Classic Communication Theories in the Digital Realm: A Literature Review

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ᴱᴺᴳ **Abstract: Introduction:** Social media platforms have profoundly reconfigured modern communication, allowing users to create and distribute content actively rather than merely consuming it. In this context, this article maps how established communication theories are being operationalized in social media research, identifying what remains applicable conceptually and what requires platform-sensitive extensions. **Methodology:** This systematic review examined peer-reviewed research applying classical communication theories—such as Uses and Gratifications, Social Network Theory, and Self-Presentation Theory—to social media environments, focusing on open-access articles within Communication studies. **Results:** Evidence suggests that, while fundamental user motivations—information-seeking, entertainment, social connection—remain salient, the interplay between individuals and algorithms intensifies identity performance, communal engagement, and online influence. Influencers function as key opinion leaders, reshaping audience perceptions and driving emergent forms of digital participation. Additionally, political discourse is democratized yet susceptible to echo chambers and polarization. Brand communication likewise benefits from influencer-driven marketing and user-generated endorsements that can rapidly shape consumer perceptions. **Conclusions:** Although classical theoretical frameworks retain significant explanatory power, they must incorporate platform-specific features like real-time feedback loops, personalization mechanisms, and transnational interactions. By integrating established constructs with interdisciplinary methods, researchers can more accurately assess complex, high-velocity communication processes. Ultimately, these findings confirm that traditional paradigms continue to inform social media research, provided they adapt to evolving technological conditions that broaden global connectivity and user agency. Thus, classical approaches remain indispensable for interpreting the evolving digital ecology.
Keywords: Uses and Gratifications Theory; Social Network Theory; Two-Step Flow; Social Capital Theory; Self-Presentation Theory; Media Richness Theory; social media; influencers; algorithmic personalization; political communication.

ᴱᴺᴳ Teorías clásicas de la comunicación en el entorno digital: una revisión de la literatura

Resumen: Introducción: Las plataformas de redes sociales han reconfigurado profundamente la comunicación contemporánea, permitiendo que los usuarios creen y distribuyan contenidos de forma activa en lugar de limitarse a consumirlos. En este contexto, este artículo analiza cómo las teorías clásicas de la comunicación están siendo aplicadas en la investigación sobre redes sociales, con el objetivo de identificar qué elementos siguen siendo conceptualmente válidos y cuáles requieren adaptaciones sensibles a las características específicas de las plataformas. **Metodología**: Esta revisión sistemática examinó investigaciones evaluadas por pares que aplican teorías clásicas de la comunicación, como la teoría de usos y gratificaciones, la teoría de redes sociales y la teoría de la autopresentación, a entornos de redes sociales, centrándose en artículos de acceso abierto dentro del campo de los estudios de comunicación. **Resultados**: La evidencia sugiere que, aunque las motivaciones fundamentales de los usuarios —búsqueda de información, entretenimiento y conexión social— siguen siendo relevantes, la interacción entre individuos y algoritmos intensifica la construcción de la identidad, la participación comunitaria y la influencia en línea. Los *influencers* funcionan como líderes de opinión clave, reformulando las percepciones de las audiencias y promoviendo nuevas formas de participación digital. Asimismo, el discurso político se democratiza, aunque también se vuelve susceptible a la formación de cámaras de eco y a procesos de polarización. La comunicación de marca también se beneficia del marketing impulsado por *influencers* y de las recomendaciones generadas por los propios usuarios, que pueden modelar rápidamente las percepciones de los consumidores. **Conclusiones**: Aunque los marcos teóricos clásicos conservan un importante poder explicativo, deben incorporar características específicas de las plataformas, como los circuitos de retroalimentación en tiempo real, los mecanismos de personalización y las interacciones transnacionales. Al integrar constructos

consolidados con métodos interdisciplinarios, los investigadores pueden evaluar con mayor precisión procesos comunicativos complejos y de alta velocidad. En última instancia, estos hallazgos confirman que los paradigmas tradicionales continúan informando la investigación sobre redes sociales, siempre que se adapten a las condiciones tecnológicas cambiantes que amplían la conectividad global y la capacidad de agencia de los usuarios. Así, los enfoques clásicos siguen siendo indispensables para interpretar la evolución de la ecología comunicativa digital.

Palabras clave: teoría de usos y gratificaciones; teoría de redes sociales; flujo de comunicación en dos pasos; teoría del capital social; teoría de la autopresentación; teoría de la riqueza de los medios; redes sociales; *influencers*; personalización algorítmica; comunicación política.

1. Introduction

The contemporary dynamics of communication are shaped profoundly by the rapid growth of social media platforms, which have altered how individuals, organizations, and societies interact and share information. Only a few decades ago, classical theories of communication sciences focused on both mass communication and interpersonal interactions, emphasizing the way a sender disseminates messages to a receiver through traditional channels - print media, radio, television - and examining the effects of these messages on audiences. Such theories remain foundational for understanding communication processes, as they provide the conceptual groundwork necessary for analyzing current technological evolutions and the changed behaviors of audiences in digital environments.

The proliferation of online platforms, and particularly social media networks, has generated significant transformations in the contemporary public sphere, reshaping how media systems, audiences, and communicative practices interact. Scholarship rooted in audience-centered communication theories has long emphasized that audiences are not merely passive recipients of mediated messages, but active agents who select, interpret, and negotiate media content according to social and psychological needs (see, for example, Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1983). In digital environments, these dynamics are intensified by participatory affordances that enable users to produce, circulate, and reinterpret content at a greater scale, thereby increasing the visibility and impact of audience activity (Anderson, 2024a). Consequently, many classical theoretical models—originally developed to explain communication within traditional mass media systems—now operate within hybrid media systems, in which digital platforms play an increasingly central role in information access, particularly among younger and mobile-oriented audiences, while continuing to coexist with legacy media forms (Anderson, 2024a; Recalde et al., 2025).

