



Teaching Interpersonal Communication to Digital Natives

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Abstract

Digital natives are commonly perceived to have under-developed communication skills due to heavy exposure to social media. Interpersonal competence remains to be one of the most crucial skills for personal and professional success. Teaching of this skill is expected to be delivered and integrated in classroom instruction. The study attempts to explore the factors that facilitate teaching of interpersonal communication from the point of view of students who are digital natives. Interpersonal communication test, survey, and focus group discussion were employed to gather data from students. The majority of the respondents have an average level of interpersonal communication skill. Respondents spend six hours a day in social media, mostly accessing YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Line, for entertainment, socialization and general information purposes. Social media positively influence the students' emotional intelligence and ability to communicate in groups. Negative effects concern verbal communication and listening skills. Use of real life experiences and the role of teacher as facilitator of teaching and learning, are viewed to be relevant and influential in developing interpersonal communication skills. Class size, teacher's questioning techniques and classroom management, group work, student-centered approaches, more speaking classes and activities, and use of real-life experiences were perceived to be the factors that facilitate teaching of and improving interpersonal communication skills. Maximizing the use of social media as a tool in teaching and learning interpersonal communication skills can address the learning needs of digital natives. Including the voice of teachers and designing a comprehensive utilization of social media in instruction are recommended.

Keywords: *Social media exposure, Interpersonal communication, Hospitality, Digital natives, Factors affecting learning*

1. Introduction

The rise of the new generation in higher education, popularly known as Generation Z or digital natives posed a new challenge and paradigm shift in education. This entails teachers, who are mostly digital immigrants, to re-examine the delivery of instruction to address the needs and match the learning styles of students who are native speakers of digital language (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives are the first generation to grow up with new technology, born between 1995 and 2012. Sarkar, Ford, and Manzo (2017) described digital natives as learners in a technology-infused learning environment who prefers a flexible schedule, has a short attention span, and needs immediate feedback. In addition, they are collaborative and active learners, and universal adopters of mobile devices.

Technological advancements in the new generation of digital natives does not remove the significance of human communication in the context of hospitality. Interpersonal communication remains to be one of the soft skills that has long been identified crucial in hospitality. In fact, *hospitalityschools.com* ranked interpersonal communication fifth among the top ten qualities of a great hospitality employee. Moreover, the terms "hi-tech and hi-touch" have become buzzwords in the hospitality industry. In one of the articles in *blog.ehl.edu*, a balance between technology and human interaction was emphasized. This blog page from the world's oldest hotel school described hi-tech being the shaper of guest experience while hi-touch is pertained to as the emotion that brings about authenticity and human interaction. This underscores the need to equip hospitality students with both technology and interpersonal skills.

Furthermore, literature has consistently stressed the importance of effective interpersonal communication skills in the hospitality industry. Interpersonal communication is commonly defined as the process through which people express, interpret, and coordinate messages in order to create shared meaning, meet social goals, manage personal identity, and carry out their relationships. It is also considered



as a soft skill or people skill. Crawford and Weber (2016) published a study entitled, *Developing Soft Skills for Future Hospitality Leaders: A Case Study*. The article presented the importance and use of soft skills, including interpersonal communication, in the hospitality setting. The study also discussed the identification of competencies for hospitality management trainees which started in 1980s. Over the years, the competencies that remained are soft skills of communication, customer focus, interpersonal skills, and leadership. Plangpamools's (n.d.) study on human capital and interpersonal communication as a successful factor in the hospitality industry highlighted that interpersonal communication is a crucial part and factor in the success of hospitality industry.

The scope of interpersonal communication skills in this study covers four essential competencies required in hospitality: listening, verbal communication, emotional intelligence, and communicating in groups. In 1994, Brownell's study on listening environments suggested that strong listening environment should be created by effective hospitality leaders. This fosters high employee participation, excellent guest service and organizational commitment. In another report, Brownell (2009) underscored the increasing importance of listening for hospitality employees despite the increasing utilization of computer and other technology. Her paper highlighted the role that listening play in customer service specifically in the areas of providing accurate information and developing strong relationships. In the same report, the influence of technology on listening was also presented. Among the cases presented that influenced listening were multitasking, use of shortcuts in writing and speaking, information overload, and too much dependence on technology.

