

Professional Communication in Internships: Integrating Media–Task Fit and Social Presence in Digitalized Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

The digital transformation of workplaces has reshaped how interns interact with supervisors, colleagues, and organizational staff, replacing traditional face-to-face exchanges with technology-mediated communication. While digital tools such as email, messaging platforms, and video conferencing offer convenience, they also create challenges in clarity, responsiveness, and engagement. These issues are particularly pressing for internship students, who must build credibility and professional identity while navigating unfamiliar digital environments. Drawing on Media Richness Theory and Social Presence Theory, this concept paper proposes a framework in which social presence mediates the relationship between media–task fit and communication outcomes, namely communication satisfaction and professional development. A quantitative survey design is proposed, targeting 150–200 internship students from UiTM Kelantan across diverse industries and states. Data will be collected through a validated questionnaire, and the framework will be tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Theoretically, the paper extends classical communication models into the underexplored context of digital internships. Practically, it provides insights for universities and host organizations to help students select appropriate communication channels, foster presence, and strengthen employability. The paper concludes that effective digital communication in internships is not only about efficiency but also about cultivating presence and connection to support interns' professional growth.

Keywords: Media Richness Theory, Social Presence, Communication Satisfaction, Professional Development, Digital Internships, Employability

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the digitalization of workplaces has reshaped how interns and employees interact. Traditional internships, once built around daily face-to-face meetings and informal office conversations, are now frequently mediated by technology. Students on placement are expected to use email, video conferencing platforms, and collaborative tools as their primary channels of communication with supervisors and colleagues. These tools definitely make people more productive, but they also change what it means to be professionally engaged. Effective communication in these settings is not only a useful ability for interns, but it also serves as a platform for accomplishing tasks, building confidence, creating an identity, and eventually becoming employable (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2022).

Despite its significance, many interns continue to encounter difficulties with digital communication. Research has shown that ongoing issues include lack of clarity, inconsistent feedback, and lack of openness (Sulaiman et al., 2023). Some people say that badly handled digital communication might hurt professional relationships and make people less interested in talking to each other (Wuersch et al., 2024). These concerns are especially

obvious in distant or hybrid internships, where the lack of physical presence increases the chance of miscommunication and encourages feelings of isolation (Chadwick et al., 2024).

Communication theories provide useful frameworks for examining these challenges. Media Richness Theory (MRT) asserts that different communication media vary in their ability to convey information. Richer media, like video conferencing, make it easy to get quick response and give a lot of clues, which makes them good for hard or perplexing tasks. Conversely, more efficient means, like email, are generally sufficient for standard communications (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Social Presence Theory (SPT) focusses on the psychological components of interaction. It emphasises that communication technologies differ in their ability to cultivate a sense of connection, warmth, and immediacy among participants (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). All of these points of view suggest that interns are good at digital communication when two things are true: the medium chosen fits the job needs, and the interaction creates a real sense of presence.

Building on this premise, the present concept paper proposes a model in which social presence mediates the link between media–task fit and communication outcomes, specifically communication satisfaction and professional development. The aim is both theoretical and practical: to extend established communication models to the relatively underexplored context of digital internships, and to provide guidance for universities and host organizations in preparing students for the realities of technology-driven workplaces.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of media–task fit on the professional communication experiences of internship students in digital workplaces.
2. To conceptualize the mediating role of social presence in shaping communication effectiveness among internship students.
3. To propose a conceptual model linking media–task fit, social presence, and communication outcomes (communication satisfaction and professional development).
4. To provide theoretical and practical insights for higher education institutions and organizations in enhancing internship students' digital professional communication.

Research Questions

1. How does media–task fit influence professional communication among internship students in digital workplaces?
2. Does social presence mediate the relationship between media–task fit and communication outcomes?
3. In what ways can the proposed conceptual model enhance communication satisfaction and professional development for internship students?

Problem Statement

Internship programs are widely recognized as a bridge between classroom learning and workplace practice. However, the growth of digitalized workplaces has reshaped the ways in which internship students interact with supervisors and employees. Digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, WhatsApp, and Zoom create opportunities for more efficient communication, but they also introduce challenges for professional interaction. Research shows that when communication lacks clarity, consistency, or openness, misunderstandings are more likely to occur and engagement tends to decline (Sulaiman et al., 2023). More

recent work has also suggested that in digital contexts, choosing media that do not fit the task can weaken relationships and reduce employee engagement (Wuersch et al., 2024). Together, these findings suggest that digital communication challenges influence not only how clearly messages are conveyed but also the quality of professional relationships. For interns, who depend heavily on mediated interactions, these challenges are particularly problematic. This situation points to the importance of developing communication skills that go beyond traditional face-to-face exchanges.