Studies examining the role of users in selecting and receiving messages, the motivations underlying media consumption, and the ways in which audiences engage with and comment upon news content are rooted in Uses and Gratifications theory, which foregrounds audience agency and goal-oriented media use (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1983). Complementary lines of research drawing on classical communication theories have further explored how individuals construct identity in mediated environments and how interpersonal networks facilitate the circulation of information, influence political orientations, consumer attitudes, and the formation of social norms (Goffman, 1959; Kelman, 1961; Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955). Empirical studies applying these frameworks to social media consistently indicate that contemporary audiences continue to pursue core informational, entertainment, and social integration needs, while the satisfaction of these needs is increasingly shaped by platform-specific logics such as interactivity, visibility, and algorithmic curation (Smith & Watkins, 2023; Soto et al., 2024; Anderson, 2024a). Within this context of active and networked audiences, political communication frameworks also require re-examination, as digital platforms enable citizens and influencers to participate directly in agenda-setting and message circulation, thereby reshaping both the horizontal (elite-to-elite) and vertical (elite-to-public) dimensions of political communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2002; Tasenţe, 2014).

Examining how classical theories of communication sciences expand and adapt to the social media era is thus essential to understanding the state of the field and forecasting future developments. Previous works indicate that, while online environments introduce new forms of user motivation and new types of interaction unforeseeable in early theoretical frameworks, these contexts can still be interpreted through existing conceptual lenses (Smith & Watkins, 2023; Anderson, 2024a; Soto et al., 2024). The aim of this analysis is to provide a comprehensive overview of how classical theories of communication sciences - from Uses and

Gratifications, Media Richness Theory, and Social Network Theory to Social Capital Theory, Self-Presentation Theory, Social Influence Theory, Social Constructivism, and related paradigms - are now being applied to elucidate contemporary realities of social media communication.

The shift toward participatory media, in which users can produce, distribute, and remix content, does not represent a conceptual break with previous communication theories that consider audiences as active agents. Instead, it intensifies and extends the conceptualizations of the audience from passive receiver to actor and co-producer of messages . Audience agency, selective exposure, and interpretive participation were central elements in Uses and Gratifications research and related audience-centered approaches well before the emergence of the internet (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1983). What distinguishes contemporary digital environments is the scale, speed, and visibility of participation, facilitated by platform affordances that enable continuous interaction, content circulation, and algorithmic amplification.

By applying classical theoretical frameworks, researchers can systematically examine how messages are created, disseminated, interpreted, and remixed within networked communication spaces such as social media platforms, which have become central arenas for public discourse and opinion formation. Features such as immediacy, connectivity, virality, and algorithmic recommendation reshape the dynamics of power among communicative actors, amplifying certain voices while constraining others, yet without negating the foundational processes identified by classical theories.

Accordingly, this review seeks to organize major findings and scholarly insights into coherent analytical clusters, illustrating how well-established communication theories have been reinterpreted or extended to account for digital media environments. The discussion clarifies how these theories illuminate contemporary communication phenomena and identifies areas where theoretical models require refinement in relation to evolving user practices, platform design, and socio-cultural conditions shaping networked publics.

2. Methodology

This literature review employed a systematic approach to identify scholarly works that link classical communication theories to social media contexts. The Web of Science Core Collection was chosen as the principal database due to its broad coverage of peer-reviewed research in communication. A compound query was formulated to capture multiple theories - Uses and Gratifications, Social Network Theory, Social Influence Theory, Media Richness Theory, Social Capital Theory, Social Constructivism, Memetics Theory, and Self-Presentation Theory - while specifying diverse social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Reddit, and Pinterest. The search was intentionally broad, without an initial time constraint, to encompass both earlier and more recent discussions on how these classical frameworks have been reinterpreted in the digital realm.

All retrieved items were confined to articles and proceedings papers within the Communication category, thus ensuring that relevant scholarship in the discipline was prioritized. Subsequently, an Open Access filter was applied, allowing full-text examination of each publication. Titles and abstracts were reviewed to ascertain their explicit engagement with at least one of the targeted theories and a clear focus on social media. Papers that merely cited a classical theory tangentially or discussed general online phenomena without referencing any of these theories were excluded at this stage. The remaining set of studies underwent full-text analysis to verify methodological rigor and substantive theoretical grounding. Particular attention was given to how authors adapted or extended each theory to address unique features of social media, such as algorithmic recommendation, interactive affordances, or transnational user communities.

A structured synthesis of the final selection was then conducted, extracting insights on the research questions, theoretical frameworks, methods, and key findings. These data were organized around the specific theories, highlighting both conceptual overlaps - such as the shared emphasis on audience agency - and notable distinctions, such as varying levels of focus on network structures or identity work. The resulting body of literature was interrogated for emerging patterns and potential gaps, forming the basis for an integrative understanding of how classical communication theories maintain relevance while evolving in response to new technological and cultural conditions of the social media age.

3. Literature review

3.1. Theories Focused on Users' Needs and Motivations: Uses and Gratifications

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) conceptualizes media users as goal-oriented actors who actively select media content to satisfy cognitive, affective, and social needs, a perspective well established in classical communication research (Katz et al., 1973; Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1983). Rather than reiterating its foundational assumptions, recent scholarship applies UGT to examine how these enduring motivations operate within digital and social media environments characterized by interactivity, personalization, and networked participation. Empirical studies consistently show that informational, entertainment, and social integration needs remain central in social media use, while their fulfillment is increasingly shaped by platform-specific features such as algorithmic curation, user-generated content, and real-time feedback mechanisms (Smith & Watkins, 2023; Soto et al., 2024; Anderson, 2024a). Consequently, contemporary UGT research focuses less on redefining user motivations and more on understanding how digital affordances mediate, amplify, or constrain gratification-seeking behaviors across platforms.

A core premise of Uses and Gratifications Theory is its emphasis on the psychological and social origins of media use, highlighting how individuals engage with media to satisfy informational, entertainment,

identity-related, and social integration needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1983). While these foundational categories remain analytically relevant, research increasingly points to novel dimensions associated with interactive, mobile, and personalized media environments. In social media contexts, users do not merely consume content but also produce, curate, and circulate it, embodying the role of the "prosumer" (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) - a hybrid position that blurs the traditional distinction between producers and audiences. This shift complicates classical gratification categories, as participation, visibility, and social feedback become integral components of media use. As a result, contemporary UGT research increasingly interrogates whether traditional gratifications persist unchanged or require conceptual expansion to account for platform-specific affordances such as continuous interaction and algorithmically mediated exposure.

Empirical inquiries in recent years demonstrate that the classic categories of gratifications continue to manifest strongly in social media use. Recalde et al. (2025) synthesize findings showing that the need for information—such as learning about daily events, understanding political discourses, or staying updated on breaking news—remains a principal motivator for many users. This informational gratification is particularly salient in politically charged environments, where audiences rely on social media to navigate campaign narratives, candidate profiles, and policy debates (Usman & Siagian, 2024). Likewise, in contexts characterized by high smartphone penetration, social platforms serve as indispensable sources of timely and hyperlocal information that may be underrepresented in mainstream media.

