation questions the necessity of possessing such knowledge and skills in the current context. These findings underscore the pressing need to bridge these intergenerational communication gaps and highlight the importance of fostering mutual understanding and empathy to overcome stereotypes and enhance effective communication across age groups.

These contrasting perspectives contribute to a cycle of miscommunication that is exacerbated by the digital environment, where nuances in non-verbal communication are often lost or misinterpreted. Moreover, the very nature of digital communication acts as a catalyst for these issues, creating a unique set of hurdles that demand careful examination. The immediacy and brevity of messages in digital spaces can lead to misunderstandings, and the absence of face-to-face interaction may hinder the development of empathy. The speed at which information travels in the digital realm also contributes to the rapid escalation of conflicts, making it challenging to defuse tensions and foster constructive dialogue.

Amidst this complex landscape, the paper also delves into the specific context of online communication in Thailand, shedding light on the toxic communication that arises due to conflicts in political opinions among various age groups. The intersection of generational differences and political divergence presents a particularly volatile combination. Misaligned political views can amplify pre-existing intergenerational misunderstandings, resulting in toxic discourse that further divides society. This phenomenon is not unique to Thailand but serves as an illustrative example of how the interplay between generational disparities and socio-political factors can significantly impact the nature of online communication.

One approach to addressing this communication challenge is through social education and campaigns. By fostering a culture of awareness and understanding, individuals can be equipped with the tools necessary to navigate the intricacies of digital communication. Initiatives aimed at enhancing digital literacy play a crucial role in empowering individuals to decipher the nuances of online interactions, thus minimizing the potential for

miscommunication. Furthermore, these campaigns can promote values such as solidarity, tolerance for differences, and acceptance of diversity, fostering an environment where individuals are more open to engaging with perspectives that differ from their own. Digital empathy, an essential component of this educational effort, encourages individuals to consider the emotions and intentions behind online messages, even in the absence of face-to-face interaction. Emphasizing these values through education and campaigns contributes to the cultivation of a more inclusive and empathetic digital community, ultimately mitigating the toxic communication patterns that often arise from generational differences and misunderstandings.

Our study aimed to comprehensively address the challenges posed by intergenerational communication in the digital age. The primary objective of our research was to devise effective strategies to mitigate toxic communication patterns among different age groups. To achieve this, we focused on the development and implementation of communication campaigns specifically tailored to the digital landscape. These campaigns were designed not only to raise awareness about the nuances of intergenerational communication but also to experiment with novel approaches that could foster understanding and empathy among online users. Through a combination of theoretical frameworks and practical experimentation, we sought to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on improving communication dynamics in the digital realm.

The conceptual framework of this study is rooted in the concept of empathy, defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings and experiences of others. (Segal et al., 2017) However, the definition and conceptualization of empathy vary across psychological, neuroscientific, and social science perspectives. Batson (2011, as cited in Segal et al., 2017) identified a commonality in the meaning of empathy across these disciplines. Empathy is characterized as a process in which one person discerns the internal state of another and can be stimulated to respond with detailed and sensitive care. This intricate understanding of empathy is further categorized into two dimensions: interpersonal empathy and social empathy.

Interpersonal empathy encompasses a range of cognitive, emotional, and social skills crucial for effective communication with others (Segal et al., 2017; Friesem, 2016). In the context of this study, these skills include:
1) Perspective-Taking: The skill of being open and receptive to the viewpoints of others, understanding their perspectives without solely interpreting them through our own lens.
2) Self-Other Awareness: The ability to be mindful of one's own thoughts, engage in self-reflection, and cultivate a compassionate mindset in communication.
3) Emotion Regulation: The capability to anticipate the emotions and feelings of others, showcasing the skill to empathetically perceive and understand their emotional states.
4) Imaginative Empathy: The capacity to place oneself imaginatively in hypothetical roles or situations, nurturing an understanding and compassion for others, thereby facilitating connection in social relationships.
5) Empathetic Connection: The skill of empathizing, extending understanding and compassion towards others, consequently building social relationships grounded in mutual understanding and support.

Social empathy is a trait that enables individuals to understand others who may be different from us or have experiences and identities distinct from our own. (Segal et al., 2017) In the

context of this study, social empathy is a quality that aids individuals in understanding others who may be different from us or have experiences and identities distinct from our own. It encompasses the recognition of differences in thought patterns, lifestyles, and technological inclinations among various age groups in society. Additionally, it involves an understanding of the historical and societal context within the experiences of each age group.

Developing interpersonal empathy on a person-to-person level is foundational. When integrated with social empathy, it becomes a crucial avenue for promoting societal understanding and improving relationships between groups within the community. This integration serves to enhance social bonds, thereby reducing prejudice and fostering a more inclusive perception of diverse groups within society.

