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Understanding the Psychology Behind Youth Communication in a Tech-Savvy World

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Abstract:

The increasing exposure and dependency of the youth on technology have led them to shun their boundaries of privacy and quite literally welcome the world at their doorstep, or rather their palm. Various e-modes of learning have broadened the scope of research and collaborations. For teenagers as young as thirteen, handy social-media platforms have exponentially added rich cross-cultural and trans-national exchange of information and experiences alike. However, as much as technology facilitates healthy competition, it also rears its ugly head in the form of varying levels and newer forms of social evils. The young now rely on social-networking sites and applications to, at times, compensate for the lack of healthier relationships in person. As cyber-bullying and plagiarism become wayward cousins of accessibility, there has been an alarming rise in cases of stress and anxiety disorders in teenagers. An increase in online communication has contrastingly led to the decline in attention spans and invaluable interpersonal relationships alike.

Keywords: Technology and Youth, Social Psychology, Social Media, E-learning, Nomophobia

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technology generally evokes a range of emotions in people from all walks of life. Some view technology as a great evil that slowly diminishes our humanity, while others view it as a way to bring the world closer together and to help solve some of our greatest challenges. In the near future, the world's virtual population will outnumber the population of Earth. Almost every person with a digital presence will be represented in multiple ways online, creating vibrant and active communities of interlocking interests that reflect and enrich our world.

The proliferation of communication technologies has advanced at an unprecedented speed. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the number of people connected to the internet worldwide increased from 350 million to more than 2 billion. In the same period, the number of mobile-phone subscribers rose from 750 million to well over 5 billion (it is now over 6 billion). ... By 2025, the majority of the world's population will, in one generation, have gone from having virtually no access to unfiltered information to accessing all of the world's information through a device that fits in the palm of the hand. If the current pace of technological innovation is maintained, most of the projected eight billion people on earth will be online. (Page 5, The New Digital Age)

THE GRIP OF TECHNOLOGY ON YOUNG MINDS

In 2015, a joint survey conducted by Hindustan Times and MaRS Monitoring and Research System Private Limited found that 98.2% users within the age group of 18-25 in India had already caught in the net. Titled the 'HT-MaRs Youth Survey', it also discovered that 70% of online youth in India spend more than 5 hours on the internet in a normal week. While internet access is still predominantly desktop based (41%), 36% however, use laptops and 27% use smartphones. A McAfee Report published in 2014 revealed that among social networking platforms, Facebook was by far the most popular site used (93%), followed by YouTube (87%) and WhatsApp (79%). 10-12 year old social account users reported higher daily access to Snapchat, Pinterest, Tinder, Tumblr, and Vine than their teen counterparts, even though the minimum age to register to these social networking sites is 13 years.

Youth often overshare what would be considered private information publicly, both intentionally and unintentionally. Despite majority (80%) of Indian youth being aware that their online activity can affect their identity, out of 90% who have shown risky behavior online, 70% have posted their contact details like email, phone and home address. 63% of youth do not turn off their location or GPS services across apps, leaving their locations visible to strangers, and only 46% enable privacy settings on their social networking profiles to protect their content.

IMPACT ON LEARNING

The advent of technology is continuously evolving the ways by which we communicate and go about our lives. When it comes to imparting education in young, impressionable minds, technology has dramatically changed the teaching and learning process. In earlier times, schools and colleges used to be considered as hallowed places of learning and the ultimate destinations for the acquisition of knowledge. In the present times, they are supplementing the learning process and go hand in hand with technological dissemination such as MIT open courseware, Khan Academy, NPTEL and in the future, they might be relegated to being just one of the learning options, with a majority of courses being offered on online and digital platforms.

Technology, however, had entered the classrooms long before the advent of social media. While the traditional 'chalk and board' methods have gradually been replaced by flat screen

televisions and audio-visuals with the help of projectors, it is far from the end of this technological invasion. E-books or electronic books have been available to users worldwide for a long time now. Students' sense of an audience is changing; earlier an assignment would have to be impressive for just the teacher, then it involved both the teacher and peers and now the audience might even be on online platforms. Students have access to e-books, digital notes, and digital textbooks with web-based assessments, animations, additional materials, videos, and other materials to support the learning of new content. In March 2014, Alison Ford wrote in 'the Guardian' that, "...Project Gutenberg has been going since 1971 and by 1989 it had posted its 10th e-book." With the expansive use of iPods, tablets and now the Ipad, there has risen a stirring debate between 'traditionalist' lovers of paper or hardbound books and the modern 'go-getters', who like to swipe through their Classics on feather touch screens. Defenders of the latter viewpoint stress upon the easy availability and accessibility that the ebook culture provides them with. Reading on a portable device like smartphones or tablets gives one the option to browse through multiple titles without having to worry about lugging hard copies around. A more evolved form of e-books is interactive books. This is ideal for students, no matter what the age, for they can read a book, refer to a dictionary, links, videos, images et al. A simple tap on the screen allows students to not only interact with other readers, but also get in touch with the writer altogether. Sharing of ideas and collaborating for projects have thus made it easier for students to remain updated.