Entertainment likewise remains a key motivator. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube are frequently used to alleviate boredom and access humorous or creative content (Soto et al., 2024). Shi et al. (2024), in their cross-cultural comparison of TikTok use in the United States and China, show that while some users primarily seek light entertainment, others pursue visibility, self-promotion, or social recognition through creative participation. In this sense, UGT's entertainment dimension remains conceptually robust, even as the modes through which gratification is achieved become increasingly user-driven and participatory.

Beyond information and entertainment, personal identity formation constitutes a central motivation in contemporary media use. Early UGT research emphasized the role of media in reinforcing personal values, exploring self-concepts, and identifying role models (Katz et al., 1973). In social media environments, these identity-related gratifications are intensified by affordances that enable profile curation, narrative self-disclosure, and immediate social feedback. Studies indicate that identity construction on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat involves continuous processes of self-presentation, peer validation, and audience negotiation, particularly among younger users (Qutub, 2021; Savic, 2021; Shi et al., 2024). Likes, comments, and shares function as mechanisms of social recognition that shape self-perception and stabilize identity performances in both private and public contexts (Anderson, 2024b; Soto et al., 2024).

Social integration, another foundational component of UGT, refers to the sense of affiliation and belonging users derive from mediated interaction (Blumler & Katz, 1974). On social media, this gratification is enacted through reciprocal practices such as commenting, direct messaging, and participation in groups or online communities. These interactions foster feelings of mutual support and connectedness, particularly for dispersed communities or individuals with limited offline networks. Eger and Gangur (2024) demonstrate how brand-centered communities on social media exemplify this dynamic, as users collectively co-produce shared meanings and identities while simultaneously fulfilling personal and social gratifications.

Importantly, UGT has also been extended to functional and high-stakes contexts beyond entertainment-oriented usage. Belim et al. (2024) show how eHealth literacy intersects with user motivations to seek credible health information through digital platforms. In such settings, users pursue gratifications related to reassurance, risk reduction, and practical decision-making by engaging with peer experiences, expert content, or healthcare influencers. These practices illustrate how classical gratification categories remain relevant while manifesting in decentralized and interactive information environments that may both support and undermine informed decision-making.

Recent scholarship further emphasizes that distinctive features of social media—most notably algorithmic curation—systematically shape user motivations and behaviors in ways that early UGT formulations did not fully anticipate. While the theory remains effective in identifying core motivations, researchers caution that it may overestimate individual agency in environments where exposure is structured not only by personal preferences but also by proprietary recommendation systems designed to maximize attention and engagement (Smith & Watkins, 2023; Anderson, 2024b). Habitual media use guided by algorithmic cues can influence content selection in partially unconscious ways, complicating the classical assumption of a fully active and rational audience (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Shahzad & Salman, 2021). This interaction between user motivations and platform-driven attention mechanisms becomes particularly salient when considering the emotional dynamics of social media consumption. Digital platforms operating within the logic of the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) tend to privilege emotionally charged content, as high-arousal emotions such as fear, anger, or moral outrage are especially effective in sustaining engagement (Anderson, 2024b; Soto et al., 2024). Practices such as "doomscrolling," characterized by repetitive exposure to negative news (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2020; Sunstein, 2017), exemplify how emotional gratifications may diverge from traditionally positive or entertainment-oriented uses, challenging earlier assumptions about the affective orientation of media consumption. This interplay complicates the notion of an entirely "active audience," as users remain engaged not solely through deliberate selection but also through algorithmic amplification and affective triggers linked to the attention economy. In such contexts, media use reflects not only agency but also forms of platform-induced persistence, where continued exposure is driven by emotional arousal rather than conscious informational needs. Consequently, contemporary UGT research increasingly integrates

perspectives on algorithmic gatekeeping, data-driven feedback loops, and social validation mechanisms to account for how gratifications are shaped, reinforced, or redirected in digitally mediated environments.

Taken together, these developments underscore that Uses and Gratifications Theory retains substantial conceptual flexibility despite its origins in pre-digital media systems. By systematically examining how user motivations—from identity construction and social integration to entertainment and informational needs—are articulated across platforms, scholars continue to refine and extend the theory. The enduring prominence of UGT in social media research testifies to its heuristic value, provided it is treated not as a static explanatory model but as an adaptable framework capable of engaging with the structural, emotional, and algorithmic dynamics of contemporary digital communication.

3.2. Theories Emphasizing Identity Construction and Self-Presentation: Self-Presentation Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory

Classical communication scholarship has long emphasized the role of identity in shaping media engagement, with Self-Presentation Theory providing a foundational framework for understanding how individuals manage impressions in social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Rather than reiterating its well-established dramaturgical premises, recent research applies this framework to digital environments, where social media platforms intensify identity management through persistent visibility, audience multiplicity, and strategic self-disclosure. In these contexts, self-presentation is no longer confined to situational encounters but unfolds across networked publics, enabling practices such as personal branding, curated lifestyles, and selective authenticity to become central to users' public identities (Qutub, 2021; Savic, 2021; Anderson, 2024b). Consequently, contemporary studies focus on how platform affordances—such as profile architecture, privacy controls, and feedback metrics—reshape impression management processes, extending classical self-presentation theory into algorithmically mediated communication spaces.

A typical example comes from Qutub (2021), who demonstrates how Instagram and Snapchat users create "virtual walls" to separate different layers of contacts, effectively distinguishing content suitable for close friends from content intended for more distant acquaintances. This practice of segmenting audiences is far more flexible online than in offline contexts, as digital technologies allow advanced privacy settings, selective "friend" lists, or ephemeral postings. In Goffman's terminology, the user becomes both stage manager and actor, orchestrating a nuanced performance that might vary from story to story or from one ephemeral post to another. Thus, social media intensifies Goffman's claim that people aim to control how they are perceived, except that now the scale is much larger and the timeline potentially continuous.

