

The Human Side of a Mediated Life: How Mediated Communication is Affecting
Relationships and Nonverbal Literacy

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To start writing I had to first turn off the TV (a mediated form of communication whose effects I know interfere with my ability to get work done). Then I had to exit my iTunes, put my phone in the other room (on silent so I couldn't hear the messages I was missing), exit my Skype account, log out of my email, exit my favorite blog, get off all the news websites and finally the hardest part... log out of Facebook. These are the forms of communication I use daily in addition to written, verbal and nonverbal communications. Writing it all out it looks absurd on the page, but imagining my life without a single one of these forms of communication? Preposterous! How would I survive? How would I know what was happening in the world, let alone the minute-by-minute update of my friends and family ranging in distance from my roommate upstairs in her bedroom to friends living in Madrid, Stockholm, and Japan. I can now communicate instantly with friends throughout the world and without changing out of my jammies or leaving my couch. So now you are thinking to yourself, OMG we already know this, my little sister has Facebook and she is 13, what are you going to tell me that I don't already know?

In this essay I will be exploring the ways in which mediated communication is affecting our everyday lives, with an emphasis on its impact on teens and adolescents as it relates to their ability to form and maintain relationships, both romantic and platonic, as well as their nonverbal literacy.

Nonverbal literacy is defined as "the skillful interpretation of nonverbal behaviors by an individual" (Ciampa) nonverbal behaviors include facial expressions, hand and arm gestures, posture, and other body movements, which convey meaning. Becoming nonverbally literate is a process learned over time through interpersonal interactions.

For the purposes of this essay mediated communication will be defined as any communication that is given or received by a means other than directly person to person. This includes: email, Facebook, texting, Tweeting, phone calls, Skype/Video Calling, blogs, instant messaging (such as gchat or Facebook Chat) TV, Radio/Music, and Internet Articles. My major focus will be on the ways texting, social media (both on the computer and phone), phone calls, Facebook and Video Chat have thus far affected the interpersonal relational skills of the population who have grown up in a world where mediated communication is the norm.

There is a developing body of research in this area but I feel there is a lack of concentration on the loss of nonverbal literacy in teens and adolescents brought up in a time when 90% of two-year-olds have an Internet history according to CNN

(Clinton & Stayer), in addition to the shift in the way that young people are “dating” and forming romantic bonds. As of now most of the research is postulating about the effects on the self-esteem of teens and negative health aspects, such as sleep deprivation, and depression.

Eventually I would like to see the research answer these questions: What are the implications of social media on relationships? With the availability of constant communication is there an expectation or pressure to be communicating all the time? Does constant communication accelerate romantic relationships, skipping from acquaintance to intimate relations, especially its affects on teenage relationships? Is there a correlation between the lowered divorce rates and the increase in accessibility to forms of communication? Are different forms of mediated communication used the same by both male and female adolescents and teens? To what extent does response time affect the way people are using communication? Is response time different on different platforms? Do silences when using mediated communication convey the same messages as silences in interpersonal conversation? Finally, are children brought up with more technology less nonverbally literate than those who grow up without it? A possible study of US children’s nonverbal literacy over the course of the first 30 years of their lives in comparison to children who grow up in rural Africa or Australia where technology simply does not exist.

Relationship Types

Romantic Relationships

According to Andrew Collins’s research of adolescents “Romantic relationships, like friendships, are on-going voluntary interactions that are mutually acknowledged, rather than identified by only one member of a pair. Romantic relationships, however, also have a peculiar intensity and the intensity can be marked by expressions of affection—including physical ones and, perhaps, the expectation of sexual relations, eventually if not now”. Romantic relationships are an important part of growing up and self-discovery. Having a clear definition of what is considered a romantic relationship serves the purpose of this paper by eliminating personal differences in the definition of a romantic relationship.

Work

A working relationship here can be defined as anyone with whom all of your interactions occur in the work place or at work related functions. Interactions are

not necessarily positive or negative but regardless there is an expectation of repeated interaction.

Intimate Friend

An intimate friend for our purposes here will be defined as a person with whom details that are shared with no one else are shared. A person with whom many hours have been spent together and each knows who the other is well. There is a mutual level of trust.