At the same time, theories such as Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) suggest that the effectiveness of digital communication depends not only on the media chosen but also on the degree of psychological presence experienced by the communicators. Yet, little is known about how these theories apply specifically to internship students, who often face unique challenges in balancing task requirements, supervisor expectations, and professional identity development in digital contexts (Chadwick et al., 2024; Petit et al., 2023). Without a deeper understanding of these dynamics, internship students may continue to struggle with communication effectiveness, potentially limiting their learning outcomes and employability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Communication in Digital Workplaces and Internships

Internships are a key bridge between university education and workplace practice. Employers consistently identify communication as one of the most important career-readiness competencies, defined as the ability to exchange information, ideas, and perspectives clearly and effectively across diverse settings (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2022). This competency has become even more critical as organizations increasingly rely on digital platforms such as email, Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Zoom for everyday interactions. For internship students, effective professional communication in these contexts is not only essential for coordinating tasks but also for building relationships, receiving mentorship, and shaping their emerging professional identity (Jeske & Linehan, 2020).

The shift toward hybrid and remote internships has highlighted both opportunities and challenges. While digital technologies enable flexibility and access, studies report that interns often experience difficulties in receiving timely feedback, interpreting expectations, and maintaining a sense of connection with supervisors (Widaningsih et al., 2022). These findings point to communication as a persistent pain point in digital internships, underscoring the need for conceptual frameworks that explain how different communication factors influence satisfaction and outcomes.

Media–Task Fit: From Media Richness to Task–Technology Fit

One lens for understanding communication effectiveness is Media Richness Theory (MRT), which argues that richer media, such as those that provide multiple cues and immediate feedback, are better suited for ambiguous or equivocal tasks, whereas leaner media are generally sufficient for routine exchanges. (Daft & Lengel, 1986). For instance, a quick status update may work well via email, but resolving a complex misunderstanding typically requires video conferencing. Channel Expansion Theory later extended this idea, suggesting that perceptions of richness are shaped by users' experience with the channel, the topic, and their communication partners (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). This is particularly relevant for interns, who may initially struggle with unfamiliar workplace platforms but become more adept over time.

Related frameworks such as Task–Technology Fit (TTF) and Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) emphasize that communication effectiveness depends less on fixed “rankings” of media and more on whether the characteristics of the medium align with the task at hand (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995; Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). Collectively, these theories frame media–task fit as the daily decision of “choosing the right

tool for the right job,” a decision with direct consequences for interns’ ability to work effectively with supervisors and employees.

Social Presence as the “Felt Sense” of Others Online

While media–task fit highlights the structural match between medium and task, Social Presence Theory (SPT) explains the psychological dimension: the extent to which a medium creates the feeling that others are “present” in the interaction (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). High levels of social presence allow communicators to feel connected, engaged, and supported, which is especially important for interns as they navigate new organizational environments. Recent reviews and meta-analyses have consistently shown that social presence is positively associated with satisfaction and perceived learning in online contexts (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). Importantly, empirical studies demonstrate that social presence can act as a mediator: richer media increase social presence, which in turn leads to greater engagement, satisfaction, and even continued use of platforms (Wang, 2022). This suggests that social presence may be the critical psychological mechanism through which media–task fit influences communication outcomes in digital internships.

Communication Satisfaction and Early Professional Outcomes

A well-established outcome variable in organizational communication is communication satisfaction, which captures individuals’ evaluations of the clarity, responsiveness, and overall quality of communication within the workplace (Downs & Hazen, 1977). For interns, satisfaction with communication is closely linked to their sense of inclusion, confidence, and ability to perform assigned tasks.

Studies on internships and remote work emphasize that the quality of supervisor and intern communication, particularly the clarity and timeliness of feedback, directly shapes learning and satisfaction. (Jeske & Linehan, 2020). However, while existing research recognizes the importance of effective communication, it rarely models how media choices and the sense of presence jointly produce communication satisfaction and professional outcomes. This missing link is central to understanding how interns succeed in digital workplaces.

Synthesis and Gap

Taken together, three streams of literature converge. First, media–task theories confirm that communication effectiveness improves when media characteristics align with task requirements (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis et al., 2008). Second, social presence research shows that the “felt sense” of presence strongly predicts satisfaction and engagement in online interactions (Richardson et al., 2017; Wang, 2022). Third, internship studies consistently highlight communication challenges as barriers to learning and professional growth in digital contexts (Bawadi et al., 2023).