Professional environments also illustrate the enduring relevance of Self-Presentation Theory. Brewer (2018) delves into LinkedIn as a platform for professional self-branding, noting that tasks previously confined to résumé writing now find expression in carefully curated digital profiles. These profiles can convey expertise, personality, and social proof - endorsements from colleagues, educational backgrounds, and skill sets - in a space accessible to potential employers or business partners across the globe. From a classical perspective, the user is still managing impressions, but the scale of the "front stage" is extended to millions of possible viewers, each with their own expectations and criteria for evaluation.

Al Nashmi and Painter (2018) assess political figures on Snapchat, showing how ephemeral "stories" enable candidates to project authenticity or spontaneity. Goffman's notion of front-stage performance resonates here, but the ephemeral nature of the medium modifies the dynamic: users assume that content viewed for a short period is more casual or less heavily produced, perhaps allowing politicians to appear "in the moment" and connected. This ephemeral performance can also be harnessed to test out messages or gauge initial reactions without leaving a permanent public record. In effect, ephemeral platforms alter the tension between front stage and back stage, as politicians can experiment with seemingly back-stage content (i.e., behind-the-scenes glimpses) and transform it into an appealing front-stage act that resonates with younger demographics.

In tandem with Self-Presentation Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a more psychologically oriented lens that underscores belief in one's own competencies. Abdallah et al. (2024) highlight how individuals with high communication self-efficacy are more inclined to produce online content - videos, blogs, tweets - thereby enhancing their visibility, shaping public discourse, and consolidating an online identity. In contrast, a lack of perceived competence can impede a user's active participation, relegating them to more "lurking" behaviors. Social media usage thus becomes a feedback loop: positive reinforcement (likes, positive comments, shares) can elevate one's sense of efficacy, motivating further engagement, whereas negative feedback or harassment may erode self-efficacy, leading to online silence or withdrawal.

The synergy between Self-Presentation Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory becomes evident when considering the phenomenon of influencers. Influencers cultivate a polished brand identity, mixing personal details with professional or aspirational content to attract a following. By systematically managing their online persona, they embody the Goffmanian performer. Yet their rise to influencer status often depends on their perceived competence in a specific niche - beauty, fitness, gaming, tech reviews - and their sense of self-efficacy, which drives them to produce steady content despite the competitive environment. Users with high self-efficacy are more likely to experiment with style, frequency, and engagement strategies, reinforcing the notion that personal beliefs in one's abilities play a major role in shaping digital visibility.

Recent research examining gender, race, and cultural context has added important nuance to classical theories of identity and self-presentation in online environments. Empirical studies show that marginalized or underrepresented user groups often encounter distinctive challenges in projecting authenticity, authority, or

expertise on social media, as audience reactions are shaped by persistent stereotypes and implicit biases embedded both in social norms and platform dynamics (Qutub, 2021; Savic, 2021; Anderson, 2024b). For instance, research on influencer cultures and short-video platforms indicates that women and minority creators frequently face heightened scrutiny, differential engagement, or algorithmic suppression, which can constrain visibility regardless of competence or content quality (Shi et al., 2024). In such contexts, the interaction between self-presentation and self-efficacy becomes particularly salient: even highly capable individuals may experience reduced confidence or strategic self-censorship when social or algorithmic feedback undermines perceived legitimacy. Conversely, studies also suggest that anonymity or pseudonymity in certain digital spaces can mitigate offline power asymmetries, allowing users to experiment with identity construction and gain recognition on alternative terms (Savic, 2021). Overall, these findings demonstrate that classical theories of impression management are not invalidated but rather reframed by the multi-layered, data-driven, and culturally stratified nature of contemporary social media environments.

Another dimension to consider is how ephemeral or curated digital environments prompt a continuous renegotiation of authenticity. Self-Presentation Theory originally posited that face-to-face encounters have more spontaneous signals - tone, body language, context - that might conflict with a carefully constructed impression. In social media, many of these cues are absent or can be selectively introduced. Stories and posts can be edited, retouched, or wholly staged. Yet the very scale of audience interaction also makes it more likely for discrepancies and inconsistencies to be exposed. A user can cultivate different images on different platforms, but it becomes challenging to keep them all strictly separate. In effect, the digital environment intensifies Goffman's concerns about maintaining a coherent performance across multiple "theaters".

In digital communication contexts, self-efficacy has increasingly been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, encompassing not only confidence in content production but also the perceived ability to manage multiple and overlapping audiences, navigate platform-specific norms, and cope with continuous evaluative feedback. Empirical studies indicate that users' perceived self-efficacy varies across platforms depending on affordances, dominant content formats, and audience expectations. For example, research shows that professionals often report higher communicative self-efficacy on platforms such as LinkedIn, where norms emphasize credentialed self-presentation, than on short-video platforms such as TikTok, where visual performance, algorithmic visibility, and creative fluency play a more decisive role (Brewer, 2018; Savic, 2021; Shi et al., 2024). As users engage with a broader range of platforms, their sense of self-efficacy becomes increasingly differentiated, reflecting accumulated experience with diverse media environments and audience feedback mechanisms (Bandura, 1977; Abdallah et al., 2024).

Despite these complexities, classical theories remain central to understanding identity processes in online environments because they capture enduring dimensions of human social interaction, including impression management, social validation, and perceived competence. Contemporary research extends these frameworks by demonstrating how ephemeral content formats encourage situational and transient self-presentations (Qutub, 2021), how algorithmic recommendation systems selectively amplify or suppress particular identity performances (Anderson, 2024b; Savic, 2021), and how identity can be co-constructed through ongoing interaction within networked publics rather than being solely orchestrated by individual actors (Poyry et al., 2022). Taken together, these studies illustrate that while platform architectures and data-driven mediation reshape the conditions of self-presentation and self-efficacy, the foundational processes identified by classical theories continue to structure digital identity negotiation.

In summary, Self-Presentation Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory combine to offer a dual focus on how individuals manage perceptions and how beliefs in personal competence shape their willingness to engage. As people navigate the ever-evolving constellation of social platforms - some ephemeral, some persistent, some highly curated - these two classical frameworks provide an interpretive bedrock. They highlight the tension between authenticity and curation, the interplay of user confidence and social recognition, and the new possibilities for shaping personal identity on a global stage.