Acquaintance-Friend

People who are enjoyable to be around and may be encountered at a social gathering but interactions one-on-one rarely if ever occur.

Close Family Member

A close family member is someone related to you with whom you have a similar interpersonal relationship as a close friend. You enjoy being in the presence of that person and trust their opinion and loyalty to you.

Distant Family

Someone to whom you are related but see two times a year or less would fall into this category.

Stranger

A stranger is any person with whom no interactions have occurred, a person whose life or background you have no knowledge of.

Implications of Mediated Communication

There is a mediated communication dichotomy, on one hand mediated communication creates a barrier which gives comfort to the user to open up, self-disclose and have the ability to form a relationship where they might not have without the mediation. On the other hand mediated communication may give the receiver information the sender would have never given to someone in person with the same familiarity level. This may cause social awkwardness when confronted with seeing the person face-to-face, or worse result in Cyber-bullying or personal information shared with a large group of others for whom the message was not intended.

The implications of mediated communication are relatively unmeasured as of yet. As children are becoming acquainted with media at younger and younger ages the implications for future generations is completely unknown. According to CNN

the average teenager texts over 3,000 times a month “Seventy-five percent of teenagers now own cell phones, and 25% use them for social media, 54% use them for texting, and 24% use them for instant messaging” (Clinton & Steyer). Thus, a large part of this generation's “social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet and on cell phones” (O’Keeffe, and Clarke-Pearson).

The negative effects that teens and adolescents can receive using social media/mediated communication range from “cyber bullying, sexting, and depression in addition to disrupted sleep, lower grades, limited attention span”, to having something you post during adolescence come back to haunt you in the future (Clinton & Steyer). While the messages being sent to teens and adolescents are not necessarily different than the messages received in past generations (e.g. bullying in the hall way at school, cat calls to young girls, and depression) there is an increased wall of secrecy between parents, teachers, and caretakers and these communication messages. This, paired with the teens developing sexuality, self-image, self-concept, self-worth, and interpersonal abilities can cause problems.

Definitions

Cyber Bullying: deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person. It is the most common online risk for all teens and is a peer-to-peer risk. (O’Keeffe, and Clarke-Pearson)

Sexting: “sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices.” (David F. Capeless).

Facebook Depression: a newly proposed phenomena “Facebook depression,” defined as depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression” (O’Keeffe, and Clarke-Pearson).

To be able to study the effects that mediated communication is having on teens and adolescence we must first look at how they define their relationships. The naming of different relationships and stages of relationships has changed and I am sure will change again in the future but as I understand it now there are four stages of a romantic relationship, Talking, Hooking-Up, [Dating], and Exclusivity. The difference between Talking, Hooking-Up, [Dating], and Exclusivity; are all relatively hard to define and have slightly differing nuances among different groups but these are the definitions for our purposes.

Generally **Talking** is mild flirting while in person, many texts back and forth without making any real plans to get together, chatting on an instant messenger platform and maybe making plans to meet up at a party that weekend or some other setting where many other people will be present (Guzman). Then continue to flirt until a **Hook-Up** is initiated. A Hook-Up is equally ambiguous; it could mean anything from making out to having sex depending on the age group and the person (Urban Dictionary).

I have **[Dating]** here in brackets because it is something that comes with age. Teens and adolescents do not date, if they are on a date it is either a school dance, they are forced by their parent to go on a date with a friend's child, or they are already Exclusive. [Dating] happens more once you leave adolescence and teendom behind and either go to college or the working world where the pool is much bigger and schedules also make planning times to get together more necessary (Urban Dictionary). Then finally if you make it through all that you reach Exclusivity.

At the stage **Exclusivity** there are two options; first and best, both parties are already exclusive to each other and it is just putting a label on the relationship they already have boyfriend/girlfriend, the other and less desirable thing that could happen here is that one party wants to keep their freedom to still Talk to other people and Hook-Up with this person and the other party wants exclusivity. As you can imagine the second generally produces drama and heartache (Urban Dictionary).

What Do We Already Know?