What remains underexplored is the integration of these perspectives: specifically, how media–task fit influences interns’ communication satisfaction and professional outcomes through the mediating role of social presence. While mediation has been demonstrated in online learning and organizational communication contexts, it has yet to be systematically applied to digital internships—an environment where power dynamics, role ambiguity, and limited experience make communication both more fragile and more consequential.

This concept paper addresses that gap by proposing a model where social presence mediates the relationship between media–task fit and communication outcomes. The framework not only extends classical communication theories into the internship domain but also offers practical implications for universities and organizations on preparing students for effective digital communication in the workplace.

Underpinning Theory

This study is anchored in two primary theories—Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Social Presence Theory (SPT)—and supported by established constructs from organizational communication and employability research. Together, these frameworks provide the conceptual foundation for examining how internship students communicate effectively in digital workplaces.

Media Richness Theory (MRT)

Proposed by Daft and Lengel (1986), Media Richness Theory explains that communication media differ in their capacity to transmit information. Rich media, such as video conferencing, allow for multiple cues, rapid feedback, and more personal focus, making them suitable for complex or ambiguous tasks. In contrast, lean media such as email or text messages are more efficient for routine, straightforward exchanges.

For internship students, the idea of media–task fit is particularly important. Interns must continuously select between email, messaging applications, and video meetings to coordinate tasks with supervisors and colleagues. When the chosen medium aligns with the nature of the task, communication is likely to be clearer, faster, and more effective. MRT therefore underpins the independent variable in this study—media–task fit—as a critical antecedent of effective communication.

Social Presence Theory (SPT)

While MRT highlights the structural features of communication media, Social Presence Theory focuses on the psychological dimension. Developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), SPT defines social presence as the degree to which individuals perceive others as being “present” during mediated communication. A medium that fosters high social presence enables participants to feel connected, engaged, and supported.

Research consistently shows that social presence contributes to satisfaction, trust, and learning in online and blended environments (Lowenthal & Snellson, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). For internship students, experiencing social presence during digital interactions with supervisors can help reduce feelings of distance and isolation, ultimately supporting identity development and workplace learning. In this study, social presence is conceptualized as a mediating variable that explains how media–task fit translates into communication satisfaction and professional outcomes.

Organizational Communication and Employability Frameworks

The dependent variables of this study—communication satisfaction and professional outcomes—are grounded in organizational communication and employability research. Communication satisfaction has long been recognized as a multidimensional construct within organizational communication, encompassing satisfaction with clarity, feedback, and integration (Downs & Hazen, 1977). Similarly, professional outcomes such as the development of communication competence and professional identity are reflected in employability frameworks, including the NACE career readiness competencies (NACE, 2022). While these frameworks are not grand theories, they provide validated constructs that allow this study to capture meaningful outcomes of professional communication in digital workplaces.