On the other end of the spectrum, technology facilitates teachers' ability to meet the needs of all kinds of learners with game changers such as iPads, extended classroom communities and gaming emerging as a powerful platform for learning. It is no wonder then that many educational institutes are now stressing upon different 'e' modes of learning. With a volley of information being produced and shared on an hourly basis, it has also pushed the educators to expand their teaching methodology. Through multiple open platforms, it has become easier for teachers to trace the progress of each student individually which in turn leads to a more involved participation on the student's part. The question is, are educators equipped to guide learners who are probably ahead of them with respect to access to technology? Would students continue to respect the information provided by traditional methods of teaching, when unlimited (albeit unfiltered) sources of information is available the click of a mouse (or the tap on a handheld touchscreen device) away.

Or as Matt Britland has mentioned in his article for 'the Guardian', 'What is the future of technology in Education?', iPads are only the present. "The future is about access, anywhere learning and collaboration, both locally and globally. Teaching and learning is going to be social. Schools of the future could have a traditional cohort of students, as well as online only students who live across the country or even the world. Things are already starting to move this way with the emergence of massive open online courses (MOOCs). The future of technology in education is the cloud which means access to education from anywhere which in turn means more number of students can opt for distance learning programs.

AWARENESS OF PRESENTING ONESELF MORE PROFESSIONALLY

It is common knowledge that recruiters thoroughly check a candidate's social media footprint before hiring him or her. While the budding populace is trying to keep a check on

only their Facebook profiles, another medium of social networking has become synonymous with recruitment. Launched in 2003, LinkedIn is a pool of contacts, a reserve of resumes and a platform to follow and observe careers, all rolled into one. It is not just graduates looking for fresh jobs who log in here, but also students who wish to land interesting internships. Age does not seem to be a barrier for LinkedIn because unlike Facebook, it is not mandatory here to enter your age/birth date. Thus, it is commonplace to find profiles of high school students who wish to strengthen their college applications.

In 2013, Eric Heath, who was the Director of Legal- Global Privacy and Public Policy for LinkedIn from 2012-2014, announced on the site's official blog, that the minimum age of Users had been dropped to 13 and above for some countries. As the notice read-

“We are updating our User Agreement to make LinkedIn available to students 13 years and older, depending on country. Smart, ambitious students are already thinking about their futures when they step foot into high school – where they want to go to college, what they want to study, where they want to live and work. We want to encourage these students to leverage the insights and connections of the millions of successful professionals on LinkedIn, so they can make the most informed decisions and start their careers off right.”

For youngsters looking at options to build careers along, LinkedIn provides them with the benefit to study the career paths of professionals from different streams, as also the qualifications that they already share with those belonging to their own age group. It provides them with a window of opportunity to connect with professionals in their ideal field from across the world. The upward trend in number of people signing in on this site is also an indication of the fact that the youth wants to stay updated from an early stage itself. Moreover, following diverse career paths brings about a sense of healthy competition. It is now easier to keep tabs on the latest updates, qualifications, applications and deadlines. People practicing one's chosen career, from the world over, are only a click away. The exposure and availability of such kind ensures that students are aware of global trends as also how peers from another corner of the world are presenting themselves.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE ACROSS BORDERS

Knowledge has never been limited to just literacy, which is the ability to read and write. Knowledge and the understanding of ideas and concepts or be it an ideology, are all developed with exposure to and experiences of “power, identity and local context”. Our individual experiences vary as do the people we are surrounded by. Simply put, learning is contextual to the societal practices around us. The knowledge we possess and amass over a lifetime is undeniably influenced by the culture we are raised and also choose to live in. Shared cultural experiences go a long way in determining our awareness, personal philosophy and principles alike. Knowledge, thus, varies from one culture to another.