What you do online today does not go away. Posting pictures, blog articles, and sending messages online all leave a trail that can be traced back to you. This is something that adolescents and teens often are unaware of until it is too late. "One of the biggest threats to young people on social media sites is to their digital footprint and future reputations. Preadolescents and adolescents who lack an awareness of privacy issues often post inappropriate messages, pictures, and videos without understanding that 'what goes online stays online.' As a result, future jobs and college acceptance may be put into jeopardy by inexperienced and rash clicks of the mouse." (O'Keeffe, and Clarke-Pearson).

Adults and especially youths may benefit from the variety of sources of expression. These social media sites can "reinforce skills in English, written expression, and creativity" (Boyd).

Health adherence has increased from mobile apps and reminders as well as increased anonymous access to health information, reducing any anxiety about having to speak with adults about uncomfortable subjects (O'Keeffe, and Clarke-Pearson).

Texting is not only changing the ability for people to communicate nonverbally but it is also changing the written language. The language of texting: LOL, ROLF, LMFAO, TTYL, L8R, TTYS, IDK, OMG, all not only have literal word for word translations but are also used to fill the gap left with the lack of verbal inflections. For example, the extremely common LOL literally means "Laugh Out Loud". In the context of an instant message or text its sentiment is more of a smile, something to let the recipient know the tone of the conversation as a means of preventing a misunderstanding. These new "words" now appear in newspaper articles, on TV commercials, on clothing, even being used in speech. The literal meaning these acronyms are morphing and they now have meaning divorced from the original definition.

The technology we use to communicate is changing so rapidly that the use these mediated forms of communication can shift seemingly overnight. Adolescents and teens now "use the phone for all forms of communication, ranging from text messaging to tweeting to sending a Facebook message." (Burkhard). When living in an environment such as this it is easy to understand why students feel "It can be really difficult sometimes to pull yourself away from [social media], because I don't know about you, but for me, if I'm on Facebook too long, it seems like everyone else's lives are perfect," McCormick a student at Oklahoma State University said." (Burkhard). Recent research by Mudra Mukesh supports this, finding that people who have more than 354 friends and spend a large amount of time viewing the news feeds of their friends are more likely to feel badly about themselves (Pappas). People have become increasingly dependent on their cell phones since the early 1980's, but the recent ability to operate social media applications on cell phones has changed the way the cell phone is used to communicate. "Teens leveraged these sites for a wide array of everyday social practices—gossiping, flirting, joking around, sharing information, and simply hanging out." (Boyd). The multitasking capabilities of people brought up with technology is greater than any generation in the past, but the attention spans are shorter, and especially children are exposed to influences their parents are not aware of, putting them at risk. The of communication occurring is higher than ever before; adolescents and teens are more easily influenced and affected by prolonged contact with social media.

The norms of mediated communication are different from traditional forms of communication, “[adolescents and teens] develop strategies for maintaining face in a social situation driven by different rules” (Boyd) The use of mediated communication as a self-presentation technique. Having the ability to re-read and evaluate the message, change and edit before sending the message allows the sender to manage how the receiver perceives them. This aspect of control is not as present in verbal and nonverbal communications.

Personal Interviews

The personal experience of my friend Maria highlights the value placed on mediated communication in the formation of romantic relationships. Maria started dating a new guy whom she really liked. He would take her out on dates, he would pay for her, open the car door, he was the perfect gentleman. The only problem my friend had with him was that he was a terrible texter. For my friend it was not enough communication if he was not in contact with her at least sporadically during the day. This ultimately was the reason their relationship ended.

My friend Matt had similar experiences with his middle school romances as I did. He would spend hours after getting home from school and spots, Instant Messaging his girlfriend. They would talk about everything, there was no awkwardness or questions off limits. Then the next day at school they would barely speak to each other, as if they were strangers, only to then return home to spend hours chatting away on Instant Messenger. This lack of communication in person could have been “due to a lack of experience, adolescents frequently describe feelings of social awkwardness and communication difficulties in connection with their romantic attachments” (Haynie). This begs the question, what makes the mediated form of communication a lesser source of communication apprehension?

Brittany is similar to many of the girls I know. She sends her boyfriend a text and if he doesn't respond within five minutes her emotions run the gamut of sick with worry, to furious that he is ignoring her. Only to find out his phone had died. This assumption that people always have their phones with them, and are in a situation that is appropriate to use their device to communicate is emerging as a communication norm.

