How Digital Devices and Social Media Affect Young Adults' Communication in Information Age

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Abstract: This article will investigate how digital technology has affected young people's communication socially and educationally. Do 20-30 years old people (Early Millennials) have particular needs that are served by present technology platforms or has the technology created behaviors that have impacted their social interaction? This article will investigate what the positive and negative outcomes of digital devices are, what the contributory factors are, how young adults' behavioral pattern and interpersonal relationship have changed and what can be expected for the future.

Keywords: Digital Devices; Social Media; Young Adults' Communication

1. Preface

In the past fifteen years, digital technology has dramatically impacted people's lives, especially the early Millennials (age twenty to thirty). Internet and mobile devices such as computers, tablets and smartphones have grown rapidly as digital devices and become the mainstream for social media (such as twitter, Instagram, TikTok etc.). Digital devices and social media are the fast ways for young adults to share their ideas, creativities, thoughts, and feelings even without being face to face or knowing each other. Compared to the letter writing method or face to face communication, digital communication is the dominate tool for communication today and is impacting early Millennials' lives and social behaviors in new ways. This group of people experienced the change in communication from traditional methods to digital. They have experienced with face to face conversations, writing letters and telephone communication and then have experienced the evolution into digital devices and social media.

2. Can Millennials live without their digital devices and social media?

The Action News from ABC channel reported at November 26, 2013: "ARE YOU ADDICTED TO YOUR SCREEN DEVICES?" The staff connected by Skype to Dr. Kimberly Young from the *Center for Internet Addiction*, the country's first ever in-patient recovery center for Internet Addiction at the Bradford Regional Medical Center in Western Pennsylvania. Dr. Young considered that every new technology seems to put a new screen right in front of people faces, requiring more and more of time, and more and more attention. This situation was not only a matter of convenience but also become a matter of compulsion. It is called "*Screen addiction*". She also thought all this technology has sort of inundated people, especially for young people, as her words: "We really need to start there with getting people to recognize how much we are using the technology and what kind of ramifications are associated with it."

Generally speaking, digital devices, social media and the internet they rely on have already become the indispensable necessities to the millennials. The cyber world they created has already been a new platform to connect people of different gender, race and area of living, which provide people, especially young people, with unlimited information, thought and imagination.

3. History! Those milestones of digital devices and social media.

Digital devices and social media have great impacts on people's life. These impacts are both fast and slow. On one hand, within a short period of around 40 years, people have experienced from the invention of first personal computer to smart phones in everyone's hand. This milestone like development astonishingly rapid. But the development is so natural and smooth on the other, that the typical digital devices and social media have melted in people's everyday life before noticed. When people finally found this out, the communication modes among people have already been thoroughly altered. In this chapter, the author aims to explore the typical milestones in the development of digital devices and social media.

3.1 Digital devices

The birth of the first personal computer opened a new page for human communication. Ever since then, tons of researches were conducted, which created a series of milestones in the development of digital history. The portability of personal computers and the invention of laptops expanded the spaces for people use computers and internet. What happened successively was that the clumsy first generation laptop started to be improved to a lighter and thinner direction, with less keyboard restrictions. Finally, the touch screen was invented.

The birth of computer broadened people's imagination to multi-functional electronic devices, which have already been their

major developmental direction. At the present, smart phone has become the most popular device, which integrates the functions of telephone, email, internet, music, game, and the like.

Three elements promote the update of digital devices greatly, which include smaller size, more functions and faster updating speed [1]. At present, a smartphone, a tablet and a laptop have become a "standard" equipment set in young people's daily life. They are most necessary tools for young people to study and connect with friends. We are not sure yet and would wait expectantly to see in the future the kind of digital devices which could satisfy youngsters' upgrading demands for both exterior appearance and function.

3.2 Social Media

(1).MSN: On Aug. 24, 1995, MSN online service debuted in the United States released by Microsoft. On Mar. 25, 1996, the number of MSN user reached more than one million. On Jun. 15, 1996, MSNBC, a new company jointly invested by NBC and Micro Soft Company, started to release its 24-hour continuous news and information channel and the interactive online news service, which soon became prevailing in the whole country.