For the concept of digital empathy, which refers to the ability to empathize in the context of digital communication, Friese, Y. (2016) defines it as a set of cognitive, emotional, and social skills. This includes the process through which communicators utilize digital technology to analyze, evaluate, reflect, envision the future, predict, feel, empathize, participate, and role-play during communication. Moreover, digital empathy is also identified as a crucial skill in digital citizenship. According to the DQ Institute (n.d.), digital empathy is defined as "the ability to be aware of, be sensitive to, and be supportive of one's own and other's feelings, needs, and concerns online." It encompasses understanding and encouraging the emotions of oneself and others in the digital realm, as well as recognizing and addressing the emotional aspects and worries that arise from online interactions.

Therefore, this research is centered on digital empathy as a personal competency among users of online media in different age groups. The emphasis is on the necessity to promote digital empathy to cultivate digital citizenship. Additionally, the study investigates its role in facilitating communication among diverse groups within each age bracket in the online space. Consequently, it is crucial to integrate both interpersonal empathy and social empathy into the exploration and promotion of digital empathy.

This research adopts an action research methodology in alignment with the design thinking approach. The design thinking process encompasses empathizing, defining problems, ideating solutions, prototyping, and testing the prototypes. The results presented in this article exclusively derive from the prototyping and testing phases of the research process. The study has crafted prototypes in the form of video clips and an 'empathy gym' activity, grounded in the principles of digital empathy and intergenerational communication. These prototypes are specifically designed to foster digital empathy among online users and address intergenerational communication challenges, particularly within the context of political conflicts among generations in Thailand.

Key Findings

1. Prototyping & Test

1.1 Online: VDO Clips

The prototypes of the study include five video clips, including one 5-minute clip and four shorter clips reflecting the thoughts of each generation within a 2-minute timeframe. The key message conveyed is that "*The existence of Digital Empathy among individuals of different*

generations can alleviate communication challenges, leading to a decrease in instances of violence and conflict in various online communication spaces."

In the video clips, a storytelling strategy is employed in the form of a social experiment. Representatives from each generation, namely Baby Boomer, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z, each participated in online conversations. The experiment unfolded in three phases:

Phase 1: All participants assumed roles in the conversation without showing mutual respect. The outcome was more discordant and less informative discussions than initially.

Phase 2: All participants assumed roles in the conversation with mutual respect. The result was an idealized conversation that seemed too perfect to be realistic.

Phase 3: Participants were mixed, with two individuals assuming roles that involved showing respect and empathy and the other two not showing respect and empathy.

The outcome demonstrated that those who did not initially show respect became more heated, but when they received respect from the other side, they became more willing to change their perspectives, showing respect and attempting to listen and understand the other side.

In the final stage, participants were asked to reflect on their feelings regarding the importance or benefits arising from online communication with digital empathy at both the personal and societal levels.

The strategy for disseminating the short video clips involves sharing them through Facebook and TikTok on Toolmorrow's platforms, recognized for its creative and social communication content, and for reaching the target audiences. (https://www.facebook.com/toolmorrow and https://www.tiktok.com/@toolmorrowtiktok) The video clips were launched over one month from June 1 to June 30, 2023. The total view count for all clips on FB posts and FB Reels combined is 829,103 views, while the viewing count on TikTok is 153,128 times.

1.2 Onsite: Empathy Gym

Twenty-eight participants from each generation, who had viewed video clips promoting digital empathy, voluntarily participated in the Empathy Gym. The Empathy Gym activity included two activities: 1) the Wall of Lives, designed to enhance social empathy, and 2) the Perspective-taking activity, aimed at fostering interpersonal empathy.

First, the Wall of Lives displayed images and information depicting pivotal political, economic, societal, media, and technology events corresponding to each generation's era. Then, the participants were urged to explore the wall and choose events they deemed most influential and transformative in shaping thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. They were motivated to select events with the greatest impact on them individually. Following this, participants were divided into generational groups, where they actively shared their personal experiences and insights. Throughout these discussions, they were prompted to take brief notes, reflecting on *"how they had enhanced their understanding of each generation more effectively."*

Figure 1: Wall of Lives displayed images and information depicting pivotal political, economic, societal, media, and technology events corresponding to each generation's era

In the Perspective-Taking activity, participants drew lots to determine the generation they would represent. Subsequently, they were tasked with immersing themselves in the perspective of that generation and considering how they might think or feel about the same set of video clips. These reflections were recorded on the right-hand side of a sheet of paper. Following this, participants engaged in discussions with those from different generations to assess *"whether their assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of that generation aligned with the actual experiences and viewpoints of individuals from that generation"*. They explored both commonalities and differences between their assumptions and the reality of the generation they were representing.

