

ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND CONDUCT SKILLS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THE INTERVENTIONAL ROLE OF GROUP SOCIAL WORK

Nguyen Van Ha

Lomonosov Inter-level School System

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Abstract: As cyberspace has become an important communication environment for high school students, online communication and conduct skills are no longer limited to digital safety but are also closely associated with social-emotional competence, peer relationships, and students' psychological well-being in school settings. This article examines the current status of online communication and conduct skills among high school students, identifies selected related factors, and explores the interventional role of group social work. The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining a questionnaire survey of 470 students, in-depth interviews with students, teachers and parents, a pre-test/post-test intervention with a group of 15 students participating in a group social work program. The findings indicate that students' online communication and conduct skills were at a moderately good level. Among the four skill domains, digital responsibility and empathy were rated higher, whereas emotional regulation and conflict resolution were identified as weaker areas. Social media use time and peer pressure were negatively associated with online communication and conduct skills, while awareness of digital responsibility was positively associated with these skills. Preliminary intervention results suggest that group social work can contribute to improving students' online communication and conduct skills, particularly in emotional regulation and conflict resolution. The study contributes to clarifying a school social work approach to developing students' digital communication competence in the context of contemporary digital transformation.

Keywords: group social work; online communication; conduct skills; high school students; digital responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the internet and social networking platforms has profoundly transformed the communication environment of high school students. Cyberspace is no longer merely a place where students search for information or seek entertainment; it has become an important social environment in which they maintain friendships, share emotions, express themselves and seek recognition from peer groups. Forms of interaction such as private messaging, group chats, comments and post sharing have become familiar components of school life. Therefore, online communication and conduct skills should be considered an essential competence for students in the current educational context.

However, online communication differs significantly from face-to-face communication. The absence of nonverbal cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, and tone of voice; the anonymous or semi-anonymous nature of online interaction; rapid response speed; the wide dissemination of information and the long-term storage and retrievability of online content may increase the risk of misunderstanding, emotional reactions, personal attacks, group conflicts and cyberbullying.

Walther (1996) argued that computer-mediated communication changes the ways individuals express and interpret messages. Suler (2004) further noted that the online disinhibition effect may lead individuals to express emotions and behaviors more intensely than they would in face-to-face communication. These characteristics are especially relevant to high school students, who are in a developmental stage marked by identity formation, a strong need for recognition and considerable influence from peer groups (Erikson, 1968).

From the perspective of digital citizenship, online communication and conduct are not merely matters of technological proficiency. They also involve respect, responsibility, ethical awareness and the ability to participate safely and appropriately in online communities (Jones & Mitchell, 2016; Ribble, 2015). From the perspective of social and emotional learning, competencies such as empathy, emotion management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making provide the foundation for students' appropriate behavior across different social contexts, including online environments (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011). Accordingly, online communication and conduct skills may be understood as students' ability to use digital media to exchange information, express emotions, respond to others and regulate their behavior in accordance with social, ethical, and safety norms in online environments. In this study, these skills are examined through four components: empathy in online communication, emotional regulation, conflict resolution and digital responsibility.

In current educational practice, school-based activities related to cyberspace often focus primarily on digital safety education, prevention of legal violations and risk awareness. Such an approach is necessary but insufficient as communication and conduct skills cannot be sustainably developed through the passive reception of rules alone. Students may know that they should not attack others, share inaccurate information, or participate in negative talk within group chats; however, when faced with stressful situations, emotional provocation or peer pressure, they may still respond impulsively. Thus, the issue is not only a lack of awareness but also the gap between awareness and behavior in digital communication.

From the perspective of school social work, group social work is a promising method for addressing this gap. Group social work uses interactions among group members as a means of supporting individuals in changing their cognition, emotions and behaviors (Toseland & Rivas, 2017). Through discussion, case analysis, role-play and group feedback, students have opportunities to share experiences, observe peers' responses, practice new behaviors and develop positive communication norms. This approach is consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes that behavior is formed and modified through observation, practice, and reinforcement in social environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory also suggests that students' behavior is influenced simultaneously by individual characteristics, family, school, peer groups and broader social contexts.

