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

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ABSTRACT

The growing digitalization of workplaces has reshaped how interns communicate, learn, and form professional identities. While digital tools can enhance productivity and flexibility, they also bring challenges related to clarity, feedback, and interpersonal connection. Grounded in Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Social Presence Theory (SPT), this conceptual paper proposes a framework in which *social presence* mediates the relationship between *media–task fit* and *communication outcomes*—specifically, *communication satisfaction* and *professional outcomes*. The proposed model is designed for future empirical validation through a quantitative survey among internship students at University Technology MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Kelantan. By extending classical communication theories into the underexplored domain of digital internships, this study offers theoretical and practical insights for universities and host organizations seeking to strengthen students' communication competence and employability in increasingly digitalized workplaces.

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

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of modern workplaces has significantly changed how interns and employees interact. Traditional internships, once characterized by in-person supervision and daily face-to-face communication, are now frequently mediated through technology. Internship students are expected to rely on platforms such as email, Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Zoom as their primary channels of communication with supervisors and colleagues.

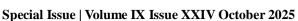
While these digital tools promote flexibility and efficiency, they also redefine what it means to be professionally engaged. Effective communication in these environments is not merely a useful skill—it is a foundation for task coordination, relationship building, confidence development, and employability (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2022).

Despite these advantages, many interns continue to encounter difficulties in digital communication. Studies have reported persistent issues such as lack of clarity, inconsistent feedback, and limited openness (Sulaiman et al., 2023). Poorly managed digital interactions can weaken professional relationships and reduce engagement (Wuersch et al., 2024). These problems are particularly evident in hybrid or remote internships, where reduced physical presence often increases the risk of miscommunication and feelings of isolation (Chadwick et al., 2024).

Communication theories provide valuable frameworks for understanding these issues. Media Richness Theory (MRT) suggests that communication media differ in their capacity to transmit information: richer media, such as video conferencing, provide immediate feedback and multiple cues, making them suitable for complex or ambiguous tasks; conversely, leaner media, such as email, are more appropriate for routine exchanges (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Social Presence Theory (SPT) complements this perspective by emphasizing the psychological



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dimension—how a medium fosters connection, warmth, and immediacy among participants (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Together, these theories suggest that effective digital communication occurs when the selected medium aligns with the task and the interaction generates a genuine sense of presence. Building on this premise, the present concept paper proposes a framework in which *social presence* mediates the link between *media–task fit* and *communication outcomes*—specifically, *communication satisfaction* and *professional outcomes*. The purpose is both theoretical and practical: to extend established communication theories to the relatively underexplored setting of digital internships, and to offer guidance for universities and host organizations seeking to prepare students for success in 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 outcomes).
- 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 outcomes for internship students?

Problem Statement

Internship programs serve as a crucial bridge between classroom learning and workplace practice. However, the rapid digitalization of modern workplaces has significantly reshaped how internship students communicate with supervisors and colleagues. Platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, WhatsApp, and Zoom have created new opportunities for more efficient collaboration but also introduced challenges that can hinder professional communication.

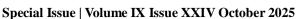
Research indicates that unclear messages, inconsistent feedback, and lack of openness often lead to misunderstandings and lower engagement among interns (Sulaiman et al., 2023). Recent studies further show that when digital media do not align with task requirements, communication effectiveness decreases, relationships weaken, and engagement levels drop (Wuersch et al., 2024). These challenges not only affect how clearly messages are conveyed but also shape the overall quality of professional relationships.

For internship students—who rely heavily on mediated communication to perform tasks, seek feedback, and demonstrate professionalism—these barriers are particularly problematic. They highlight the urgent need for communication skills that extend beyond traditional face-to-face interactions.

At the same time, theories such as Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) suggest that communication effectiveness depends not only on selecting the right medium but also on the degree of psychological presence experienced during the interaction.



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However, little is known about how these theories apply to internship contexts, where students often face unique challenges balancing task requirements, supervisor expectations, and emerging professional identity in digital environments (Chadwick et al., 2024; Petit et al., 2023).

Without a deeper understanding of these dynamics, internship students may continue to struggle with digital communication effectiveness, limiting both their learning outcomes and professional growth. Therefore, it becomes essential to develop a conceptual framework that integrates structural and psychological dimensions of communication—specifically, how media—task fit and social presence interact to influence communication satisfaction and professional outcomes in digital internship settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Communication in Digital Workplaces and Internships Internships serve as a vital bridge between higher education and the realities of professional practice. Employers consistently rank communication as one of the most essential career-readiness competencies, referring to the ability to exchange ideas, information, and perspectives clearly and effectively across diverse settings (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2022). This competency has become increasingly critical as organizations rely heavily on digital communication platforms such as email, Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Zoom for everyday collaboration.