3.3. Theories Based on Social Structures, Networks, and Opinion Leadership: Social Network Theory, Social Influence Theory, and the Two-Step Flow

While Uses and Gratifications and identity-oriented theories foreground individual motivations and self-expression, other classical communication perspectives emphasize the role of social structures and interpersonal ties in shaping message dissemination and interpretation. Social Network Theory (SNT), emerging from sociological research on social relations and information flow (Barnes, 1954; Granovetter, 1973; Wasserman & Faust, 1994), conceptualizes communication as a system of nodes and ties, where nodes represent social actors (individuals, organizations, or communities) and ties denote relational connections such as friendship, shared interests, or institutional affiliation. Early applications of SNT focused on how information circulated within groups and how network structures influenced collective behavior, providing a foundation later adapted to media and communication research.

Central to SNT is the assumption that structural properties of networks—such as node centrality, tie strength, and network density—shape the reach, credibility, and velocity of message circulation (Granovetter, 1973; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Classical media research already noted that interpersonal relationships could significantly affect whether messages disseminated through mass media were trusted or acted upon (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In social media environments, these dynamics become more explicit and measurable. Platforms such as Twitter and TikTok rely on visible follower–following relations, while interface design and algorithmic feeds prioritize content circulating within users' networks. As a result, online popularity,

connectivity, and engagement metrics function as indicators of influence, echoing early SNT insights regarding the gatekeeping role of well-positioned actors within a network (Savic, 2021; Xu, 2022).

Empirical studies illustrate how network centrality amplifies both information and misinformation in digital contexts. Mututwa and Matsilele (2020), for example, show how celebrities' disclosures about health issues on Twitter can rapidly reach large audiences due to their central network positions. In such cases, network structure facilitates the swift diffusion of public health information. Conversely, the same mechanisms can accelerate the spread of misleading or false content when influential nodes disseminate inaccurate claims. From an SNT perspective, the configuration of the network—who follows whom, which clusters are dense or sparse, and which actors bridge otherwise disconnected communities—plays a decisive role in determining the trajectory and impact of online information flows.

Closely tied to SNT is Social Influence Theory, developed by Kelman (1961). This theory focuses on the processes by which an individual's attitude or behavior changes within a social context. Kelman distinguishes among compliance (adopting behavior to gain approval or avoid punishment), identification (aligning with a group or figure out of a desire for a positive self-defining relationship), and internalization (fully accepting an idea or norm as consistent with personal values). When applied to social media, these processes are frequently visible in how individuals may conform to trending hashtags to fit in (normative influence), accept shared information as factual if it comes from a trusted influencer (informational influence), or wholeheartedly integrate beliefs gleaned from online communities into their worldview (internalization).

Researchers like Sharipudin et al. (2023) link social influence to consumer decisions, showing how normative and informational routes can affect product purchase intentions. Bradshaw et al. (2021) apply Kelman's typology to digital persuasion: certain campaigns rely on compliance by offering incentives for social media shares or by portraying an attractive influencer endorsing a product, while others aim for deeper internalization by aligning brand values with the personal values of potential consumers. In activism or political mobilization contexts, these same influence patterns can lead to rapid shifts in collective behaviors. Social Influence Theory thus intersects with SNT by examining not only the structural position of influencers but the psychological processes that make their influence effective.

The Two-Step Flow of Communication, originally proposed by Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955), complements Social Network Theory and Social Influence Theory by emphasizing the role of opinion leaders as intermediaries who filter, interpret, and contextualize information before it reaches wider audiences. While initially formulated in the context of traditional mass media, this model has been extensively revisited in digital communication research. Contemporary studies show that influencer cultures on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok exemplify how a relatively small number of highly visible users can shape trends, reinterpret news, and endorse products for large and often highly engaged audiences (Pöyry et al., 2022; Savic, 2021; Sharipudin et al., 2023). In these environments, influencers function as trusted reference points whose perceived authenticity and relational proximity often grant them greater persuasive power than institutional media sources.

Digital platforms, however, complicate the original two-step logic by enabling multi-step flows of communication. Rather than a single opinion leader, information frequently circulates through chains of micro-influencers, niche creators, and highly connected users, each embedded within specific communities or thematic clusters. Empirical research indicates that such multi-layered diffusion patterns enhance both the reach and fragmentation of information flows, as messages are continuously reframed across network segments (Xu, 2022; Pöyry et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the foundational insight of the Two-Step Flow—that interpersonal endorsement significantly shapes media effects—remains theoretically robust.

These dynamics become particularly pronounced in politically polarized and crisis contexts. Social media networks often fragment into ideologically homogeneous clusters or echo chambers, where algorithmic filtering and selective exposure reinforce pre-existing beliefs and amplify the influence of opinion leaders within each community (Xu, 2022; Anderson, 2024b). At the same time, recent research highlights the role of bridging actors—users connected to multiple ideological or social groups—in facilitating cross-cutting information flows and mitigating polarization. Studies on digital activism and youth political participation demonstrate that such actors can connect otherwise segregated networks, enabling the circulation of diverse perspectives and collective mobilization beyond traditional media constraints (Bunquin, 2019; Usman & Siagian, 2024).

An emerging line of inquiry looks at the role of algorithms in forging or constraining these social connections. Traditional SNT assumed that relationships were primarily user-driven or emerged out of organic interactions. Now, platforms often propose "people you may know" or "accounts to follow," shaping network structures from their inception. Users who meet algorithmic thresholds of popularity may be recommended more frequently, leading to a "rich get richer" phenomenon of preferential attachment. Social Influence Theory must also consider the possibility that normative or informational influences are amplified or throttled by the platform's hidden curation systems. In essence, the synergy between structural factors, social influence processes, and algorithmic mediation defines much of contemporary social media's complexity.

Thus, from a classical standpoint, SNT, Social Influence Theory, and Two-Step Flow remain potent interpretive tools for understanding digital communication patterns. They explain how messages resonate within a group, how certain individuals emerge as trusted voices, and how entire communities can rapidly change attitudes or mobilize around shared goals. The challenge is incorporating the new dynamics of automated recommendation systems, global scale, and user agency in an environment that is simultaneously shaped by interpersonal relationships and computerized filtering. Yet the foundational insight - that relational structures and interpersonal influence matter immensely in shaping media effects - continues to ring true in the age of likes, shares, and follows.

3.4. Evolving Dimensions of Political Communication in the Social Media Environment

Blumler and Gurevitch (2002) conceptualize political communication as operating along two interrelated dimensions: a horizontal dimension, describing interactions among political actors and mass media institutions, and a vertical dimension, capturing how political messages are transmitted from elites to the general public. Prior to the emergence of digital platforms, this framework reflected a communication system dominated by legacy media logics, in which political actors negotiated visibility, framing, and agenda-setting primarily through professional journalism, while audience feedback remained limited in scope and speed.