On this basis, the present article analyzes the current status of online communication and conduct skills among high school students, identifies selected related factors and examines the interventional role of group social work in enhancing these skills. The findings are expected to provide a scientific basis for developing school social work activities aimed at strengthening students' digital communication competence, preventing online conflicts and supporting students' psychosocial well-being in the digital age.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative, qualitative and pre-test/post-test intervention approaches. The quantitative component was used to assess the current status of students' online communication and conduct skills, examine the reliability of the measurement scale and analyze selected related factors. The qualitative component was used to provide deeper insights into students' experiences, contexts and ways of handling online communication situations. The pre-test/post-test intervention design was used to preliminarily examine the interventional role of group social work.

2.2. Research Sample

The quantitative survey sample consisted of 470 students from a high school in Hanoi. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, of which 470 valid responses were collected, yielding a valid response rate of 94.0%. The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Research Sample

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	214	45.5
Female	256	54.5
Grade level		
Grade 10	162	34.5
Grade 11	156	33.2
Grade 12	152	32.3
Daily social media use time		
Less than 2 hours	58	12.3
2–4 hours	214	45.5
More than 4 hours	198	42.2

Source: Survey results of the study.

The sample structure shows that the proportion of female students was slightly higher than that of male students, although the difference was not substantial. The distribution of students across grades was relatively balanced, which provided a favorable basis for comparison across school-age groups. Notably, 87.7% of the students reported using social media for two hours or more per day and 42.2% reported using it for more than four hours per day. This indicates that cyberspace has become a routine communication environment for students and highlights the need to pay attention to the quality of online interaction and online conduct skills.

Figure 1. Students' Daily Social Media Use Time

Daily social media use time	Percentage (%)
Less than 2 hours	12.3
2–4 hours	45.5
More than 4 hours	42.2

Source: Survey results of the study.

2.3. Research Instruments

The main research instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections. The first section collected general information on gender, grade level and daily social media use time. The second section examined students' use of cyberspace, including purposes of use and forms of online interaction. The third section measured online communication and conduct skills using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The scale included four skill domains: empathy, emotional regulation, conflict resolution and digital responsibility.

In addition to the quantitative survey, the study used semi-structured in-depth interviews with students, teachers and parents. The interview content focused on students' experiences of communicating on social media, situations involving misunderstanding or conflict, students' responses to online criticism or negative behavior, teachers' and parents' perceptions of students' online communication skills and evaluations of school-based educational activities in this area.

2.4. Reliability Assessment of the Scale

The reliability of the scale was examined using Cronbach's alpha. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability of the Online Communication and Conduct Skills Scale

Skill domain	Number of observed items	Cronbach's alpha
Empathy	5	0.82
Emotional regulation	5	0.79
Conflict resolution	4	0.81
Digital responsibility	4	0.84
Overall scale	18	0.87

Source: Data analysis results of the study.

The results show that all scales had Cronbach's alpha coefficients greater than 0.70, meeting the commonly accepted threshold in social research (Nunnally, 1978). Digital responsibility had the highest reliability coefficient, followed by empathy and conflict resolution. Although the coefficient for emotional regulation was slightly lower, it remained within a good range. These results indicate that the measurement instrument had acceptable reliability and was suitable for subsequent analyses.

2.5. Group Social Work Intervention and Data Analysis

To examine the interventional role of group social work, the study conducted a pre-test/post-test intervention with a group of 15 students. These students were selected on the basis of voluntary participation and their initial online communication and conduct skills being at an average or below-average level.