For internship students, effective digital communication goes beyond task coordination; it also plays a central role in relationship-building, mentorship, and the formation of a professional identity (Jeske & Linehan, 2020). However, the transition to hybrid and remote internship formats has brought new complexities. While digital technologies allow for flexibility and broader access, interns frequently report challenges related to delayed feedback, unclear expectations, and difficulty maintaining interpersonal connection with supervisors (Widaningsih et al., 2022).

These challenges underline that communication remains a recurring concern in digital internships and highlight the need for conceptual models capable of explaining how different communication factors influence satisfaction and professional outcomes.

Media—Task Fit: From Media Richness to Task—Technology Fit One of the most established perspectives on communication effectiveness is Media Richness Theory (MRT). The theory posits that communication media vary in their capacity to convey information. Richer media—those that provide multiple cues and immediate feedback—are more suitable for complex or ambiguous tasks, whereas leaner media are better suited for straightforward or routine communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

For example, a simple progress update might be effectively communicated through email, while resolving a misunderstanding or discussing a nuanced issue is better achieved through video conferencing. Channel Expansion Theory later refined this concept, suggesting that users' perceptions of media richness are influenced by their experience with the channel, the subject matter, and their familiarity with communication partners (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). This is particularly relevant for interns, who may initially find workplace communication tools unfamiliar but grow more comfortable as they gain experience.

Complementary 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 the degree of alignment between media characteristics and the task at hand (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995; Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). Collectively, these frameworks conceptualize media—task fit as a continuous decision-making process of "choosing the right tool for the right task." For interns, this alignment directly influences how effectively they communicate with supervisors and colleagues, shaping both task performance and satisfaction.

Social Presence as the "Felt Sense" of Others Online While media-task fit focuses on structural alignment between communication channels and tasks, Social Presence Theory (SPT) captures the psychological dimension—the extent to which a communication medium creates the sense that others are "present" in the



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interaction (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). High levels of social presence foster a feeling of connection, engagement, and support—critical for interns adapting to new organizational environments.

Meta-analyses and reviews consistently show that social presence is positively associated with satisfaction and perceived learning in online contexts (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). Empirical evidence also indicates that social presence can act as a mediating mechanism: richer media heighten social presence, which in turn enhances engagement, satisfaction, and continued use of digital platforms (Wang, 2022). Thus, social presence represents a crucial psychological process through which media—task fit influences communication outcomes.

Recent empirical studies further demonstrate the complexity of digital communication during internships. Jeske and Linehan (2020) found that interns who maintained consistent video or chat contact with their supervisors reported higher role clarity and confidence. Similarly, Alasagheirin et al. (2023) and Gao et al. (2024) found that perceived responsiveness and immediacy in online communication increase students' sense of belonging and satisfaction, with social presence functioning as the key mediating factor. In related work, Schneider et al. (2024) highlighted that internship supervisors frequently identified communication gaps and role ambiguity as challenges, emphasizing the importance of timely feedback and structured digital mentoring.

Beyond internship settings, studies in digital learning environments show that social presence enhances collaboration quality and learning engagement (Sung & Mayer, 2012; Rodríguez-Ardura & Meseguer-Artola, 2017). Taken together, these findings affirm that social presence acts as the psychological bridge linking media characteristics with human engagement. Integrating MRT and SPT therefore provides a holistic understanding of digital communication—one that captures both its technical and emotional dimensions, which are particularly vital for interns developing professional identity and confidence.

Communication Satisfaction and Early Professional Outcomes Within organizational communication research, communication satisfaction represents a well-established construct encompassing clarity, responsiveness, and overall communication quality (Downs & Hazen, 1977). For interns, satisfaction with communication strongly correlates with a sense of inclusion, confidence, and effective task performance.

Existing studies on internships and remote work underscore that the clarity and timeliness of supervisor feedback significantly affect interns' learning experiences and satisfaction (Jeske & Linehan, 2020). Yet, while research recognizes the importance of effective communication, it has rarely modeled how media choice and social presence jointly shape communication satisfaction and professional outcomes. This conceptual gap limits our understanding of how interns succeed in digital workplaces where relationships, mentoring, and feedback are primarily mediated through technology.

Synthesis and Gap

Across the reviewed literature, several insights converge around a common theme: communication effectiveness in digital internships depends on both structural and psychological factors.

From the structural perspective, theories of media—task fit emphasize that effective communicatio occurs when the features of a medium align with the requirements of the task at hand (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis et al., 2008).