The ability to speak and write effectively in English are given prominence in the hospitality industry. Rahim (2011) analyzed the training and internship needs assessment of verbal communication among hotel practitioners. The results revealed low verbal communication ability among the respondents as there are some mismatches between the ability of the interns and the requirements of the industry. The study recommended a balance between general English proficiency and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses to match the needs of the students. The need for more practice was also emphasized. Some of the specific needs discussed are listening to customers' enquiries, explaining hotel procedures, and giving oral reports.

Emotional intelligence, called EQ or EI, is defined as the ability to recognize, understand and manage emotions intrapersonally and interpersonally. Koroglu and Koroglu (2012) reiterated that emotional intelligence is one of the most essential skills in hospitality, specifically in tourism industry. Mayer and Salovey (1997) as cited by Koroglu and Koroglu (2012) described four skills that an emotionally intelligent person demonstrates. These skills include identifying, using, understanding, and regulating emotions. The research focused on the importance of emotional intelligence in the tourism industry in the context of the job performance of tour guides. Nguyen, Ladkin, and Osman's (n.d.) qualitative research on emotional intelligence, on the other hand, dealt with hotel employees. They focused on examining the understanding and application of emotional intelligence. The results indicated the employees' high awareness about emotional intelligence and its applications in dealing with customers and colleagues. The research participants emphasized that they learn better from experiences or real-life situations compared to trainings.

In a study conducted by Lolli (2012), his findings revealed that the entry-level hospitality leaders believed that interpersonal communication skills are very important. However, the respondents perceived that their college curriculum did not prepare them enough to be competent interpersonal communicators. It is on this premise that the rationale of this research is established. This study is conceived on the notion that the current students of hospitality who belong to the Generation Z, known as digital natives, are viewed to be heavy users of technology, social media to be specific. Social media's effect on the ability to interact and communicate is visible throughout all areas of the society (Subramanian, 2017). In the same study, Bala (2014), as cited by Subramanian (2017), emphasized that while social media is strengthening social network, interpersonal relations are weakening. Furthermore, the students ascertained that the way they behave online affected their daily communication. Moreover, the respondents of the study of Vevere (2015) perceived social media as their new natural environment. In the same study, 73 percent of the respondents agreed that social media influence the way they speak and write. In relation to this, 84 percent of the



respondents use emoticons like smileys in writing. However, 83 percent claimed that when text messaging, they think of grammar rules and punctuation. Overall, the students recognized the impact of social media on their everyday communication patterns by perceiving social media as a new natural environment of communication. In terms of the ability to communicate in groups, digital natives are collaborative learners. They prefer learning with a team that allows for connectivity to peers (Sarkar et al., 2017).

As future shapers of the industry, it is imperative to look into the students' current interpersonal communication skills and identify how the hospitality curriculum can reinforce teaching such skills in the classroom or instruction level. This will help the schools prepare the students to meet and match the needs of the industry when they join the workforce. It is also expected that the results will address the gap between the digital natives and the digital immigrants' teaching and learning needs and styles. Research results will be beneficial to curriculum and instructional design. The results may be used as a springboard for designing specific courses and teaching and learning activities where interpersonal communication skills may be reinforced among students. In addition, the results on the social media exposure of the respondents will be helpful in identifying e-learning platforms and programs. The study provides a picture of where the hospitality students are in terms of social media use and this can be a basis for developing efficient communication channels to teach and reach them, for academic, personal, and social purposes.

2. Objectives

1. To profile the respondents in terms of interpersonal communication skills assessment level and social media exposure
2. To analyze the influence of social media exposure to the respondents' interpersonal communication skills
3. To identify the factors that facilitate teaching of interpersonal communication skills

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Measurement

The study employed a mixed methods research. Mixed methods research, as described by Creswell (2014) is a methodology for conducting research that involves collecting, analyzing and integrating quantitative and qualitative research. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Qualitative data consists of open-ended information that the researcher usually gathers through interviews, focus groups and observations. On the other hand, quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics. Specifically, the study used explanatory sequential design which included three phases of data gathering namely: quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis, and interpretation and connecting both quantitative and qualitative results. The research instruments utilized were a survey questionnaire, online test, and focus group discussion (FGD).