(2).Blog: Blog, which was released in 1997, has been looked on as the fourth type of online communication following Email, BBS, and IM. It is considered "Readers" in cyber era. Blog is in fact an online diary using the technology of hyperlink, which now serves as the representation of not only a new living style and working mode, but also an unprecedented learning channel. Generally, blog is a comprehensive platform supported by internet, which enables people to promulgate their feelings promptly and conveniently, to communicate with others timely and effectively, and to demonstrate their all-rounded and unique personalities.

(3).YouTube: YouTube is the biggest video website worldwide, which was established on Feb.15, 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, Jawed Karim and others. The initial intention of building up this website was to provide ways for friends to share their video. By and by, it has become the storage of memories and a place to release new works by its users. Since YouTube opened its website in 2005, it has provided simple methods for common users to upload videos. The rapid development of modern technology, and the popularization of broadband and photographic apparatus enable the prevalence of short videos. Using simple interface, YouTube enables uploaded videos reach audience all over the world. The commercial mode of YouTube brings new opportunities to its users. Users are now not only information receivers, but also releasers. Beside, uses could also make some profits by sharing their unique video collection and feelings.

(4). Facebook: Facebook, which was founded on Feb. 4, 2004 by Mark Elliot Zuckerberg, is a website providing social communication services. Facebook is a world leading website for picture sharing. Till May, 2012, there were 900 million users registered on Facebook. By Nov. 2013, around 350 billion pictures were uploaded to Facebook every day. According to the data of Jul, 2007, Facebook had 34 million active users, including users from college network and non-college network. And it gained the most college users among all websites which specially serve college students [2].

(5).Twitter: In 2006, the pioneer of Blog technology and the founder of Blogger Evan Williams and Jack Dorsey established Twitter service. Twitter is a transformation of instant information, which allows its users to send their latest situation and ideas in the form of text to cell phones and personalized websites, not only to individuals. Twitter is a tool that allows people to communicate and keep connected through the exchange of short messages, no more than 140 characters. It can be said the users on twitter try to answer one simple question: What are you doing now? Tweets have evolved from documenting everyday experiences, even just what you ate for lunch, to now offering interesting and valuable content around important topics with links to related website.

(6).TikTok: TikTok is a short video social platform owned by ByteDance. It was launched in May 2017 with the vision of "Inspire Creativity and Bring Joy". TikTok has repeatedly topped the App Store or Google Play rankings in the United States, India, Germany, France, Japan, Indonesia, and Russia. Based on today's fast food culture, TikTok quickly swept the global social media market with short videos (usually about 15-30 seconds), rich themes, and leading popular topics. Especially among young people, TikTok has become an important medium for interpersonal communication.

4. What is changed?

Communication based on internet, digital technologies and social network are treated as the latest step in the development of communication history. This approach helps people have a broad perspective on information and communication and brings the social practices and pattern of people to a totally new level. This new level of communication has been developed by evolutionary digital devices and social media. Its major characteristic is interaction, referring to websites integrating technology and social interaction. The most important point of this innovation is that content can be produced by every Internet user by using digital devices and social media ----- creating of a new media universe and transforming the Internet from a publishing medium to a communication medium. [3]

The change of the communication mode has a big impact on young adults due to their fidelity to digital devices and social media. They felt curious and attempted to use them at the very beginning. Gradually, they become skillful and highly competent. During this process, some of youngsters' thinking and behavior modes have been altered to a great extent. In this chapter, the author attempts to analyze this phenomenon from four aspects including remoteness, velocity and convenience; behavior pattern; online ethics; and the change of political attitude.

4.1 Remoteness, velocity and Convenience

The most distinctive characteristics of this present type of communication mode are remoteness, velocity and convenience. The characteristic of remoteness enables young people who are using portable digital devices to enter cyberspace, to communicate with anyone who are online, and to gain all sorts of information at all times and places. This sort of communication mode, which is very different from the traditional face to face or telephone communication, expanded the space for youngsters to express their personalities and ideas. Comparing to the library or chatroom, young people are more inclined to exchange ideas and gain information online. Remote operation and velocity make this convenient communication method deeply penetrate into young people's study, social interaction and daily life.