At the same time, social presence research demonstrates that the sense of being connected with others is a powerful predictor of engagement and satisfaction in online environments (Richardson et al., 2017; Wang, 2022).

In parallel, studies focusing on internships reveal persistent communication barriers—such as unclear expectations, delayed feedback, and limited mentor interaction—that hinder learning and professional growth (Bawadi et al., 2023).

Despite these rich strands of inquiry, few studies have examined how these elements operate together. Specifically, it remains unclear how the alignment between media and task (a structural condition) interacts



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with the experience of social presence (a psychological condition) to influence interns' satisfaction and professional outcomes.

While mediation effects of social presence have been documented in online learning and workplace communication, this mechanism has not yet been systematically explored in the context of digital internships. Given that interns often work within hierarchical relationships, with limited autonomy and experience, understanding this interaction becomes crucial.

This paper therefore proposes an integrated conceptual model that positions social presence as the mediating mechanism linking media—task fit to communication satisfaction and professional outcomes. By bringing these perspectives together, the framework contributes both theoretically and practically: it extends established communication theories into the unique setting of digital internships and provides guidance for universities and host organizations seeking to strengthen interns' digital communication competence.

Underpinning Theory

This study is anchored in two primary theories: Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Social Presence Theory (SPT), supported by established constructs from organizational communication and employability research. Together, these frameworks form 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 convey information. Rich media, such as video conferencing, allow multiple cues, rapid feedback, and a 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 exchanges that require less interpretation.

For internship students, the concept of media—task fit is particularly important. Interns constantly decide between email, messaging applications, and video meetings to coordinate with supervisors and colleagues. When the chosen medium aligns with the nature of the task, communication tends to be clearer, faster, and more effective. MRT therefore provides the theoretical basis for the independent variable in this study: media—task fit as a key determinant of effective communication.

Social Presence Theory (SPT)

While MRT focuses on the structural aspects of communication, Social Presence Theory addresses 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.

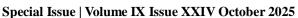
Research consistently shows that social presence enhances satisfaction, trust, and learning in online and blended environments (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). For internship students, experiencing a sense of presence during digital interactions with supervisors can reduce feelings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

Organizational Communication and Employability Frameworks The dependent variables in this study—communication satisfaction and professional outcomes—are grounded in established work on organizational communication and employability. Communication satisfaction has long been recognized as a multidimensional construct that captures how individuals evaluate clarity, feedback, and integration in workplace communication (Downs & Hazen, 1977).

Similarly, professional outcomes such as communication competence and identity formation are reflected in employability frameworks, particularly the NACE career readiness competencies (NACE, 2022). Although these frameworks are not grand theories, they provide validated and widely accepted constructs that help this



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study capture meaningful indicators of professional growth and communication effectiveness in digital settings.

Conceptual Framework

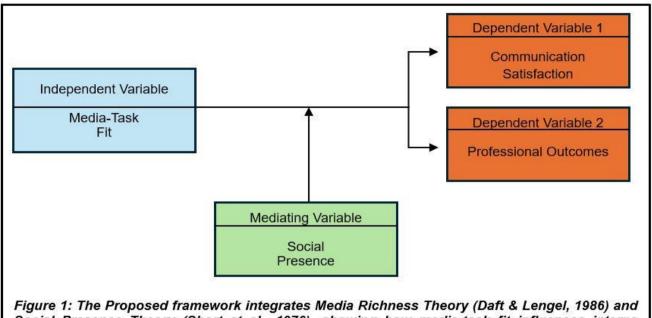


Figure 1: The Proposed framework integrates Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976), showing how media-task fit influences interns communication satisfaction and professional outcomes through social presence.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework presents how interns' professional communication in digital workplaces is shaped by both structural and psychological factors. Drawing from Media Richness Theory, media—task fit reflects how well a chosen communication channel provides the necessary cues, immediacy, and feedback to accomplish tasks effectively. In line with Social Presence Theory, the perceived sense of connection and interpersonal warmth functions as the psychological mechanism that transforms appropriate media choices into positive communication experiences.

Social presence is expected to mediate the relationship between media—task fit and communication outcomes by enhancing clarity, responsiveness, and emotional connection. When interns perceive stronger social presence, they are more likely to feel satisfied with communication, gain confidence in their interactions, and strengthen their professional identity and networks. At the same time, media—task fit may also exert direct effects on both communication satisfaction and professional outcomes, suggesting a partial mediation structure.

This framework provides a balanced view of how the alignment between task requirements and communication media, supported by a sense of human presence, contributes to meaningful interaction, communication satisfaction, and employability among interns in digital work environments.