Within the horizontal dimension, political leaders sought access to media coverage by conforming to editorial norms and news values, shaping debates and public agendas largely within elite-controlled arenas. The vertical dimension, in turn, emphasized a predominantly top-down flow of information from political elites to citizens, with only constrained opportunities for public response through mechanisms such as letters to the editor, opinion polls, or call-in programs. Although audience feedback was not absent, it rarely disrupted established power asymmetries within the political communication system.

Subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that the rise of social media platforms—understood as algorithmically mediated digital communication infrastructures—has significantly reconfigured both dimensions of this model. Recent studies argue that the horizontal dimension now extends beyond interactions between political actors and legacy media organizations to include digitally native intermediaries such as influencers, content creators, and online communities that participate in agenda-setting and framing processes (Chadwick, 2017; Anderson, 2024b). Traditional journalistic gatekeeping is increasingly supplemented by networked forms of visibility shaped by platform algorithms and user engagement dynamics.

Similarly, the vertical dimension of political communication has evolved from a largely unidirectional flow into a more interactive and contested process. Citizens are no longer positioned solely as message recipients but engage in real-time responses, content remixing, and networked mobilization, thereby influencing political narratives and campaign strategies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Usman & Siagian, 2024). Empirical research highlights how political actors must now navigate hybrid communication environments in which institutional authority coexists with decentralized participation and algorithmic amplification.

In this sense, while Blumler and Gurevitch's original framework remains analytically relevant, contemporary adaptations emphasize the need to account for platform-specific affordances, algorithmic curation, and networked publics. These developments do not eliminate elite influence but redistribute communicative power across a more complex ecology of actors, thereby reshaping both horizontal negotiations and vertical dissemination processes in contemporary political communication (Chadwick, 2017; Anderson, 2024b).

3.5. Theories Centered on Social Capital and Relational Power: Social Capital Theory

Although Social Capital Theory is not always included in the earliest classifications of communication theories, it aligns closely with canonical perspectives on how social cohesion, trust, and shared norms facilitate collective action and the circulation of knowledge within communities (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) popularized the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital, emphasizing how close ties (bonding) and more distant connections (bridging) each provide resources and opportunities. In a digital context, these distinctions become salient. Online platforms let users maintain both strong ties with intimate friends and weak ties with acquaintances or new groups at unprecedented scale. The result is an environment where relational power can be accumulated and used to spread information, garner support, or undertake various forms of collective endeavor.

Scholars who apply Social Capital Theory to social media stress that digital interactions do not merely replicate offline ties; they can expand or transform them. Raji et al. (2020) observe that platforms such as Instagram integrate personal expression with connection-building, enabling people to share visual narratives that elicit emotional support or empathy from both close friends and passing viewers. This interplay of strong and weak ties can enhance the user's social capital in multiple ways: strong ties offer a sense of belonging and reliability, while weak ties can open doors to novel information, job opportunities, or cross-cultural dialogues. Junaidi et al. (2020) similarly document how these networks create diverse forms of collaboration that might not emerge in face-to-face contexts, as participants in online forums often forge connections beyond the constraints of geography or social hierarchy.

In addition to bridging and bonding, researchers differentiate structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital (Putnam, 2000; discussed in Dhir et al., 2017). Structural social capital refers to the overall network architecture - who is connected to whom. Relational social capital involves trust, reciprocity, and norms that guide interactions among network members. Cognitive social capital pertains to shared values, narratives, and understandings. On social media, structural capital can be traced through the ties a user maintains, but the relational and cognitive aspects hinge on how trust is established and how beliefs or objectives come to be shared among participants.

Abdallah et al. (2024) and Mustaffa et al. (2021) highlight the need for strong communication skills and willingness to engage as prerequisites for social capital formation in online spaces. When individuals effectively articulate their ideas, provide support to others, or participate in communal events, they increase the likelihood of forging reciprocal relationships that yield practical or emotional benefits. Social capital then empowers them to gather resources - information, social support, or financial help in some crowdfunding contexts - that can be reinvested back into the community, creating a cycle of reinforcement. On a local or national scale, these processes can lead to organized activism, philanthropic initiatives, or crowdsourced

problem-solving, as exemplified by civic movements that rely heavily on social media to coordinate volunteers and share resources.

However, Social Capital Theory also raises questions about inclusivity, community boundaries, and the risk of insularity. While the internet promises global reach, in practice, many users gravitate toward communities that share their values or backgrounds, forming insular subcultures. These subcultures might reinforce trust and cohesive norms internally (high bonding capital) but remain disconnected from other groups (low bridging capital). In such cases, the negative side of bonding emerges, as each cluster becomes resistant to external viewpoints or resistant to bridging attempts from outsiders. Fragmentation can intensify if the platform's algorithms preferentially display content from like-minded peers, reducing the impetus for bridging interactions. This phenomenon has been documented in studies on political partisanship (Chen, 2020; Mututwa & Matsilele, 2020), where certain circles seldom encounter conflicting perspectives, making it harder to find common ground across ideological divides.

Additionally, social capital in digital realms intersects with brand communication and influencer cultures. A user with significant social capital - manifested in follower counts, high engagement rates, or trust from a community - can leverage that capital into sponsorships, brand partnerships, or even social impact projects. This dynamic exemplifies how intangible community resources become personal or commercial advantage, which can be beneficial but also raise ethical issues about monetizing communal trust. Eger and Gangur (2024) refer to how brands attempt to tap into existing social capital by associating their products with influential figures or actively participating in user communities, hoping to inherit some of that trust.

Recent scholarship highlights a strong interdependence between social capital, self-presentation, and self-efficacy in digital environments. Studies show that users who are able to strategically manage self-presentation and cultivate relational ties tend to accumulate higher levels of social capital, which in turn reinforces perceived self-efficacy and confidence in public participation (Bandura, 1997; Savic, 2021; Abdallah et al., 2024). Network-based reputation—manifested through visibility, engagement, and peer recognition—can empower individuals to assume leadership roles, act as content creators, or mobilize communities around shared causes (Dhir et al., 2017; Eger & Gangur, 2024). Conversely, users who lack digital, cultural, or communicative competencies may remain peripheral within online networks, limiting their ability to build social capital or access support. Empirical research on digital inequality suggests that such disparities reflect not only differences in technological access but also unequal capacities to leverage social networks effectively, thereby reproducing broader social inequalities in online contexts (van Dijk, 2020; Chen, 2020).