While working on a group project my partner and I began to grow frustrated with the slow response from a group member. As our deadline loomed ahead and our irritation level rose we began to wonder out loud “What is taking her so long to respond?!” “Seriously, who doesn't have there emails come to there phone anyway?!” “We sent her the email two hours ago, she must have gotten it, right?”

and on and on. Our assumption being that the girl would have access to either her phone or a computer within the two-hour span and would respond. These assumptions show our dependence on mediated forms of communication. The men and women of my generation are the last generation to have not been born into a society full all ready full of mediated communication. Future generations will be even more reliant on mediated forms of communication.

My final interview was with a young man named Bryce. He had the opposite problem of the boy Maria was dating, he texted and called too often. Her friends told him after their relationship ended that next time he should not text a girl quite so much. He should play it cool, and refrain from sending as many messages. They advised him to let more mystery build around the relationship. This interaction shows that new norms in relationship forming are developing due to mediated communication.

Conclusions Drawn

My conclusions from these interviews are, particular norms form mediated communications, which are not the same as traditional forms of communication have developed. Mediated communication is such a large part of the way we now interface with each other, especially for teens and adolescents. These norms are the ones they focus on and work to perfect above all others. Leading to a generation of people who lack basic interpersonal communication skills and are virtually completely nonverbally illiterate. The expectation of immediate responses and constant communication is becoming a part of the norm. The irritation behind a lack of speedy communication is increased among peers who hold each other to these emerging communication norms.

Other dangers that I have observed with the constant communication we have is that all of it is written. Everything posted, sent, or tagged is documented for retrieval at a later date. The consequences of this may result in getting fired from a job or refused admittance to a university. While those are serious consequences this paper trail can also have serious consequences on the relationships of adolescents and teens. Adolescents and teens are particularly susceptible to these negative affects because they are in such a time of personal growth and confusion. They lash out for no reason, say and do things they don't mean, and inevitably hurt each other's feelings. In the past these would have happened and as time moved forward new, happier memories would replace the horrors of the teen years. Not anymore, all the mean and nasty things posted hastily to Facebook or Twitter is now a record, which can be traced back to you. Friendship alliances shift and the joke you said

about a mutual friend on gChat is now the reason you are ostracized from the group. Not understanding this can make the growing pains of teen years much more sharp. Additionally there can be legal consequences, because all of the communication is documented, it can be brought to authorities in cases such as cyber bullying. Finally as is especially evident in Matt's story mediated communication fosters a lack of inhibitions. Self-monitoring becomes shockingly low. Adolescents and teens are especially susceptible to opening oneself up to a potentially dangerous person or an emotionally painful situation, because of perceived intimacy.

Although there are many disadvantages to mediated communication, it goes without saying that there are numerous advantages as well. These include the ability to multi-task, keeping in touch with family and friends from around the world, and making new friends around the world without the expenses of travel. Another benefit of mediated communication is increased maintenance of self-presentation; because users can take the time to think about the response, they can go back and edit or adjust their message in order to convey what they intend. The increase of mediated communication equates to more over all communication, which leads to improved reading and writing skills. Teens and adolescents also experience more openness to new relationships, which fosters personal growth.

The acquisition of a cell phone in middle school is the ultimate tool to connect with friends any time anywhere, even in the same room. When there is a message that is only intended for one individual, but it is a group setting a text message is now used. Nonverbal communication used to be the means by which secret messages were passed from friend to friend. Now been the text message has taken its place. This is one of the reasons I believe that nonverbal communication literacy is declining. The ability to read a person's facial expressions and body language to understand how they are feeling or what they are thinking is no longer as necessary. Friends no longer need to understand the expression on each other's faces; more likely than not if they want to send you a private message they will, a text message. The efficiency and secrecy of this message is much greater than that of a nonverbal cue.

Conclusion

Although mediated communication has started to gain the attention of researchers its effects are still largely unknown. I believe a significant gap in the research is the effects that mediated communication has on teens and adolescents, especially as it relates to their ability to form and maintain relationships and their ability to interpret and understand nonverbal communication. This paper concludes

with a survey for a future researcher to use as a launching pad to answer the questions about the effects of mediated forms of communication on adolescents and teens. The ways in which mediated communication will affect the daily lives of its users are only just starting to be studied. As more research emerges the depth of the impact mediated communications has on its users will become more clear. My hope is that researchers focus on the human side of mediated communication; how it is changing the way people are interacting, relating to, and understanding one another.