The group social work program consisted of eight sessions, each lasting 45 - 60 minutes. The sessions focused on the following themes: group formation; identifying the characteristics of online communication; empathy in online communication; emotional regulation; conflict resolution; digital responsibility; integrated practice; and review and evaluation. The techniques used included group discussion, case analysis, role-play, group feedback, and experience sharing.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and pre-test/post-test mean comparisons. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to supplement and explain the quantitative findings.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Students' Use of Cyberspace

The survey results show that students used cyberspace frequently and for diverse purposes. Table 3 presents students' purposes of social media use.

Table 3. Students' Purposes of Social Media Use

Purpose of use	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Communicating with friends	412	87.7
Entertainment	398	84.7
Studying	276	58.7
Updating information	241	51.3

Source: Survey results of the study.

The results indicate that communicating with friends was the most common purpose of social media use, accounting for 87.7%, followed by entertainment at 84.7%. Meanwhile, studying and updating information accounted for lower proportions. This difference suggests that, for students, social media functions primarily as a communication and relational environment before serving as a learning or information environment. This is important for education and school social work as online risks often arise not only from information content but also from social interactions among students.

When compared with developmental characteristics, this finding is reasonable. High school students have a strong need for peer relationships, recognition and emotional sharing. Social media therefore becomes an extended space of school life. However, the prevalence of online communication may also increase the risk of misunderstanding, personal attacks, conflicts, or uncontrolled conduct.

Students' forms of online interaction are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' Forms of Interaction on Social media

Form of interaction	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Private messaging	438	93.2
Participating in group chats	402	85.5
Commenting	356	75.7
Posting/sharing content	298	63.4

Source: Survey results of the study.

Private messaging and group chats were the two most common forms of interaction. Compared with public posting or sharing, these semi-private forms of interaction are more immediate, less supervised and may create a false sense of safety. As a result, students may be more cautious when posting publicly but more likely to relax their self-control in group chats or private messages. This helps explain why students' digital responsibility scores were higher, whereas emotional regulation and conflict resolution scores were lower.

3.2. Current Status of Students' Online Communication and Conduct Skills

The results for the four domains of online communication and conduct skills are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Current Status of Students' Online Communication and Conduct Skills

Skill domain	Mean	Interpretation
Empathy	3.30	Moderately good
Emotional regulation	2.95	Average
Conflict resolution	3.01	Average
Digital responsibility	3.42	Moderately good
Overall mean	3.21	Moderately good

Source: Survey results of the study.

The results show that students' online communication and conduct skills were at a moderately good level overall but the skill domains were unevenly developed. Digital responsibility received the highest score, followed by empathy. In contrast, conflict resolution and emotional regulation scored lower. This difference reveals an important issue: students had a relatively good awareness of digital conduct norms but remained limited in regulating emotions and behavior when facing stressful online interaction situations.

Digital responsibility reached a mean score of 3.42, indicating that students had a certain level of awareness regarding avoiding the sharing of inaccurate information, respecting privacy and considering consequences before posting. This may be related to the fact that digital safety, information privacy and prevention of violations are often emphasized by schools, families and the media. In other words, behaviors that are public and visible to others may make students more cautious.

Empathy reached a mean score of 3.30, which was higher than the overall mean. This suggests that students tended to recognize the importance of respecting different opinions and considering others' feelings in communication. However, empathy is more difficult to exercise in online environments than in face-to-face communication. The absence of eye contact, facial expressions, tone of voice and contextual cues may lead students to misinterpret others' intentions.

Emotional regulation was the lowest-scoring domain, with a mean score of 2.95. This represents a notable weakness in students' online communication. When provoked, challenged or misunderstood, students tended to respond quickly, found it difficult to pause and were easily drawn into arguments. This finding is consistent with Suler's (2004) theory of online disinhibition, which suggests that anonymity, psychological distance and a perceived lack of control may lead individuals to express stronger emotions in online environments.

Conflict resolution reached a mean score of 3.01, which was higher than emotional regulation but remained at an average level. Behaviors such as knowing when to stop arguing appeared relatively stronger whereas proactive behaviors such as reconciliation or seeking support from a mediator were weaker. This suggests that students tended to avoid or disconnect from conflicts rather than resolve them constructively. In online communication, physical and psychological distance may reduce motivation for direct dialogue, leading students to remain silent, leave groups, block contacts, or allow conflicts to persist.