Overall, Social Capital Theory offers an integrative framework for understanding how interpersonal connections, trust, and shared norms shape user experiences and collective outcomes in social media environments. Research consistently demonstrates that digital networks function not merely as channels for message transmission but as reservoirs of social support, reciprocity, and symbolic recognition, while also creating mechanisms of exclusion or boundary reinforcement (Putnam, 2000; Dhir et al., 2017). The tension between bonding and bridging social capital remains central for assessing social media's capacity to foster cohesion or deepen fragmentation, particularly in contexts characterized by ideological polarization or algorithmic filtering (Chen, 2020; Mututwa & Matsilele, 2020). While digital platforms amplify certain dynamics—such as speed of interaction, scalability, and collaborative potential—they also introduce challenges related to filter bubbles, privacy, and the commercialization of trust (van Dijck et al., 2018; Anderson, 2024b). Nevertheless, the core premise of Social Capital Theory—that relational ties constitute a key resource enabling collective action and social coordination—continues to provide a robust analytical lens for examining online communities.

3.6. Theories Addressing the Role of Technology and Channel Richness: Media Richness Theory and Extensions

While the frameworks discussed above concentrate on audience needs, identity, social structures, and influence, another branch of classical communication theory focuses explicitly on the attributes of the channels themselves. Media Richness Theory (MRT), introduced by Daft and Lengel (1986), proposed that different communication media vary in their capacity to convey nuances, support immediate feedback, and provide social and nonverbal cues. The notion of "richness" indicates that some channels - like face-to-face conversation - are better at handling complex, equivocal information, while "lean" media - such as written memos - might be suitable for simpler, more routine tasks.

Initially, MRT did not account for the interactive, multimedia possibilities of the internet, much less social media. Nonetheless, digital researchers have adapted MRT to explore how platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Zoom compare to older channels in terms of richness. Nkoala (2024), for instance, points out that a platform like Twitter can be considered relatively lean due to its text-based, brevity-driven nature, yet the presence of images, videos, and threaded replies can increase its perceived richness for certain users in specific contexts. Liu et al. (2016) show how social media can transition quickly between synchronous and asynchronous modes, further complicating the classification as simply "rich" or "lean".

Moreover, Anders et al. (2020) argue that communication tasks requiring high empathy or complex negotiation might benefit from platforms with more immediate feedback (video calls or real-time chat), while simpler announcements could be efficiently handled through asynchronous posts. Lee (2022) adds that even if social media has a variety of interactive capabilities, sensitive or emotionally charged discussions might still demand richer cues, such as vocal inflections or facial expressions, pushing participants back toward voice calls or face-to-face meetings. Thus, while social media is flexible in terms of modality, the alignment between channel capabilities and communication goals remains critical - a central tenet of MRT.

Beyond MRT, researchers propose additional refinements. Channel Expansion Theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999) holds that perceived richness of a medium can grow as users gain experience not only with the platform but also with the subject matter and the communicative context. In social media, this means that novices might initially find a platform awkward and insufficiently expressive, whereas experienced users, especially those deeply acquainted with the norms of a certain community or with the platform's features, perceive it as a "rich" environment. Chen (2020) exemplifies this with messaging apps like LINE or WhatsApp: for advanced users, the ability to send emojis, voice notes, images, real-time location, and group messages transforms these apps into highly versatile, and subjectively rich, channels.

Media Synchronicity Theory (Dennis et al., 2008) further elaborates the trade-offs between synchronous and asynchronous modes. High synchronicity (real-time text chat, live streams, video calls) is valuable for tasks requiring immediate consensus or rapid back-and-forth interactions, whereas asynchronous platforms (forums, message boards, or ephemeral stories) allow reflection, editing, or deeper cognitive processing. Anders et al. (2020) highlight that social media can flexibly support both, depending on user preference, platform design, and situational urgency. For instance, a crisis scenario might require real-time coordination (live chats, emergency broadcasts), while ongoing group deliberations (organizing an event, maintaining a community page) might proceed effectively through asynchronous channels.

Another extension, Niche Theory (Dimmick and Rothenbuhler, 1984; Xu, 2022), seeks to explain how different media coexist and compete for user time and attention in an increasingly crowded digital environment. Each platform occupies a certain niche, shaped by user habits, perceived gratifications, and distinctive features. Generalist platforms like Facebook might be considered "broad" niches - covering various communication forms - whereas specialized platforms like LinkedIn, Twitch, or Mastodon carve out more targeted roles. Niche Theory thus connects to UGT by addressing how users allocate their limited time across different media based on the perceived utility or gratification each offers.

Collectively, Media Richness Theory and its subsequent extensions address a dimension often underemphasized in audience- or network-centered approaches: the affordances and constraints of the communication channel itself. Empirical research confirms that the flexibility of social media environments blurs the traditional distinction between "rich" and "lean" media, yet the foundational MRT premise—that communication effectiveness depends on the alignment between channel capabilities and task equivocality—remains influential (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis et al., 2008). Studies in computer-mediated communication demonstrate that attempts to manage emotionally complex or conflictual interactions through text-based channels are more prone to misunderstanding, whereas richer media offering visual and vocal cues better support ambiguity resolution and relational repair (Lee, 2022; Anders et al., 2020). Conversely, routine updates, announcements, or informational broadcasts tend to be communicated more efficiently through leaner or asynchronous channels, confirming the continued applicability of MRT in digital contexts.

Research grounded in Channel Expansion Theory further emphasizes that perceived media richness is not solely determined by technical features, but also by users' experience, skills, and familiarity with both the medium and its communicative norms (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). Empirical studies show that users who repeatedly engage with a platform and explore its interactive affordances—such as video conferencing, voice messaging, reactions, or polling tools—are more likely to perceive it as rich and expressive (Chen, 2020; Xu, 2022). Conversely, when platform cultures or habitual practices restrict interaction to predominantly textual exchanges, even technologically multimodal environments may function as subjectively lean channels. This insight underscores the role of communicative competence and social learning in shaping how channel richness is enacted in practice.