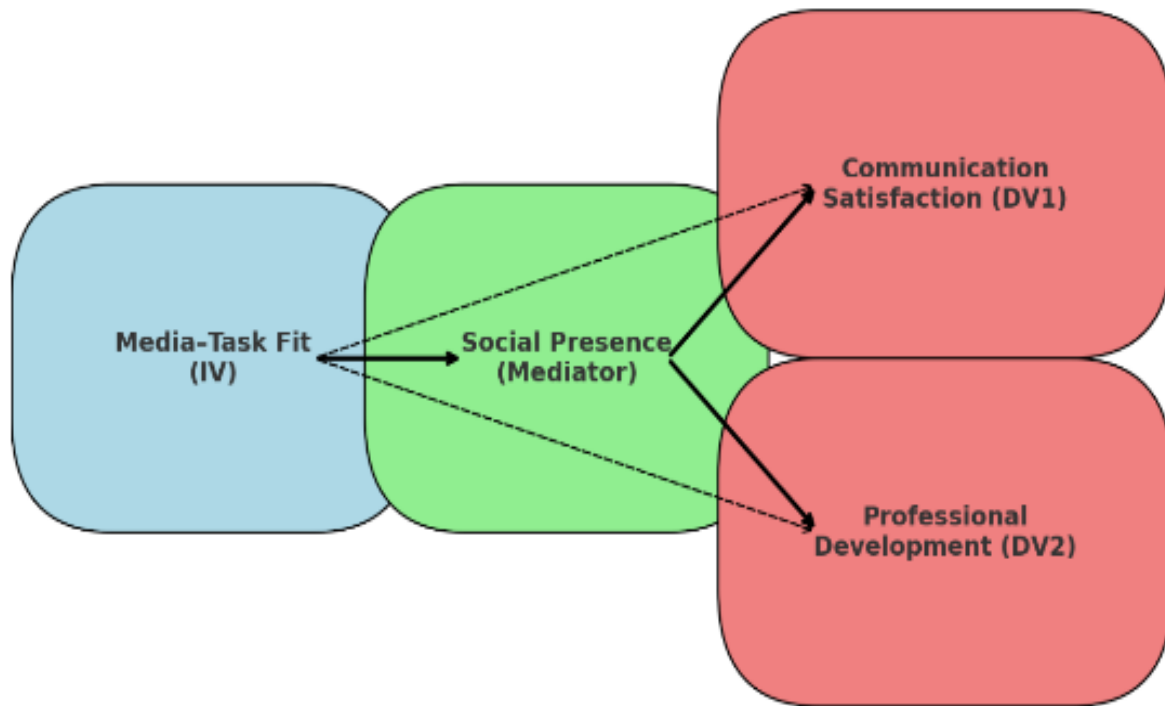
Integrating the Theories

By integrating MRT and SPT with established constructs from organizational communication and employability research, this study proposes that media–task fit (MRT) shapes interns’ experiences of social presence (SPT), which in turn affects communication satisfaction and professional outcomes. This theoretical

integration not only extends classical communication theories into the context of digital internships but also aligns the study with practical frameworks used by employers and educators to evaluate workplace readiness.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework: Media-Task Fit, Social Presence, and Communication Outcomes



As illustrated in Figure 1, the proposed framework suggests that the effectiveness of interns' professional communication in digital workplaces is shaped by both structural and psychological factors. Drawing on Media Richness Theory, media–task fit is expected to influence the extent to which students perceive their digital interactions as engaging and meaningful. In line with Social Presence Theory, this sense of presence is positioned as the key mechanism through which appropriate media choices translate into positive outcomes. Specifically, social presence is expected to enhance communication satisfaction by increasing clarity and responsiveness, while also supporting professional development by strengthening confidence and identity formation. At the same time, the framework acknowledges that media–task fit may also exert direct effects on both communication satisfaction and professional development, suggesting a partial mediation structure. This model therefore integrates classical communication theories to explain how internship students can achieve more effective digital communication and, ultimately, better employability outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative survey design, chosen because the aim is to test relationships between specific constructs rather than to build thick narrative accounts. A survey allows for the collection of standardized data from a relatively large group of respondents and provides the statistical grounding needed to evaluate the proposed model. In particular, it makes it possible to assess how media–task fit influences communication satisfaction and professional outcomes, both directly and indirectly through social presence.

Respondents and Sampling

The focus of the study is on undergraduate students at UiTM Kelantan who are completing their internship placements. These students are spread across a wide range of industries and states in Malaysia. This distribution is seen as an advantage: it reflects the diversity of workplace contexts that interns encounter and therefore strengthens the general relevance of the findings.

Because not all students can provide the kind of information required, a purposive sampling approach is adopted. Only students who are currently undertaking or have very recently completed internships are included, as they are in the best position to reflect on their communication experiences. Methodological guidelines suggest that mediation models require a minimum of 100–150 cases for meaningful results (Cohen, 1992). To reduce the risk of low response rates and to ensure stable estimates, the study aims for 150–200 responses. This figure also follows the “ten times rule” commonly cited in the PLS-SEM literature, where the sample should be at least ten times the number of indicators for the most complex construct (Hair et al., 2019).

Research Instrument

Data will be gathered using a self-administered questionnaire, distributed online for convenience since interns are located in different parts of the country. The instrument consists of five sections:

1. **Demographics** – covering age, gender, program of study, internship industry, and placement location.
2. **Media–Task Fit (IV)** – items adapted from Media Richness Theory and Task–Technology Fit research (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). A sample item is: *“The communication channels I use during my internship are well suited to the type of tasks I am given.”*
3. **Social Presence (Mediator)** – measured with established items from prior social presence research (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Richardson et al., 2017). Example: *“When using digital platforms, I feel as though my supervisor or colleagues are present with me.”*
4. **Communication Satisfaction (DV1)** – based on Downs and Hazen’s (1977) Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire. Example: *“I am generally satisfied with the clarity of communication from my supervisor.”*
5. **Professional Outcomes (DV2)** – adapted from employability frameworks, particularly the NACE career readiness competencies (NACE, 2022). Example: *“My internship experience has strengthened my ability to communicate professionally.”*

All constructs are rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Drawing on validated measures ensures comparability with earlier studies and enhances the reliability of the findings.

Data Collection Procedure

The survey will be administered online through a secure platform, which allows students to participate regardless of their geographic placement. Before responding, participants will be informed about the study objectives, assured of confidentiality, and reminded that participation is voluntary. Data collection will run for approximately four weeks, providing sufficient time to reach the targeted number of responses.