Overall, the results in Table 5 indicate that the core issue is not that students entirely lack awareness of digital communication. Rather, the more prominent issue is the gap between awareness and behavior: students may know appropriate conduct norms but still lack the capacity to regulate emotions and resolve conflicts in high-pressure interaction situations.

3.3. Selected Factors Related to Online Communication and Conduct Skills

The study found that students' online communication and conduct skills were associated with gender, social media use time, peer pressure, and awareness of digital responsibility. The main results are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Comparison of Online Communication and Conduct Skills by Gender and Social Media Use Time

Comparison variable	Group	Mean	SD	Test statistic	p
Gender	Male	3.12	0.56	t = -3.21	0.001
	Female	3.29	0.51		
Social media use time	Less than 2 hours	3.38	0.49	F = 6.42	0.002
	2–4 hours	3.25	0.52		
	More than 4 hours	3.08	0.57		

Source: Data analysis results of the study.

The results show that female students had higher mean scores in online communication and conduct skills than male students and the difference was statistically significant. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously and should not be reduced to an essential difference between males and females. The difference may be related to communication style, attention to social relationships, tendencies toward emotional consideration and caution in online interaction. This finding is consistent with some research on youth digital citizenship, which suggests that female students often score higher in dimensions related to online respect and positive communication behaviors (Jones & Mitchell, 2016).

Regarding social media use time, students who used social media for less than two hours per day had the highest skill scores, whereas those who used it for more than four hours per day had the lowest scores. The difference was statistically significant. This result indicates that greater use of social media does not necessarily imply better communication competence. On the contrary, frequent exposure to rapid, emotional, and poorly regulated interactions may gradually normalize negative communication behaviors. Therefore, digital skills education should not focus only on whether students can use technology, but also on the quality of their interactions and their ability to regulate behavior in digital environments.

Table 7. Correlations between Selected Factors and Overall Online Communication and Conduct Skills

Related factor	Correlation with overall skills
Social media use time	-0.32**
Peer pressure	-0.28**
Awareness of digital responsibility	0.45**

Note: **p < 0.01.

Source: Data analysis results of the study.

The correlation results show that social media use time and peer pressure were negatively correlated with online communication and conduct skills. Social media use time showed a moderate negative correlation, reinforcing the view that prolonged time online may be associated with lower-quality conduct if students lack self-regulation skills and appropriate guidance.

Peer pressure was also negatively correlated with online communication and conduct skills. This finding is particularly meaningful for group social work. Peer groups may become risk factors when group norms encourage gossip, personal attacks, exclusion, or crowd-based reactions. However, peer groups may also become protective factors if organized in a positive direction. In a facilitated group environment, students can share experiences, observe how peers handle situations, receive feedback, and jointly establish positive communication norms. Thus, group social work does not reject peer influence; rather, it uses peer influence as an interventional resource.

By contrast, awareness of digital responsibility was positively correlated with online communication and conduct skills. This was the strongest correlation among the variables examined. The finding suggests that raising awareness remains a necessary condition. Students need to understand the consequences of online speech, information sharing, and privacy violations. However, the results for emotional regulation and conflict resolution also indicate that awareness alone is insufficient to produce appropriate behavior. These skills must be developed through situational practice, feedback, and self-regulation.

3.4. Current Status of School-Based Education on Online Communication and Conduct Skills

The current status of school-based educational activities is presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8. Educational Content Related to Online Communication and Conduct

Educational content	Percentage of students exposed (%)
Digital safety awareness	82.6
Avoiding the sharing of personal information	78.9
Prevention of legal violations	74.3
Civilized online conduct	61.7
Online conflict resolution skills	38.5
Emotional regulation skills	34.9

Source: Survey results of the study.