3.2 Data Collection

Quantitatively, an online survey and test were administered to 93 respondents. The survey questions included items about social media exposure of the respondents in terms of frequency of utilization, purposes, and sites accessed. For interpersonal communication skills assessment, the respondents took an online test which assessed their current interpersonal communication level. The online test is an open access test from skillsyouneed.com. On the qualitative side, FGD was conducted among nine participants. During the FGD, the survey results were presented and validated with nine participants. FGD was also facilitated to further discuss the influence of social media exposure to respondents' interpersonal communication skills and gather the students' inputs as to the factors that facilitate teaching of interpersonal communication.

The respondents and participants are students in the international program in a hospitality college in Bangkok, Thailand enrolled in Principles of Communication class during the first and second semester of academic year 2018. They were purposively selected for this study, considering their age and their



understanding of interpersonal communication. For the FGD, invitation was sent to the students, and nine participants signed up and signified willingness to be part of the discussion.

3.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics using frequency counts, mean, and standard deviation was used to assess the interpersonal skills of the respondents. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was utilized to identify the common themes from the responses of the FGD participants.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Profile of Respondents

As presented in Table 1, the majority of the respondents have an average level of interpersonal communication skills. The scoring criteria of the assessment is divided in three levels: below 50 is below average, 50 to 69 is average, and 70 and above in above average. As described by skillsyouneed.com, the results indicate that the respondents have a basic grasp of key interpersonal communication skills and there is a need for more practice to develop the skills. Looking at the specific skills, it is worthy to note that the respondents registered the highest mean score in emotional intelligence and the lowest in verbal communication. Next to verbal communication is listening, while group communication ranked second.

During the FGD, participants shared that the results capture their current level of communication. All of them agreed to the results describing their current interpersonal communication skill level. The participants conferred that verbal communication skill is the weakest among hospitality students. The results are aligned with the results of Rahim's (2011) study which analyzed the training and internship needs assessment of verbal communication among hotel practitioners. The mean scores also revealed low verbal communication ability among the respondents as well as some mismatches between the ability of the interns and the requirements of the industry. The FGD participants explained that this is brought about by limited exposure to the English language, lack of confidence, fear of rejection and correction, lack of opportunities to practice in class, and the Thai culture where respect for the younger ones is perceived to be just listening, being passive, and avoiding talking, asking questions, or expressing themselves if talking with elders or people in authority, like teachers.

On the other hand, the participants associated their emotional intelligence skill obtaining the highest mean score, with their common interest in hospitality. Participants furthered that because hospitality students are highly interested in the field, they have higher motivation and they demonstrate more flexibility to adapt to different people and situations. They also recognize the need to provide customer satisfaction and this was also considered as a factor where the EQ score could be attributed. As one respondent put it, "this is a hospitality college and most people come here because they are interested in the hospitality industry and EQ is something you really need in the hospitality industry because that's what they want to do and when these people come together, so that makes for the high EQ." These results correspond to the research findings of Nguyen et al. (n.d.) which indicated that hospitality employees have high awareness about emotional intelligence and the importance of its applications in dealing with customers and colleagues. During the discussion, communicating in groups was frequently mentioned as part of emotional intelligence, highlighting confidence building and boosting of self-esteem.

**Table 1** Frequency count of respondents' level of assessment

Skills	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Total
Listening	31 (33.33%)	58 (62.37%)	4 (4.30%)	93 (100%)
Verbal Communication	13 (13.98%)	65 (69.89%)	15 (16.13%)	93 (100%)
Emotional Intelligence	44 (47.31%)	37 (39.78%)	12 (12.90%)	93 (100%)
Working in Groups	30 (32.26%)	47 (50.54%)	16 (17.20%)	93 (100%)
Overall Average Score	21 (22.58%)	65 (69.89%)	7 (7.53%)	93 (100%)

Table 2 Respondents' Mean Scores in Interpersonal Communication Skills Assessment

Skills	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Listening	40	73	55	7
Verbal Communication	25	89	53	13
Emotional Intelligence	36	85	59	10
Working in Groups	27	88	58	14
Average Score	32	76	57	8