With such an elaborate background to our ‘lived experiences’, when we introduce the youth to a global sharing platform, the potential of ideas that can be exchanged multiplies. As mentioned in New Media Literacies and Participatory Popular Culture Across Borders:

“Most students are involved in some sort of popular culture literacy practice, whether it includes blogging, Facebook, online gaming, reading fan fiction, or the like. Some lament what online tools are supposedly doing to reading and writing practices of the youth; in fact though, students learn about audience, context and genre by participating in online text construction. Educators can help students critically examine their textual choices within this literacy environment. In addition, students can learn about crossing boundaries- even though they are digital- to engage in a transnational discourse.” (65)

The internet, thus, allows students to project their identities in a cross-cultural exchange. The virtual world has now become a very important tool of communication for the young. This new age Globalization offers students the opportunity to not just learn about another, but also introspect upon their own lives and culture through the prism of the Other, making them insightful at an early age itself. As is rightly put by Williams and Zenger, “...this could then lead into further discussions about how to bridge differences in order to resolve conflict and create a more peaceful world.” (66) Their views are not just open to the teacher’s opinion now, the world is their audience.

THE METANARRATIVE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In his work, “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge”, Jean-Francois Lyotard has mentioned the idea of a “Metanarrative” or the “Grand Narrative”. According to the New World Encyclopedia, “Metanarrative or grand narrative or mater narrative is a term developed...to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.” Thus, a narrative of a historical period is one that encompasses and legitimizes the experiences shared by the universal population. A metanarrative can be described as the “big story” which represents, in short, an explanation for everything that happens in a society... The concepts of “Capitalism” or “Communism” and “Fascism” are examples of metanarratives, as are things like “Religion” (Roman Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and so forth) and, probably most controversially, “Science” (and, in particular, the “Big Science” that argues, ultimately, all of the Laws governing the behaviour of matter in the universe can be discovered and, eventually, related to a single, unified, Law)” A Grand Narrative thus, is one that incorporates multiple narratives or experiences and beliefs, lending it a defined structure.

People who try to perpetuate myths about religion, culture, ethnicity or anything else will struggle to keep their narratives afloat amid a sea of newly informed listeners. With more data, everyone gets a better frame of reference. (Page 35, The New Digital Age)

This leads us to rightfully believe that technology is the metanarrative of the 21st Century. It is the inescapable reality du jour. Toddlers these days are adept at much more than simply locking and unlocking their parents’ cellphones. They are aware of the diverse functions of the various touch-screen devices commonly found in today’s households. In the book, “Understanding Digital Technologies and Young Children: An International Perspective”

Cathy Burnett and Karen Daniels, in a chapter titled, 'Technology and Literacy in the Early Years', write, "When they enter educational settings, many children bring with them extensive understanding and experience of making meanings using digital tools in digital environments." (Page 19)

FOMO and FOBM

Fear of missing out syndrome or FOMO is a type of anxiety, a sort of anticipatory regret. It is a byproduct of being aware of many alternatives which one could be doing, or having, or being. An awareness of these alternatives causes fear of social exclusion, indecisiveness, inherent dissatisfaction and regret with what one has (or is). FOMO can be considered as a modern take on the saying "the grass is greener on the other side". This psychological syndrome is aggravated because of incessantly being online, which in turn leads to comparisons based on what peers are posting on social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Youth are more susceptible to FOMO as the pressure to keep up with peers is huge. Being 'a part of the crowd', possessing and doing what most consider 'cool' makes youth feel that it adds up to increased acceptance levels even if one's choice goes against one's judgement.

"I never read, watch, or even do the things I want to any more – just the things I think I should be doing" sums up the social constraints one feels because of FOMO. The negative impact of FOMO is that one does not learn to appreciate what one has (or is); instead one compares and evaluates the lives of others and as a result is plagued by discontent. "Work-life balance is something many of us struggle with. We're at our kid's soccer game worrying about what we're missing in a meeting. And we're staying late at work worrying about what we're missing at home. And so goes the destructive cycle in an endless round of FOMO." A counterpart to this is FOBM or the "fear of being missed".

ANXIETY AND STRESS: NOMOPHOBIA

The widespread use and accessibility of mobile phones and electronic devices has undoubtedly enhanced interconnectedness and communications. On the flip side, one is available 24x7 not just to one's family and relations but also to one's colleagues, superiors and subordinates at the workplace. The demands of being always reachable and available online would stretch working hours and invariably spill over into personal/family time. One is never able to switch off from official matters and this would entail adverse psychological effects such as sleep disturbance, anxiety, stress and depression.