The results show that schools had paid attention to digital safety, information privacy, and prevention of legal violations. However, content directly related to online conflict resolution and emotional regulation reached much lower percentages. When compared with Table 5, a clear correspondence can be observed: content that was addressed more frequently, such as digital responsibility had higher mean scores, whereas skills addressed less frequently, such as emotional regulation and conflict resolution, were weaker among students.

Table 9. Forms of Education on Online Communication and Conduct Skills

Form of education	Percentage (%)
Class meetings	76.2
Thematic awareness sessions	68.9
Extracurricular activities	42.6
Group discussions	31.5
Role-play/situational activities	24.7

Source: Survey results of the study.

The results in Table 9 show that the most common forms were class meetings and thematic awareness sessions. These forms are useful for transmitting information quickly but are limited in their ability to train behavioral skills. Meanwhile, group discussions and role-play/situational activities - forms more suitable for skill development were used less frequently. This reflects a gap between information reception and the capacity to act in real-life situations.

Thus, the limitation does not lie in the school's lack of attention to cyberspace-related issues, but rather in its approach. Current educational activities remain largely oriented toward warning and information transmission, whereas students' weakest skills are those that require practice in specific social contexts. This provides an important basis for proposing group social work as a more appropriate intervention method.

3.5. Results of the Group Social Work Intervention

The results of the group social work intervention are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Comparison of Online Communication and Conduct Skills before and after the Group Social Work Intervention

Skill domain	Pre-intervention mean	Post-intervention mean	Increase
Empathy	3.18	3.52	+0.34
Emotional regulation	2.85	3.31	+0.46
Conflict resolution	2.92	3.36	+0.44
Digital responsibility	3.35	3.68	+0.33
Overall mean	3.08	3.47	+0.39

Source: Intervention results of the study.

The results show that after eight sessions of the group social work program, students' overall mean score increased from 3.08 to 3.47. All skill domains improved. Notably, emotional regulation showed the greatest increase, from 2.85 to 3.31, followed by conflict resolution, from 2.92 to 3.36. These were the two weakest domains before the intervention and also the two domains with the most visible improvement after the intervention.

This finding suggests that group social work can target students' key weaknesses effectively. Through activities such as case analysis, role-play, group feedback, and experiential discussion, students did not merely listen to rules of conduct but practiced how to respond in specific situations. They had opportunities to experiment with new behaviors in a safe environment, receive peer feedback, and adjust their responses. This represents a critical difference between group social work and conventional awareness-raising approaches.

Qualitative findings after the intervention further supported this conclusion. One student shared: "Previously, when someone said something I disagreed with, I reacted immediately, but now I know how to pause and think before replying." Another student stated: "After participating in the group, I feel that I understand my friends better and do not rush to conclusions when reading messages." These reflections indicate that change occurred not only at the level of awareness but also in students' ways of approaching and handling online interaction situations.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that online communication and conduct skills among high school students should be approached as a form of social-emotional competence in the digital context rather than merely as technological skills or digital safety knowledge. Students need not only to know how to use online platforms but also to understand others, regulate emotional responses, resolve conflicts and take responsibility for their own behavior. This is consistent with the digital citizenship approach proposed by Ribble (2015) and Jones and Mitchell (2016), and it aligns with CASEL's (2020) social-emotional learning framework.

A notable finding is that students scored relatively high in digital responsibility and empathy but lower in emotional regulation and conflict resolution. This uneven development reveals a gap between awareness and behavior in online communication. Students may understand principles of civilized conduct, yet when they encounter provocation, misunderstanding, or peer pressure, they may still respond emotionally. This issue deserves attention in school education because digital safety awareness programs may improve awareness but are insufficient for developing sustainable behavioral skills.

The findings on social media use time also raise an important issue. Students who spent more time on social media tended to have lower skill scores. This suggests that frequency of use does not necessarily translate into digital communication competence. Without appropriate guidance, online experiences may habituate students to rapid reactions, emotionally charged language, or negative communication norms. Therefore, digital skills education should go beyond encouraging effective technology use and focus more on the quality of social interaction in online environments.