Taken together, classical channel-focused theories—including Media Richness Theory, Channel Expansion Theory, Media Synchronicity Theory, and Niche Theory—retain strong analytical value for understanding social media communication because they foreground how channel properties intersect with user goals, experience, and situational demands. Although originally developed in the context of face-to-face interaction, organizational communication, and early computer-mediated systems, these frameworks have been successfully recontextualized to account for the hybridity and multimodality of contemporary platforms (Dennis et al., 2008; Dimmick & Rothenbuhler, 1984; Xu, 2022). By highlighting how cues, synchronicity, and platform specialization shape communicative outcomes, these theories complement audience- and network-based approaches and reaffirm that communication outcomes are decisively influenced not only by who communicates and why, but also by the characteristics of the medium through which interaction unfolds.

3.7. Final Reflection on Classical Theories in a Social Media Context

This final reflection aims to foreground the broader theoretical implications that emerge from applying classical communication theories to contemporary social media environments. One key implication is that digital platforms do not render foundational theories obsolete, but instead expose the conditions under which their assumptions require refinement. Concepts such as audience activity, opinion leadership, identity performance, or channel richness remain analytically productive precisely because they allow scholars to interrogate how enduring communicative processes are reconfigured by algorithmic mediation, platform governance, and data-driven attention economies.

A central theoretical challenge highlighted by recent scholarship concerns the recalibration of agency. Classical models often presuppose purposeful actors operating within relatively transparent media systems. Social media environments complicate this premise by embedding user practices within opaque recommendation systems, monetization logics, and automated visibility regimes. This calls for theoretical integrations that

bridge communication theory with platform studies and critical data research, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how agency is distributed across users, algorithms, and institutional actors. In this respect, extensions of Uses and Gratifications, Social Influence, or Social Network Theory increasingly emphasize relational and structural constraints alongside individual motivations.

Another emerging implication relates to scale and transnationality. Classical theories were largely developed in nationally bounded media systems, whereas social media communication unfolds across culturally heterogeneous and geopolitically uneven spaces. Applying concepts such as social capital, opinion leadership, or media richness in global platforms requires greater sensitivity to cultural norms, linguistic asymmetries, and unequal access to digital resources. Future research is therefore encouraged to adopt comparative and cross-cultural designs that test the portability of these theories beyond their original socio-historical contexts.

Finally, the expansion of immersive, AI-driven, and hybrid communication environments raises new theoretical questions that classical frameworks can help structure, but not fully resolve on their own. The increasing prominence of generative artificial intelligence, virtual interaction spaces, and decentralized platforms invites renewed inquiry into how identity, influence, trust, and meaning-making are negotiated when human communication is partially automated or mediated by non-human actors. In this sense, classical theories function less as closed explanatory systems and more as adaptable heuristics that guide inquiry into emerging communicative forms.

Taken together, the continued relevance of classical communication theories lies not in their capacity to offer exhaustive explanations, but in their ability to anchor contemporary research in enduring analytical concerns while remaining open to interdisciplinary extension. Their future value depends on how effectively they are rearticulated in dialogue with technological change and withy new social realities, rather than on their preservation as fixed models from a pre-digital era.

4. Conclusion

The rise of digital platforms and social media has not displaced classical communication theories; rather, it has extended and recontextualized them within environments characterized by scale, interactivity, and algorithmic mediation. Core concepts—such as audience motivations, identity performance, social ties, relational influence, and channel affordances—continue to offer valuable analytical leverage. However, the findings of this review suggest that the applicability of these theories in digital contexts is neither uniform nor universal, but instead shaped by technological access, cultural norms, and socio-economic conditions.

One of the most significant transformations concerns the role of the audience. Social media enables individuals to act as content producers, curators, and opinion leaders, often blurring traditional distinctions between media elites and publics. Yet this expanded agency is unevenly distributed. While Social Network Theory and Uses and Gratifications effectively capture participatory dynamics in highly connected environments, their explanatory power is conditioned by disparities in access to digital infrastructures, platform literacy, and algorithmic visibility. In contexts marked by digital divides—whether along lines of income, education, geography, or age—the capacity to participate, influence, or even access diverse information remains structurally constrained.

Similarly, theories of social influence, social capital, and political communication reveal different dynamics depending on cultural and institutional contexts. In some societies, social media amplifies horizontal communication, civic engagement, and networked mobilization; in others, communication practices remain embedded in hierarchical traditions, strong community norms, or state-regulated media systems. From the perspective of the sociology of uses and techniques, media practices cannot be understood independently of local habits, symbolic meanings, and historically rooted patterns of technology appropriation. Consequently, concepts such as opinion leadership, bonding and bridging social capital, or audience agency do not manifest identically across regions, platforms, or cultural settings.

Algorithmic mediation and artificial intelligence further complicate these dynamics. Personalized feeds and recommendation systems reshape exposure and visibility in ways that classical theories did not anticipate, redistributing power between users, platforms, and institutional actors. While theories such as Uses and Gratifications or Social Influence can be adapted to account for algorithmic gatekeeping, they must be integrated with critical perspectives on platform governance, data capitalism, and automated decision-making. Without such integration, there is a risk of overstating user autonomy and underestimating structural constraints embedded in digital architectures.

Crises—political, health-related, or social—bring these limitations into sharper focus. In highly connected societies, social media can facilitate rapid information exchange and collective coordination, but it can also accelerate misinformation, polarization, and emotional contagion. In less connected or more fragmented contexts, crisis communication may remain dependent on traditional media or interpersonal networks, limiting the reach of digital platforms. Classical theories help explain these patterns, yet their explanatory scope depends on how effectively contextual variables—trust in institutions, media credibility, cultural attitudes toward authority—are incorporated into analysis.

Taken together, this review underscores that classical communication theories remain indispensable not because they provide universal answers, but because they offer adaptable frameworks capable of engaging with contextual complexity. Their continued relevance lies in their capacity to be recalibrated in relation to global inequalities, cultural diversity, and evolving technological regimes. Rather than assuming that social media operates uniformly across the globe, future research should employ comparative, cross-cultural, and

interdisciplinary approaches that examine how communication theories travel, transform, or encounter limits in different socio-technical environments.

Ultimately, classical theories continue to illuminate the fundamental dynamics of communication—how meaning is produced, negotiated, and circulated—but their application in digital contexts must remain sensitive to variation rather than predicated on universality. In an increasingly connected yet uneven world, understanding social media communication requires not only theoretical continuity, but also critical attention to difference, inequality, and context.

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