The majority of the respondents are heavy social media users, spending more than four hours in a day. As shown in Table 2, the average daily utilization is 6.3 hours. As to the purposes presented in Table 3, the respondents mostly access social media for entertainment, socialization, and general information. This is consistent with the study of Kibe and Komunyu (2014), where the same three were identified as the respondents' needs for using Facebook groups. Though the FGD participants confirmed that they mostly use social media for entertainment and socialization, the participants also clarified that the purposes overlap depending on the contents they access. The contents they access for entertainment sometimes lead to learning new information or they look for knowledge or educational content which are entertaining. The same is true with socialization. This signifies the participants' appreciation for learning in a fun, collaborative and interactive way. However, given the top survey responses on the purposes for accessing social media, there is an implication that the respondents do not directly rely on social media for academic matters including learning skills. This, in a way was validated by the FGD participants when they noted that they understand their role as students and that the role of the teacher in improving their communication skills, through their suggested teaching and learning activities, are vital in the learning process. Another purpose added by two of the participants is the surveillance or knowledge of others. This purpose is not commonly listed as a popular reason for accessing social media. This is parallel to the research findings of Sheldon and Bryant (2016), where surveillance ranked first as a motive in using Instagram. Surveillance pertains to keeping up with what others are doing and getting more information about others by checking their social media posts. One of the participants shared that her perception about someone she met changed after she looked into the Instagram posts of that acquaintance. This denotes that social media exposure has an effect on establishing and keeping relationships.

Table 4 presents the ranking of the social media sites accessed by the respondents. The top three most accessed sites are YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Line. Studies of Aishwarya and Vinod (2017), Sheldon and Bryant (2016), Amin et al. (2016), and Al-Khaddam (2013) all confirmed that Facebook and Instagram are two of the most frequently used sites. In the FGD, the most frequently referred sites were YouTube, Reddit, Line, and Instagram.

**Table 3** Respondents' daily social media utilization in hours

Hours	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1	1	1.08
1-2	5	5.38
3-4	19	20.43
5-6	24	25.81
7-8	16	17.20
More than 8	28	30.11

Table 4 Respondents' social media exposure in terms of purpose

Purposes	Frequency	Rank
Entertainment	91	1
Socialization	81	2
General Information	68	3
Academic Matters	45	4
Leisure	34	5
Self-Seeking	25	6
Others	7	7

Table 5 Respondents' frequently accessed sites

Sites	Frequency	Rank
YouTube	88	1
Facebook	86	2
Instagram	85	3.5
Line	85	3.5
Google+	46	5
Twitter	30	6
Pinterest	24	7
Snapchat	18	8
LinkedIn	9	10
Others	16	9

4.2 Influence of Social Media Exposure to Interpersonal Communication Skills of FGD Participants

As to interpersonal communication skills, the influence on emotional intelligence was the most actively discussed. Another theme on influence that emerged is how social media influence the participants' self-confidence. Most of them attributed this to YouTube and Facebook's motivational videos, stories, and influencers. This result supports the argument of Ikachoi et al. (2015) that social media has a profound influence on the self-esteem of undergraduate students and that social media can be used to improve communication skills and boost self-esteem if used appropriately. On the other hand, the negative influence experienced by the participants include conflict in self-identity, misunderstandings of chat messages, shorter attention span, and misspelling words. For the listening skill, the result supports Brownell's (2009) report that too much dependence on technology and use of shortcuts in writing and speaking affects listening skills. As described by Sarkar et al.'s (2017), the short attention span makes the learners crave for a fast-paced environment, which is what social media offers. Another influence is on online and face-to-face behavior. One participant mentioned that as an active member of communities in Reddit, where members do not take offense on humor and comments. With this, he finds himself in conflicting situations when he interacts face-to-face and still behaves the way he does in Reddit. His behavior is similar to the respondents in the study of Subramanian (2017) claiming that the way they behave online affected their daily communication. As Vevere (2015) put it, users view social media as their natural environment.



