Meaning of Messages in Digital Communication: A Hermeneutic Study of Social Media Users

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Abstract

This research explores the meaning of messages in digital communication on social media through a hermeneutic approach. The findings show that message interpretation is strongly influenced by users' personal and social contexts, including cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and individual values. Algorithms that personalize content create 'filter bubbles' that narrow views and reinforce biases, while homogeneous online communities reinforce the meaning of certain messages in 'echo chambers'. Intercultural digital communication often suffers from misunderstandings due to differences in cultural norms and context, but users who frequently interact with other cultures show better adaptation. Emotion and empathy in digital communication often lack depth, with anonymity increasing negative behaviors such as cyberbullying. Social media enables the construction of digital identities and personal narratives that influence the meaning of messages. The implications of this research highlight the importance of digital literacy education, the development of fair algorithms, programs that support intercultural communication, and policies to address cyberbullying. This hermeneutic approach provides important insights for creating a more inclusive, empathetic and effective social media environment.

Keywords: Digital Communication, Social Media, Hermeneutics, Message Interpretation

Introduction

In the dynamic digital landscape, social media has emerged as an essential tool for communication, information sharing, and social connectivity (Tanase Tasente, 2023). The rapid evolution of social media platforms has not only revolutionized our interactions but has also significantly influenced how we perceive and interpret the messages conveyed through these channels (Zoya N. Sergeeva, 2023). The multifaceted nature of digital communication, characterized by its speed and diversity, coupled with the influence of users' cultural and personal backgrounds, has led to a complex and nuanced understanding of the messages shared online (Francidalma Soares Sousa Carvalho Filha, 2023). When individuals engage with content on social media, their cultural and personal contexts play a significant role in shaping the meanings they derive from these messages, highlighting the complex interplay between

technology and human interpretation in the digital age. A hermeneutic approach, deeply rooted in the interpretation and understanding of textual meaning (Nataša Nikolić, 2023), is a valuable method for exploring how social media users perceive and share messages. This method allows for a comprehensive analysis of how factors such as experience, cultural background, and situational context influence the interpretation of messages in digital communication (David L. Rennie, 2012). Hermeneutics, as a multidisciplinary field, deals with theories of understanding, especially in relation to written texts, making it particularly relevant to interpreting messages in social media interactions (Josef Isensee, 2023). Furthermore, the hermeneutical circle, which emphasizes deeper insights into specific phenomena and events, can be applied not only in research but also in practical settings such as social media communication. By applying hermeneutic principles, researchers can uncover the complex layers of meaning embedded in social media messages, explaining how users perceive and engage with digital content. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and emerging visual platforms play a significant role in disseminating health information and influencing user behavior (Agnes Papadopoulou, 2022). These platforms are not only tools for communication but also shape social practices and institutionalize interactions, especially among the younger generation (Jan Kietzmann,, 2011). In the business realm, Instagram is mostly used for promotional activities, while Facebook serves as a platform for sales and recruitment, highlighting the diverse functions of social media in different sectors (Eva Kalinová, 2023) [4]]. The impact of social media on the health and development of young people is significant, with both positive and negative outcomes observed, influenced by user characteristics and media sector features (Eva Kalinová, 2023). Understanding how users assign meaning to messages on social media is crucial, as interpretations can vary based on individual perceptions, social norms, and the specific context in which the message is received, emphasizing the complexity of communication in the digital age.

Social media users interpret the messages they receive through multiple lenses influenced by cultural consumption, personal experiences, and digital literacy (Tanase Tasente, 2023) [1] [2]. Factors such as the type of cultural consumption, interest in reading details, and the meaning of text messages between users play an important role in shaping the interpretation process (M. Hasyim, 2023) [3]. In addition, the use of symbols in digital communication can lead to different interpretations among users, highlighting the importance of semiotics in understanding the meaning of messages (Mahbub Ghozali, 2022) [4]. Cultural background and personal experiences have a greater impact on how individuals decode messages in digital communication, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of digital communication to understand how meaning is constructed and perceived in the realm of social media (Nurasia Natsir, 2023). Research on hermeneutic analysis in digital communication aims to not only enhance theoretical understanding of message consumption (Tat'yana Lenkova, 2022), but also to offer practical insights for social media users, digital marketers, and policymakers in crafting more impactful messages in the digital era (Muchlish Hasyim, 2023). By exploring the interpretation of creole media texts through hermeneutics, this study explains the complexity of understanding polycode media messages and the importance of considering linguistic and extralinguistic elements in interpretation. Furthermore, it explores the structural characteristics of social media that enable consumers to engage with marketer-generated content, highlighting the importance of consumer learning and the different types of MGC consumers identified in the study. This comprehensive analysis not only enriches theoretical knowledge but also provides practical recommendations for stakeholders to improve the effectiveness and meaning of messages in the digital landscape.