Comparing to the past, young adults are more willing to participate into information communication and propagation. They express their ideas and feelings frequently online. The openness of social networks makes it possible for their ideas to be viewed by anyone, which might trigger following up back and forth comments and communications. This enables them to make new friends more easily and communications are no longer constrained to their own circles in real life. People of similar interests are easily meet and gather together online, who will follow similar issues and conduct deeper communication via texts, pictures and videos. It is doubtless for us to conclude that digital devices and social media have provided young people with a convenient platform on which remote operation could be conducted and information could be gained more instantly.

4.2 Behavior Pattern

The impact of digital devices and social media on young people also lie in the altering of the modes they gain, record and spread information. In the past, people communicated with others via the modes of face to face interaction or telephone conversation; people gained news and other information via books, newspapers, broadcasts and TV programs. But now, no one could deny that they rely more deeply on social networking service (SNS) than the previous generation, which cause the phenomenon that it becomes impossible for youngsters to live without any digital devices.

This phenomenon is called *"Screen addiction"*. Whenever young people stop their work at hand, they would probably take out their cell phones, tablets or laptops and search for news and information in different sorts of social networks. They are keen on recording different kinds of trifles in their life, as small as having a sandwich at lunch. They would probably take a picture of that sandwich and send it to Twitter or Instagram. Whenever they meet tumult around themselves, their first reaction would probably be taking out their smart phones and video it, which would be very likely sent to SNS with a follow-up statement for further explanation. They are very skillful in using all sorts of APPs (application), and are fond of comment all restaurants and other places they have been to. They could not go out without taking their smart phones and would become annoyed if the smart phone runs out of electricity, feeling a segregation with their social circles. The millennials could not live without SNS and have devoted most of their time to the screens of their digital devices.

4.3 Online Ethics

Comparing to traditional communications, young people face complicated cyber ethics issues when they use social media. There are two types namely offline and online. To be specific, they behave differently in cyber world from in real world, which could be reflected in four aspects including identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, and credibility. [4]

(1).Identity: In real world, people's personalities would more or less be influenced by the environment they are living in or people around them. Yet in cyber world, because they would meet more strangers and acquaintances, they are motivated to explore their hidden identities, may it molding a better self on the home page, or releasing the oppressed self in real world life. Thus, there are obvious distinctions among some youngsters on their cyber identities and real world identities .

(2).Privacy: Similar to identity, young adults manifest different attitudes towards privacy online and offline. In real world, due to all sorts of reasons, they express ideas which might not truly reflect their intentions. Yet in the cyber world, where people could communicate anonymously, young people tend to release themselves and express their real intentions thoroughly. In such situation, they would not be aware of privacy, but tend to completely deliver themselves of their true ideas.

(3).Ownership and Authorship: Every person has the opportunity to use social media and release texts, pictures or videos via social media, which might arouse the vagueness of copyright. The initial author and provenance would become indistinct after one piece of information or knowledge being reproduced again and again. When young people use social media, they always neglect giving credit to its owners, which arouses ethical issues in cyber world. For instance, YouTube is very popular among millennials. There are millions of unauthorized videos or video fragments with copyright, even though people could always see warnings from the website saying do not upload any TV programs, MTVs, concerts or other unauthorized advertisements, unless their entire content is created by yourself.

(4).Credibility:The openness of social media also leads to the incredibility of information. Since everyone could express his/her personal ideas via SNS, and there are no effective ways to distinguish true information from false ones, young people's moral standards might be toned down and they might spread or gain false information online.

5. Harm comes at the same time

Everything has double side. Digital devices and social media cannot jump out this circle. Over-using them already caused and is causing some issues which may just hurt young people themselves or may hurt the whole society. This chapter will research three aspects for represented problems of over-using digital devices and social media, which include: Internet-screen Addiction, Privacy and Safety Problem and Cyber-violence.