Data Analysis

To examine the proposed relationships, the study will use Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This technique is well suited for mediation analysis, particularly when the sample size is moderate and data may not be normally distributed (Hair et al., 2019).

Analysis will proceed in two stages. The measurement model will first be assessed to ensure construct reliability and validity. This involves examining Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE), as well as checking discriminant validity using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Once the measurement quality is established, the structural model will be tested. This will involve estimating the direct paths from media–task fit to communication outcomes and the indirect paths through social presence. To confirm the mediation effects, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples will be performed.

By combining validated instruments, careful sampling, and a robust analytical approach, the study is designed to provide credible evidence about how media–task fit and social presence shape communication outcomes for internship students in digital workplace settings.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this concept paper has been to propose a model that explains how media–task fit and social presence jointly shape the communication outcomes of internship students in digital workplaces. While much has been written about organizational communication in general, the specific experience of interns, who often lack authority and familiarity with professional norms, has not received comparable attention. By bringing together Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Social Presence Theory (SPT), this paper highlights the dual importance of choosing communication channels that align with the demands of the task and cultivating a sense of interpersonal presence in mediated interactions.

From a theoretical standpoint, the model offers several contributions. First, it extends MRT beyond managerial and organizational decision-making into the context of student internships, a setting where individuals often have little control over broader organizational practices but make micro-level decisions about which channels to use. Second, it places SPT at the center of the explanatory process by identifying social presence as the psychological mechanism through which media–task fit influences satisfaction and professional development. Although prior studies have connected social presence with learning outcomes in online education (Richardson et al., 2017), its role in workplace communication—particularly in internships—remains underexplored. The integration of these two perspectives therefore addresses a gap between communication theory and employability research.

In practical terms, the model underscores the need for greater attention to digital communication training in higher education. Universities could incorporate explicit modules that help students evaluate when to use lean versus rich channels, and how to project presence effectively in online conversations. For supervisors and host organizations, the framework suggests that creating a sense of immediacy—through timely responses, video interactions, or even simple acknowledgment—can significantly improve interns' perceptions of communication quality. In the Malaysian context, where internship placements vary widely in industry and geographic location, such practices may be particularly valuable for ensuring equitable experiences across diverse workplaces.

The model also carries implications for policy and institutional practice. Graduate employability initiatives frequently emphasize technical and professional skills, yet communication—especially in digital form—is often treated as a “soft” skill that is assumed rather than taught (NACE, 2022). By framing communication as a



structured competency with theoretical underpinnings, this study reinforces the argument that universities and employers should treat digital communication as a core professional skill set rather than a peripheral one.

Of course, this paper remains conceptual and therefore carries limitations. The model has not yet been empirically tested, and its application is currently bounded to internship students from a single university. Future studies should examine the framework using survey or mixed-method approaches, comparing interns across industries, regions, or even cultural contexts to test its broader relevance. Longitudinal research could also track how communication strategies evolve over the course of an internship, capturing whether perceptions of media richness and social presence shift as interns gain more workplace experience.

In sum, the discussion emphasizes that effective digital communication during internships cannot be reduced to a matter of efficiency or convenience. It requires both a thoughtful alignment of media with task demands and the creation of a genuine sense of presence that supports relationship-building and professional growth. The proposed model therefore contributes not only to theory development but also to practical strategies for improving the internship experience in a rapidly digitalizing world of work.

CONCLUSION

This concept paper set out to address the communication challenges faced by internship students in digital workplaces by proposing a model that integrates Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) with Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). The framework positions social presence as the mediating mechanism through which the fit between task and medium influences communication satisfaction and professional development. By situating these theories within the underexplored context of student internships, the paper extends their application beyond traditional organizational settings and demonstrates their relevance for employability research.

The proposed model carries both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it brings together two perspectives that are often studied separately and shows how they can jointly explain digital communication effectiveness. Practically, it suggests that preparing students for internship success requires more than technical training; it also requires deliberate attention to communication strategies. Universities can help students reflect on channel choice and presence-building skills, while supervisors can enhance the experience of interns by creating immediacy and clarity in mediated interactions. Together, these practices can improve not only task performance but also interns' confidence and identity as emerging professionals.

Like all conceptual work, the framework presented here should be viewed as a starting point. Its value will depend on how future studies refine and test it across industries, cultures, and internship structures. Longitudinal and comparative research could be particularly useful for examining how interns' communication strategies evolve over time or differ by organizational context. In closing, the paper highlights that digital communication during internships is not simply about efficiency—it is also about connection, presence, and professional growth. Attending to these dimensions will be vital in preparing students for the realities of an increasingly digital world of work.

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