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.



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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 for this study will be collected using a self-administered online questionnaire, chosen for its practicality since interns are located across different regions of the country. The instrument comprises five sections:

- 1. **Demographics** covering participants' age, gender, program of study, internship industry, and placement location.
- 2. **Media–Task Fit (IV)** measured using items adapted from *Media Richness Theory* and *Task–Technology Fit* research (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). A sample item reads: "The communication channels I use during my internship are well suited to the type of tasks I am given."
- 3. **Social Presence** (**Mediator**) assessed with validated items from prior social presence studies (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)** measured using items adapted from 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**) derived from employability frameworks, particularly the NACE career readiness competencies (NACE, 2022). Example: "My internship experience has strengthened my ability to communicate professionally."

To enhance conceptual clarity, this study defines Professional Outcomes as a multidimensional construct comprising three interrelated sub-dimensions: task performance, professional identity formation, and network building.

Task performance reflects interns' perceived ability to complete assigned duties efficiently and meet workplace expectations (Jeske & Linehan, 2020). Professional identity formation refers to the extent to which interns perceive themselves as emerging professionals who are developing confidence and competence within their fields (Bawadi et al., 2023).

Network building captures interns' capacity to establish and maintain professional relationships with supervisors, peers, and industry contacts, supported by evidence that online knowledge-sharing efficacy enhances professional collaboration (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Each sub-dimension will be measured using multiple Likert-scale items adapted from validated employability and communication competency frameworks. All constructs will be rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Using validated measures ensures comparability with prior studies and enhances the reliability of the findings.



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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 is to propose a model that explains how media—task fit and social presence jointly influence the communication outcomes of internship students in digital workplaces. While extensive research exists on organizational communication, the specific experiences of interns—who often lack authority, confidence, and familiarity with professional norms—have not received the same level of attention. By integrating Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Social Presence Theory (SPT), this study emphasizes the dual importance of selecting communication channels that align with the task and cultivating a sense of interpersonal connection in mediated interactions.

From a theoretical perspective, this model contributes in several ways. First, it extends MRT beyond managerial and organizational contexts into the domain of student internships, where individuals have limited control over broader organizational systems but must still make daily decisions about which communication channels to use. Second, it positions SPT as the psychological mechanism that explains how media—task fit influences communication satisfaction and professional outcomes. Although prior research has linked social presence with learning outcomes in online education (Richardson et al., 2017), its role in workplace communication—particularly within internship settings—remains relatively unexplored. The integration of these two perspectives therefore bridges a theoretical gap between communication research and employability studies.

In practical terms, the proposed model highlights the need to strengthen digital communication training in higher education. Universities could introduce modules that teach students how to evaluate when to use lean versus rich media and how to project presence effectively during online communication. Supervisors and host organizations can also enhance the internship experience by fostering immediacy through timely responses, personalized feedback, and regular virtual check-ins. In the Malaysian context, where internship placements span various industries and geographical regions, such practices are essential to ensure equitable learning and engagement among students.

The model also offers meaningful implications for institutional and policy development. Graduate employability initiatives often emphasize technical or professional skills but tend to overlook communication as a structured competency. By situating communication within theoretical frameworks such as MRT and SPT,



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this paper reinforces the idea that digital communication is not merely a "soft skill" but a foundational professional competency. It argues that developing the ability to choose suitable media and sustain social presence should be seen as core employability outcomes rather than peripheral abilities.

However, as a conceptual work, this paper has its limitations. The proposed model has yet to be empirically

tested and is currently limited to internship students from one institution. Future research should validate the framework using quantitative or mixed-method designs and compare results across different industries, universities, or cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could also examine how communication strategies evolve over the duration of an internship, capturing changes in how interns perceive media richness and social presence as they gain more workplace experience.

In sum, this discussion highlights that effective communication in digital internships extends beyond efficiency or convenience. It depends on aligning the communication medium with the task at hand while fostering a sense of presence that supports collaboration, confidence, and identity formation. The proposed framework thus contributes to both theoretical advancement and practical improvement in the way internships are designed and experienced in a rapidly digitalizing world of work.

Limitation

As a conceptual paper, the proposed framework remains untested. While this limitation is inherent to conceptual development, future empirical validation is essential. The study's scope is also limited to internship students from a single institution (UiTM Kelantan), which may constrain generalizability. Future research could adopt comparative or longitudinal designs across multiple universities and industries to verify the robustness of the model. Cross-cultural validation would also enrich understanding of how media—task fit and social presence operate in different internship ecosystems.

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 outcomes. 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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