The role of peer groups is also important. The study found that peer pressure was negatively associated with online communication and conduct skills. In online peer groups, students may be drawn into crowd-based behaviors such as gossiping, attacking, or excluding others. However, peer groups are not only risk factors; they can also become protective resources when organized positively. This is a key foundation of group social work. When groups are designed with clear goals, rules, facilitation, and feedback mechanisms, peer influence can be transformed into a driver of positive behavioral learning.

The preliminary intervention results suggest that group social work can improve online communication and conduct skills, particularly in the two weakest domains: emotional regulation and conflict resolution. From the perspective of social learning theory, this change can be explained by the processes of observing, practicing, and reinforcing positive behaviors within the group (Bandura, 1977). From an ecological perspective, group activities in school affect an immediate microsystem in students' lives, where peer relationships directly influence behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From the perspective of social and emotional learning, the group program helped students simultaneously develop social awareness, emotion management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Durlak et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, the intervention results should be interpreted with caution. The intervention group was small, there was no control group, and no follow-up assessment was conducted to examine the durability of the outcomes. Therefore, a strong causal relationship cannot yet be confirmed. Even so, the pre-test/post-test results, together with qualitative data from students and teachers, suggest that group social work has practical potential in school settings, especially for skills that are difficult to change through information-based education alone.

Overall, the contribution of this study lies in showing that the development of online communication and conduct skills among students requires a shift from a risk-warning approach to a competence-development approach. In this regard, group social work can serve as an appropriate method because it creates an environment for interaction, experience, feedback and the formation of positive peer norms.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The study shows that high school students' online communication and conduct skills were at a moderately good level overall, but the four skill domains were unevenly developed. Students scored relatively high in digital responsibility and empathy, but showed limitations in emotional regulation and conflict resolution. This reflects a gap between awareness and behavior in online communication: students may know appropriate conduct norms, but they do not always regulate their emotions and behavior effectively when facing conflicts, personal attacks, or peer pressure.

Factors such as social media use time and peer pressure were negatively associated with online communication and conduct skills, whereas awareness of digital responsibility was positively associated with these skills. These findings suggest that digital communication education should combine awareness raising with behavioral training through experiential activities. Preliminary intervention results indicate that group social work can improve students' online communication and conduct skills, particularly emotional regulation and conflict resolution.

5.2. Recommendations

For schools, it is necessary to move from an approach primarily based on awareness raising and risk warnings to a competence-development approach through experiential activities. Educational content related to cyberspace should place greater emphasis on emotional regulation, conflict resolution, empathy, and digital responsibility. Schools may integrate group social work activities into class meetings, experiential learning activities, life skills education programs, or school counseling services.

For teachers, school counselors, and school social workers, professional development should be provided to strengthen their capacity to organize group activities, analyze online communication situations, and support students in resolving conflicts in digital environments. Teachers should not only remind students of rules or handle violations; they should also guide students in recognizing emotions, choosing appropriate responses, and seeking support when necessary.

For families, parents should accompany students through dialogue, guidance, and trust-building rather than relying only on control or prohibition of social media use. Parents should pay attention to their children's emotional experiences and online peer relationships, as many school-related conflicts now occur not only in classrooms but also in group chats and social networking spaces.

For students, opportunities should be created for them to practice communication and conduct skills in situations close to their everyday online lives. Learning to pause before responding, verify information, respect differences, avoid participating in collective attacks, and seek support when conflicts exceed their capacity to handle them are skills that should be practiced regularly.

This study has several limitations. The survey sample was drawn from one high school, the intervention group was small, there was no control group, and the sustainability of post-intervention outcomes was not assessed. Future studies should expand the sample to multiple locations, include a control group, conduct follow-up assessments, and examine more deeply the roles of family, school climate, and online peer culture.

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