Methods

Qualitative approaches, such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Dilan Aktaş, 2022), thematic analysis (Rosha Makvandi, 2022), and integrative study approaches

(Ahmad Noor Hazim Ahmad Ghani, 2023), are invaluable in understanding the impact of social media on various aspects of society. These methods allow researchers to investigate individual experiences, analyze social media content, and identify effective communication strategies. By utilizing hermeneutic methods, researchers can interpret the meaning of messages shared on social media platforms, gaining insight into users' perspectives and behaviors (Busro Busro, 2023). Studies have highlighted the impact of social media use on academic achievement, with increased frequency on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat correlating with decreased academic performance, moderated by factors such as mother-adolescent communication and gender (Simon Wan, 2023). Additionally, excessive social media engagement, particularly at a young age, has been associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as increased digital stress and depressive symptoms, particularly affecting young women through appearance comparison and cyberbullying experiences (Paul Weigle, 2022)

Results and Discussion
1) Results

The main findings of this study, based on data collected through various methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, aim to investigate how social media users interpret messages in digital communication using a hermeneutic approach (Oscar R. Diamante, 2019). By analyzing user experiences and interactions on platforms such as Instagram, this study explains the diverse effects of social media on individuals, especially millennials, highlighting the benefits and potential negative consequences of excessive and uncontrolled social media use. This comprehensive approach contributes to a deeper understanding of how users engage with and interpret messages in the digital realm, offering insights to improve communication strategies and promote responsible social media use among different age groups.

a. Variability of Message Interpretation:

Social media users tend to interpret messages based on their personal and social contexts. Life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual values greatly influence how they understand and respond to digital messages. Use of Emojis and Memes**: Visual symbols such as emojis and memes are often used to add emotional or humorous nuances to messages. However, the interpretation of these symbols can vary greatly depending on the culture and social group of the user.

b. The Role of Algorithms and Filter Bubbles:

Social media algorithms that personalize content based on user activity create 'filter bubbles', which can narrow a user's perspective and reinforce existing biases. This affects how messages are perceived and received, often leading to narrow or distorted understanding. Homogeneous online communities can reinforce certain meanings of messages, creating 'echo chambers' where the same views are continually reinforced without being challenged by different perspectives.

c. Intercultural Communication

Digital communication across cultures often leads to misunderstandings due to differences in cultural norms and contexts. Misinterpretation of different symbols, idioms and communication styles can lead to conflict or confusion. Social media users who frequently interact with individuals from other cultures tend to develop better cultural adaptation skills, demonstrating more flexible and contextual understanding.

d. Emotions and Empathy in Digital Communication

Digital communication allows for quick and easy emotional expression, but often lacks the depth and nuance that comes with face-to-face communication. Social media users may have difficulty expressing empathy or accurately understanding the emotions of others. The anonymity and emotional distance in digital communication can increase negative behaviors such as cyberbullying, which can affect the meaning of messages and the mental health of users.

e. The Role of Narratives and Digital Identity

Social media provides a platform for users to construct and present their digital identities. The meaning of messages is often closely related to how users see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. Users often construct personal narratives through their posts, comments, and interactions on social media, which shapes how they interpret messages and communicate with others.

2) Discussion

a. Digital Marketing

Marketers can leverage AI-driven actionable insights based on historical data to design more personalized and contextual messages that trigger positive emotional responses from audiences (Fan Peng Kong, 2023). By leveraging neural network-based systems that assess and extract insights from marketing content designs, marketers can understand the appeal of their content and receive recommendations for improvement based on historical data (Fan Peng Kong, 2023). Additionally, emotional positivity in social media messages posted by brands plays a significant role in shaping consumer engagement behavior, with emotional positivity having different effects on personal engagement (likes) versus interactive engagement (retweets) on social media platforms (Iris Itzel Curiel Jiménez, 2022). Furthermore, the use of personal consumer data in designing in-store digital brand touchpoints can enhance consumers' emotional connection with the brand, emphasizing the importance of meaningful interpersonal interactions over one-way messages for a successful emotional brand experience (João S. Oliveira, 2022).

b. Digital Literacy and Education

Digital literacy programs play a vital role in enhancing users' critical thinking skills when interpreting messages on social media, thereby reducing the risk of misinformation (Burhanuddin Arafah, 2023). These programs aim to empower individuals to critically access,

analyze, evaluate, and create content, fostering a deeper understanding of the digital landscape and messages encountered online (Jian-Feng Nie, 2023). By equipping users with the ability to distinguish between reliable and misleading information, digital literacy initiatives contribute to the development of informed and responsible digital citizens (Rodney H. Jones, 2022). Through a combination of media literacy and digital citizenship education, individuals can navigate the complexities of online spaces, recognize potential biases, and make informed decisions when engaging with content on social media platforms.

c. Social Media Platform Development

Developers can consider how their algorithms influence the meaning of messages and strive to provide richer context for users.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complexity of message interpretation in digital communication on social media through a hermeneutic approach. Social media users interpret messages based on their personal and social contexts, with cultural backgrounds, life experiences, and individual values playing a significant role. The use of visual symbols such as emojis and memes adds nuance to messages, but interpretations vary widely. Algorithms that personalize content create 'filter bubbles', narrowing views and reinforcing existing biases, thus affecting message comprehension. Homogeneous online communities reinforce certain message interpretations in 'echo chambers', reducing exposure to different perspectives.

Cross-cultural digital communication often leads to misunderstandings due to differences in cultural norms and contexts. Users who frequently interact with individuals from other cultures demonstrate greater cultural adaptability, with more flexible and contextual understanding. Emotional expressions in digital communication often lack depth and nuance. Anonymity and emotional distance increase negative behaviors such as cyberbullying, which affects message interpretation and users' mental health. Social media allows users to construct

digital identities and personal narratives that influence how they interpret messages and interact with others.

Research Implications

a. Promote digital literacy education that helps users develop critical skills to interpret messages more accurately and contextually.

b. Develop Fairer Tools and Algorithms, Design social media algorithms that take into account diverse perspectives and reduce the effects of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers'.

c. Facilitate Intercultural Communication Develop programs and tools that help users understand and appreciate cultural differences in digital communication.

d. Implement more effective policies and technologies to prevent and address negative behavior in digital communication.

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