Consequences of high quantitative mobile phone exposure included mental overload, disturbed sleep, the feeling of never being free, role conflicts, and feelings of guilt due to inability to return all calls and messages. Addiction to the mobile phone and intensive mobile phone use has been associated with dependency on the mobile phone. Overuse has been associated with somatic complaints, anxiety, and insomnia, depression, psychological distress, and an unhealthy lifestyle.

“Nomophobia” - a portmanteau coined from no-mobile-phone phobia - or the fear of being without a mobile device, or beyond mobile phone contact is a growing affliction among today’s youth. People experiencing smartphone separation pangs feel as if they have lost connectedness, are inconvenienced by the possibility of losing out on communications (albeit temporary) feel inadequate as they can’t access information at the swipe of a finger,

In a study by a research organization which sampled around 2100 people, it was found that nearly 53 percent of mobile phone users in Britain tend to be anxious when they lose their mobile phone, run out of battery or credit, or have no network coverage. The study found that about 58 percent of men and 47 percent of women suffer from the phobia, and an additional 9 percent feel stressed when their mobile phones are off. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed cited keeping in touch with friends or family as the main reason that they got anxious when they could not use their mobile phones. The extent to which a majority of mobile users are addicted is evident from the facts that a mobile device is within arms reach (or closer) even during sleep hours, is almost never switched off, is used extensively even during mundane activities such as commuting to work, dining, exercising, and spending time with family.

Constantly being hooked onto devices takes a toll on intimate relationships. The smartphone has edged its way into a personal conversation, across the dinner table, in a tête-à-tête with a friend and in a family get-together.

CHANGING EQUATIONS OF COMMUNICATIONS

Technology is not just a prerogative of the young generation; its users are spread among all age groups. Communication etiquette among youth and between youth and their parents/teachers in the digital age is continually evolving. It is not just the modes and media of communication that is changing, but also the style and content of communication that is redefining traditional norms of communication. Educators who have not yet jumped onto the technology-enabled teaching bandwagon are perceived as being archaic. Digitization of educational material, the abundance of visually appealing and interactive educational content easily and readily available online and the multitudinous sources of supportive information has widened the realms of the teaching-learning process. A teacher expounding on a Shakespearean play is now better equipped to make the learning process dynamic and interesting by projecting a movie, videos of a theatre performance of the play or an online quiz.

The ubiquitous nature of social media has enabled parents/teachers to network with each other, connect and communicate with their children/students and with peers across a borderless online world. Adults too turn to the internet to be abreast of communication media around them through networking sites, blogs and forums to post queries, find answers, share their opinions and guide others. They may also connect with their own children to be aware of their online presence and to keep tabs on them. Youngsters, on the other hand, especially when they are at an age when they start asserting their independence, may consider this as an intrusion into their privacy and hence resist befriending their parents online. They may even consider it a social embarrassment and worry that it may influence the way their peers

communicate with them. Youth have their own personal zones and feel the need to understand the world on their own terms.

A teacher connecting with students on a social platform has its own set of pros and cons. While it empowers the teacher-student relationship on one level, it also simultaneously offers a peek into the personal lives and views of each other which may hamper perceptions. For instance, a student may not be comfortable with his teacher possibly viewing a personal picture in which he is consuming alcohol with friends or a teacher may feel conscious of his 'student-friends' commenting on his relationship status. Over-sharing of information may prove to be detrimental for both parties.

As children live significantly faster lives online than their physical maturity allows, most parents will realize that the most valuable way to help their child is to have the privacy-and-security talk even before the sex talk. (Page 37, The New Digital Age)

While the elderly may still look at the young's dependency on technology as a hindrance to their interpersonal communication, they themselves cannot escape the fact that their own daily lives have been unconsciously altered to accommodate the same. When the youth of today come across elders who have willingly accepted this boon, the two invariably connect.

IS NARCISSISM ON THE RISE?

The word 'selfie' has found its way into the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and means: "a photo of yourself that you take, typically with a smartphone or a webcam, and usually put on a social networking site." Selfie-posting is associated with spending more time on social networking sites and may have deeper psychological implications than just a visual way to connect with 'friends'.

An article by Dr. Gwendolyn Seidman, an educator who studies relationships and cyberpsychology, on an online blog studies explores the relationship between selfie-posting on social media sites and narcissism, self-obsession and self-objectification. The article goes on to define narcissism as extreme self-centeredness and a grandiose view of oneself, and that narcissists have an excessive need to be admired by others and have a sense of entitlement. Self-objectification is a tendency to view one's body as an object based on its sexual worth. The article cites that those high in self-objectification tend to see themselves in terms of their physical appearance and base their self-worth on their appearance. Though such studies are still in the nascent stages, and as the correlations were modest, narcissism can explain only a small amount of the selfie-posting behavior that is observed on social media and there may be other still-to-be-uncovered factors that also influence this behavior.