Survey Questions For Future Research

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. How many people do you talk to in any given day?
4. Of those people how many are solely face to face interactions?
5. What is your most used form of communication
 - a. Face to face
 - b. Talking on the phone
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Texting
 - e. Instant messaging
 - f. Email
 - g. twitter
 - h. Skype
 - i. Other
6. Which of the following do you use on a daily basis?
 - a. Face to face
 - b. Talking on the phone
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Texting
 - e. Instant messaging
 - f. Email
 - g. Twitter
 - h. Skype
 - i. Other
7. Through which of the following do you use most often to keep in touch with a family member?
 - a. Face to face

- b. Talking on the phone
- c. Facebook
- d. Texting
- e. Instant messaging
- f. Email
- g. Twitter
- h. Skype
- i. Other

8. Through which of the following would you use most often to keep in touch with your boyfriend/girlfriend/significant other?

- a. Face to face
- b. Talking on the phone
- c. Facebook
- d. Texting
- e. Instant messaging
- f. Email
- g. Twitter
- h. Skype
- i. Other

9. If you had just met someone who you wanted to start dating/talking to, by which means of communication would you use when initiating communication?

- a. Face to face
- b. Talking on the phone
- c. Facebook
- d. Texting
- e. Instant messaging
- f. Email
- g. Skype
- h. twitter
- i. Other
- j. I would not initiate contact

10. Please rank from first to last the order of sources you receive news from

- ___ TV news broad casts
- ___ Text messages
- ___ Twitter
- ___ Facebook
- ___ News Paper
- ___ Online News website
- ___ Interpersonal interactions

11. All the different avenues of communication have made it easier to maintain my relationships

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Neutral
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

12. I feel most comfortable telling a romantic partner personal information via:

- a. Face to face
- b. Talking on the phone
- c. Facebook
- d. Texting
- e. Instant messaging
- f. Email
- g. Skype
- h. Other
- i. Twitter

13. I feel most comfortable talking to a potential romantic partner via:

- a. Face to face
- b. Talking on the phone
- c. Facebook
- d. Texting
- e. Instant messaging
- f. Email
- g. Skype
- h. Other
- i. Twitter

14. I feel the most formal way to communicate (i.e. with a boss) is:

- a. Face to face
- b. Talking on the phone
- c. Facebook
- d. Texting
- e. Instant messaging
- f. Email
- g. Skype
- h. Other
- i. Twitter

15. When I text a friend I expect them to respond:

- a. Within 1-5 minutes
- b. Within the hour
- c. Within the day
- d. Within the week

16. When I text a romantic partner I expect them to respond:

- a. Within 1-5 minutes
- b. Within the hour
- c. Within the day
- d. Within the week

17. I feel anxious when waiting for a response from a potential new romantic partner

- a. Always
- b. Depends how much I like them
- c. If they are better looking than I am
- d. Never

18. When I got my first cell phone the top features I used were (ranking from most used to least):

- ___ Phone calls
- ___ Texting
- ___ Browsing the internet
- ___ Responding to emails
- ___ Facebook
- ___ Twitter
- ___ Facetime/skype

19. The features I most use on my cell phone NOW are (pick 3):

- ___ Phone call
- ___ Texting
- ___ Browsing the internet
- ___ Responding to emails
- ___ Facebook
- ___ Twitter
- ___ Facetime/Skype

20. The average number of text messages I send in one day is:

- a. 0-10
- b. 11-30
- c. 31-60
- d. 61-100
- e. 101-200
- f. more than 200

21. The communication types that are most appropriate in a work environment are (top 3 in order)

- ___ Phone call
- ___ Texting
- ___ Email
- ___ Skype
- ___ Twitter

- Facebook
- Instant messaging
- Other

Data from this of survey should indicate what the connection is between mediated communication and relationships. Conclusions about the relationship between mediated communication and the nonverbal communication skills could also be alluded to with information from this survey.

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