4.3 Factors that Facilitate Teaching of Interpersonal Communication Skills

The participants in the FGD identified the following factors that they view as effective in teaching and learning interpersonal communication skills: class size, classroom management by the teacher, questioning techniques of the teacher, more opportunities for practice, more electives or extra courses, group work, student-centered approach, and use of real life experiences. These factors are in conjunction with previous researches that look into effective teaching and learning, identifying the teachers' personality and competence as a significant factor, along with the others. The "overwhelming majority" of literature on the advantages of a small class size, as noted by Mathis (2016), presents that class reduction is a positive and effective strategy. In relation, student participants of Tran's (2013) study attributed their low quality of learning to large class sizes, limited class time, lack of teacher's innovation and preparation, and poor resources, among others. Another similar study of Salvador and Await (2013) listed teacher's behavior and teaching methods, classroom setting, and information provided to students as factors that has much effect in students' learning behavior. Digital natives are described by Sarkar et al. (2017) as active and collaborative learners. This explains why the participants identified group work and student-centered approach as factors that reinforce teaching. They prefer learning through activities rather than listening to traditional lectures. Group work provides opportunities for peer connection and establishing teamwork. For questioning techniques, students prefer being asked open, active, and critical questions. The manner the teachers recognize and respond to given answers are also important to students. One FGD participant said that as students, they do not appreciate when a teacher disregards or do not pay attention to their answers, whether it is right or wrong, they need to be acknowledged for their participation. With regard to feedback, participants noted that they value immediate feedback after a task is completed, the same with assessment which they prefer to be administered immediately after the related lesson or topic. This characteristic corresponds with Sakar et al.'s (2017) description of digital natives who expect immediate feedback and payoff for their effort. In terms of the learning environment, digital natives prefer a conducive atmosphere that integrates use of technology, allows room for connectivity and productivity.

These recommendations from the students themselves underscore the pivotal role of the academic and administrative affairs of an education institution in providing effective teaching and learning environment. The teacher is in charge of the delivery of instruction in the classroom level while the administration and the support offices takes care of the curriculum, resources, registration, and quality control. As the Cornu (2016) suggested in the UNESCO IITE policy brief, teachers need not pretend to be digital natives. They must be open to the mediation of technology, without losing their core as to their roles and values. The role of a teacher as a facilitator and knowledge mediator remains crucial in this generation of learners.

5. Conclusion

The study employed a mixed research method through an online test, survey and focus group discussion. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyze the results. Data were collected from 93 respondents. The study attempted to determine the respondents' interpersonal communication level and their social media exposure, analyze the influence of social media exposure to the respondents' interpersonal communication skill, and identify the factors that facilitate teaching of interpersonal communication to digital natives. The majority of the hospitality students are heavily exposed to social media. They currently have an average level of interpersonal communication covering listening, verbal communication, emotional intelligence, and communicating in groups. Their main purposes for accessing social media are entertainment, socialization, and seeking general information. YouTube, Facebook, Line, and Instagram are the most frequently accessed sites. The positive influence of social media exposure to hospitality students include inspiration, boosting self-confidence, edutainment, and additional knowledge on issues. On the other hand, conflicting self-identity, short attention span, and spelling errors were cited as negative influences. The factors identified to facilitate teaching of interpersonal communication skills to digital natives are class size, teacher's questioning techniques and classroom management, group work, student-centered approaches, more speaking classes and activities, and conducive learning environment.



The respondents strongly associate communication skills development with real-life and experiential learning.

The implication on the relevance of effective pedagogy and andragogy on hospitality education is clearly established. The role of the teacher as facilitator of learning remain highly relevant in teaching interpersonal communication skills to digital natives. The need to adopt to the learning needs and styles of the digital native students is a challenge not only to the teachers but also to the academic community in general. Integrating or embedding social media in the curriculum and syllabi will maximize the productivity of the respondents' heavy exposure to social media. Designing a comprehensive social media utilization program in classroom instruction will provide a standard or structure for the integration. Furthermore, the factors identified by the digital natives still align with the factors that facilitate effective teaching and learning through time. The tools of learning may have evolved with social media being a powerful platform but the principle and relevance of learning remain significant for the digital natives. The challenge remains on how to utilize social media for productive, engaging, fun, and academic purposes. A strong support from both the academic and administrative sides of the school is crucial in the satisfaction of the identified factors.

For future studies, it is recommended to increase the sample size, conduct participant and classroom observations, more focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Extending the scope of the respondents to include teachers and school administrators is recommended.

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