Figure 2: the participants from different age groups discussing the Perspective-taking activity

2. Reflection: Results From the Focus Group Discussion

After testing the prototypes, as mentioned earlier, focus groups were conducted with the participants upon the conclusion of the activities. The findings from these focus groups revealed that:

1) The participants expressed their experiences and perspectives, thoughts, and feelings towards people in their respective age ranges, based on experiences in different periods, covering aspects of economics, politics, society, and communication technology.

2) The participants became aware of differences between age groups in terms of thought patterns, lifestyles, and technological trends, as well as the understanding of historical and social contexts within the experiences of each age group. It was found that after watching the advocacy clips and participating in the Empathy Gym activities, which focused on perspective-taking and imaginative empathy, there was an enhanced understanding that the actions and expressions of each generation stem from their thoughts and feelings, shaped by experiences they have heard and witnessed. This understanding emerged from various age periods, and perspectives towards other generations were found to change or evolve.

These excerpts illustrate how the thoughts of each generation reflect the enhancement of interpersonal and social empathy, as observed in the focus group discussions.

	I used to think	*Now I think*
Gen BabyBoomer	• *originally viewed as 'the new generation,' were often thought to lack experience and perceived as having misguided and hasty teenage thinking.* • *We have accumulated more experience, and it's beneficial for other generations to lend us their ears.*	• *my perspective has evolved to understand that not everyone from that generation fits that mold. It's more about individuality* • *I now believe that people of every age possess unique insights and perspectives that should be heard and learned from together."*
Gen X	• *once seen by the BB generation as boring, inclined to complain, talking endlessly without a point, and seemingly detached, was often labeled as old-fashioned in their thinking.*	• *My perspective has shifted to understanding that Generation X's speech or complaints often stem from their caring and compassionate nature. They are considerate and understanding.*
	• *Generation Z was that they were carefree, impulsive, not very open to understanding differences, self-centered, stubborn, and sometimes unreasonable.*	• *Now, I see Generation Z as a generation that thinks independently, with their unique thought processes that may differ from our own. They exhibit mature thinking, self-sufficiency, reason, and an understanding of change.*

	I used to think	*Now I think*
Gen Y	• *Initially, there was an understanding that people of the same age group should think alike.*	• *Now realize that being part of a generation doesn't always dictate uniform thinking and behavior. People within the same generation can have diverse perspectives and ways of thinking, influenced by various other factors like their environment, education, family, and individual outlook.*
Gen Z	• *I used to think that older adults, being traditional, spoke in a way that was hard to relate to, often speaking without consideration, which made children and young adults feel uncomfortable about conversing. I believed that older adults couldn't understand the younger generation because their experiences, society, and economics were different.*	• *Although some things still bother me when I hear them from older adults, I understand them better. I've come to see that adults of all ages make more of an effort to understand children and young people. They are more compassionate than I had thought. I've also come to believe that when adults act like children, they become more understanding of us.*

Table 1: examples of the thoughts of each generation reflected in the focus group discussion

Conclusion

In conclusion, our research underscores the significance of cultivating digital empathy across online users of all generations. The 'empathy gym' and video clips have demonstrated their potential to enhance perspective-taking skills and increase awareness of digital empathy. Participants acquired insights into different generations, fostering a better understanding of their differences. Moreover, they acknowledged the crucial role of media campaigns in promoting digital empathy and knowledge across all generations for more effective communication. This emphasizes that integrating social and interpersonal empathy into online media users through such activities elevates their awareness of digital empathy.

However, challenges persist. While these activities and video clips have generated awareness, they have struggled to instill confidence in developing digital empathy skills among individuals in each generation for practical application in using online media. Online communication diverges from face-to-face interactions, allowing communicators to shield themselves, leading to a tendency for more impulsive responses. This is particularly evident when individuals delve into emotionally charged topics, such as politics, which may diminish their analytical thinking ability and self-regulation in online communication. This challenge is amplified when discussing sensitive political issues in the context of Thailand, given its history of divergent political opinions.

In response to identified challenges, implementing digital empathy in real-life communication requires additional investigation. Given persistent hurdles, more studies are necessary to seamlessly integrate digital empathy into everyday scenarios. These studies should focus on developing targeted strategies, especially in politically charged online

environments. Understanding the nuanced dynamics of online communication, particularly in emotionally charged subjects like politics, is crucial for formulating approaches that enhance users' digital empathy skills. Deeper exploration of these strategies can provide practical insights, extending beyond awareness creation. This comprehensive approach is essential for equipping individuals across generations with the confidence and skills needed to navigate online platforms with empathy, fostering healthier and more constructive digital interactions.

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