5.1 Internet-screen Addiction

Internet-screen addiction is the primary problem young adults face when they over-use digital devices and social media. People's life could be enriched if they send texts, surf internet and play cyber games to a moderate degree. But addiction to the use of digital devices and social media would arouse problems like hypopsia. Even worse psychological problems like escaping from real world and real life could generate as well if one is too much addicted to the screen.

For instance, the mobile phone addiction of young people is one of the most typical examples, showing phenomenon such as keeping their phone nearby, thinking frequently about their phone, interrupting activities to respond to phone, feeling distressed without phone, and being unable to reduce phone use. Dr. Ira Hyman, from Western Washington University, aimed teens and young adults as targets, did a survey about if they can take apart with their mobile phone. The research shows: not surprisingly, young people are emotionally attached to their cell phones, many individuals considering their phones to be part of their self- concept. [5]

5.2 Privacy and Safety Problem

It has been a controversial topic which experts have been arguing that whether the privacy and safety of young adults could be protected when they surf the internet. One unique characteristic of the internet is that when people use it, there will be traces, which would never be erased. The openness of cyber spaces makes it easier for other people to view these traces. Since youngsters' lives are congested with digital or high-tech devices, they are the most vulnerable group who are the most easily to leave traces of their personal information online. They probably have never calculated how much of their private information have been revealed online ever since they started to use digital devices and social media. There are chances and evidences that these private information could be used illegally and young people would have to pay high price on this.

Safety problem is another issue of over-using digital devices and social media. Predators who search online for vulnerable teen and young adults; ubiquitous pornography; cyberbullying, a lot of dangers hide in young people's digital devices and social media. Internet-related crimes are increasing everyday. A steady stream of government reports reinforces worries about the strangers youth will meet online, and the stalking—or worse—that may come of it. These reports are often long on hyperbole but short on data.[6]

5.3 Cyber-violence

Cyber violence has already been an important which deserves urgent attention at present. It could make youngsters malefactors as well as victims consciously or unconsciously. Because of the complexity of digital devices and social media, it is difficult to create a social network that fully eliminates the negative factors such as malicious comments, personal attacks, pornography, and etc. Thus, young people might probably be affected by these factors actively or passively when they surf the internet. On one hand, they might become the victims of cyber violence by being mass hunted or receiving anonymous vicious comments when they have controversial with others online. On the other hand, they might also be led by online opinions unconsciously and express negative comments to victims when they are not aware of what is really happening, and finally become a member of the malefactors.

Besides, terrorists have noticed the advantageous features of the internet, like its openness and velocity. So they've started to use internet to spread terrorism information. They would make use of YouTube to build their own website and send the link to social networks, or to upload videos publicizing terrorism. Due to their curiosities, some young people would click the links so that they are exposed to those negative, or even vicious information.

6. Conclusion

It has only been more than 40 years since the birth of the first computer in 1980s to the popularization of digital devices and social networks. Within this several decades, the great invention of digital devices have completely changed the mode of information propagation and shortened the distances of interpersonal communication and people-information communication. Interpersonal communication becomes unprecedentedly convenient. Due to their competence of accepting new things, young people have deeper perceptions of and are greatly affected by the changes digital devices have brought about.

Digital devices and social media have provided young adults a new platform, which is more open, more rapid in information updating, more omnifaceted and more convenient. This platform connects young people from all over the world in this information explosion era, and has thoroughly renewed the modes of their social interaction and behaviors. They actively participated into the cyber world beyond the real world, and share everything happening around them with others who are online. They've become the beneficiaries and contributors of the cyber world. Internet and screen have already been an indispensable part of their self-identity.

But of course, as the birth and growth of this new mode of communication, its harms come along as well. Internet-screen addiction, privacy release, safety hazard, cyber violence, the lack of reading habit and the neglection of interpersonal interactions in real world have already been the most distinctive problems caused by the prevalence of digital devices, which have aroused the people's attention. As loyal supporters of digital devices and social media, young people are experiencing its harms as well. As time goes on, these problems would be solved gradually, if not thoroughly, with the development of technology and the perfection of legislation. By that time, the technology and human culture would also develop to a higher level.

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