INTERNET PLAGIARISM

The easy availability of information on the World Wide Web, just the click of a mouse away (or the tap of a finger away) has undoubtedly contributed to spreading the corpus of knowledge far and wide. Students and researchers turn to the ubiquitous Google search engine, Wikipedia and millions of websites for readily available and easily accessible sources

of information to complete assignments and to get inspired by new ideas. On a positive note, the internet broadens the horizons of knowledge and information. Trouble creeps in when students start taking credit for ideas which aren't their own. Many don't have any qualms about plagiarizing and "copy-pasting" everything down from the internet without bothering about citations and acknowledging the sources. Assignments are solved in turns and parts and uploaded and shared on social media groups like Facebook and WhatsApp so that individuals are not 'burdened' with the entire assignment. This not only gives rise to academic dishonesty, but even cripples the development of one's thinking abilities. Research, on an ironic note, is said to be the transference of bones from one graveyard to the other. Hi-tech electronic means of copying are used during exams wherein entire books are downloaded onto deceptive watches. Whereas the shadow of dishonesty has always been a part of the academic world and unfair means have been resorted to even in the pre-internet era, is technology responsible for taking it several notches ahead is the question. Is there a substantial degradation of academic ethics is a debatable issue.

INCITING YOUNG MINDS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

If on the one hand excessive spread and use of social media has galvanized youth and has given rise to internet activism to show support to worthy causes, on the other hand, it is also contributing to indoctrinating and inciting impressionable minds with incomplete and unverifiable information, many a time for selfish political expediency. Social media is also responsible for perpetuating youth violence, be it through cyber bullying, cyber stalking or threatening to circulate objectionable photographs and video clips in an intimate relationship gone awry. Continual exposure to uncensored videos, fight compilations and violent games has adverse effects on youth psychology.

One example of the changing nature of gangs is the recent adoption of social media platforms such as MySpace, Twitter, and Facebook by younger gang members familiar with social media to exchange insults, violent threats, and challenges in real time that often escalate into actual violent crimes being committed, including homicides. This is a relatively new but increasingly recognized phenomenon that is now being labeled as "internet banging."

CLOAK OF ANONYMITY

An online urban dictionary defines "flaming" as an online argument that becomes nasty or derisive, where insulting a party with personal attacks takes precedence over the objective merits of one side or another. The blanket or cloak of anonymity is very conveniently used by youngsters to create innumerable profiles and use social media to express themselves online in a way they might not dare to say 'offline' or in person. Psychologists call it "deindividuation" - social norms are withdrawn because identities are concealed. In what has been researched as the Online Disinhibition Effect, people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly. This might develop into benign or toxic disinhibition.

ATTENTION SPAN ON THE DECLINE

For a generation that's always "plugged in", it is a common sight to see youngsters with heads bent, lost in their virtual worlds via their smartphones, earphones plugged in while crossing streets, during travelling, lectures, at mealtimes. Lesser levels of attention span are inversely proportionate to the amount of time one spends on social media.

According to scientists, the age of smartphones has left humans with such a short attention span even a goldfish can hold a thought for longer. The average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000, or around the time the mobile revolution began, to eight seconds.

"In the future, our identities in everyday life will come to be defined more and more by our virtual activities and associations. Our highly documented pasts will have an impact on our prospects, and our ability to influence and control how we are perceived by others will decrease dramatically. The potential for someone else to access, share or manipulate parts of our online identities will increase, particularly due to our reliance on cloud-based data storage." (Page 32, The New Digital Age)

CONCLUSION

It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity. – Albert Einstein

The rampant invasion of technology into our 21st Century lives has not only empowered, but also enslaved us in several ways. With the option to lead multiple lives across various online social platforms, the youth find it alarmingly convenient to switch between their online and offline selves. While there is a rapid increase in social awareness and accessibility to various opinions, it does not take long for controversial content to spread like wildfire. Can we now trust the youth to always use the internet as a means to develop a healthy social outlook? Micro-blogging platforms may bolster greater connectivity but they have also given rise to new social evils, some superficial yet dangerous forms of bullying and heckling. Can we now thus, trust the future citizens of the world to nurture their interpersonal 'offline' relationships with equal warmth and enthusiasm as with which they have embraced this metanarrative of technology?

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