

Assignment 2: Research Paper Intercultural Communication
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How Technology influenced the communication of a generation

An examination of intercultural communication in today's society and the influence of how technology has shaped communication has given a new twist to the way generational differences can pose communication problems. Communication across generations has always been a challenging issue. As technology continues to permeate our daily lives we see an increasing disconnect between generations. This poses a bigger issue when communicating a point of view. For instance, a person can be expressing differences and/or similarities to an argument. However, depending on how a person perceives and uses technology, the meaning of their position might be misunderstood. This is particularly noticeable when communicating thru texting, Facebook, Twitter, Google and e-mail.

According to the *Millennials at Work* report by PwC, a consulting technology firm, from a generational perspective 31% of Millennials believe themselves to have better technology at home than they have at work. Millennials now form a large part of the workforce and have begun having families of their own. Thirty-one percent might not seem that big of a percentage, but this simple fact means that new generations are always connected and have embraced new technologies as a critical medium of communication for socializing and working.

On the other hand, Gen Xers continue to climb from mid to senior management responsibilities and organizational leadership positions, which in turn changes their social context. However, Gen Xers mainly see and use technology for convenience purposes, such as online banking, and shopping. Technology has yet to become central to their social lives. And,

while the way they tend to typically communicate [by email] is not being replaced, this way of communication and its culture may be heading out the door.

In contrast, according to Richard Fry a senior researcher at the *Pew Research Center*, Baby Boomers are now steadily exiting the workforce in large numbers. While Baby Boomers experienced an era of relative steady technology changes, with the exception of the first dot come boom bust in the earliest 2001 and the economic crash of 2008, their experience with new technology has not been one without major risks and distrust. The use of technology is not their natural medium for communication. They tend to use technology only when is absolutely required, and when they are not given another option. Their use of technology is manly limited to reading e-news, e-books, and filling out “required” forms.

And now, along with the families of Millennials, a new generation of teenagers are embodying the continuation to embracing new technologies. They are Generation Z. They are for all accounts the culmination of the larger historical forces driving the transformation in how our society will communicate with each other in a globalized world. According Alex William, a writer at *The New York Times*, Generation Z has gone thru a profound demographic shift. He explains that, according to the Census Bureau, “Between 2000 and 2010, the country’s Hispanic population grew at four times the rate of the total population. The number of Americans self-identifying as mixed white-and-black biracial rose 134 percent. The number of Americans of mixed white and Asian descent grew by 87 percent.” In other words, Gen Z will be the first truly global generation, connecting across borders in every direction and combination. This is quite the contrast to previous generations. The communication of Gen Z will be interdepended to a rising global youth from every corner of the world yielding to perhaps new global communication standards.

As technology continues to shape communication, our generational differences in the way we communicate with each other are becoming more obvious, thus creating new challenges. The anthropologist Edward Hall, in the *Hall's High-Context and Low-context Orientations*, examines cultural similarities and differences in both perception and communication. He explains that context of communication depends “on the degree to which meaning comes from the setting rather than from the words being exchanged”. He goes onto describing communication as low context and high context in the following manner: “A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code”.

While he is looking at specific cultures (American Indians, Japanese, Arab, etc.) the concept of symbols vs. characters also applies to generational differences when using technology as the medium for communication. While the main issue might seem to be a technology gap rather than anything else, this is not the case. It is true, older generations are not as technology savvy as other generations and this will always be a cycle. However, provided that all factors remain the same, generational differences when we communicate via text, email, twitter, or social media will continue to pose an exponential communication problem. And, to Edward Hall's point, when a message is transmitted thru any of these digital mediums, depending of the sender, the message will have a degree of a low and high context which will have to be interpreted by the person receiving the content.

Communication between generations via technology creates several distinct scenarios. In the ideal scenario the sender and the receiver are using the same technology environment to

receive the message and the receiver has enough context for either LC or HL information to understand the communication. Therefore, *the message is delivered*. In the not so ideal scenario, the sender and the receiver are not using the same technology environment to receive the message but both understand enough about the environment to arrange for a digital-bridge to receive the information. The receiver has enough context for either LC or HL information to understand the communication. Thus, *the message is delivered*.

And lastly, the two worst case scenarios. In worst case scenario one, the sender and the receiver are not using the same technology environment to send-receive the message and neither one understands enough about the environment to arrange for a digital-bridge. Therefore, *the message is not delivered*. In worst case scenario two, the sender and the receiver are using the same technology environment to receive the message, but the receiver does not have enough context for either LC or HL information to understand the communication. *The message is not delivered*.

Further examining these circumstances, one can see how each scenario relates at some level to generational style of communication and technology preference. For instance, when the communication happens within a circle where all factors of communication are the same, technology becomes an effective and efficient tool for communications for all groups. The opposite effect happens when technology is utilized to communicate across generations where context takes a different meaning. It loses its effectiveness and rapidly creates a sense of disconnect between generations.

While not covered in this paper, this is also true for digital divide inequalities. The way a generation utilizes communication can pose confusion for others. Let's take the following

example of a text that reads “I’m sorry about your cat, LOL”. The circumstances for receiving the text was related to the loss of a pet. Depending of the “circle” or generation of the receiver of the message, the text can either be taken as cruel, sarcastic, or even as a sympathetic message from the sender. In this particular case, the message was sent between two distinct generations - a Baby Boomer to a Gen Xer as a sympathy message where LOL meant “Lots Of Love”.

Moreover, sending a message where the context is unclear by any of the two parties, will create confusion and misunderstandings. In *Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life* the author believes that Communication Competence is ...“one of the goals of studying communication theory is to make you a better communicator. We should articulate more clearly the nature of communication competence”... [Page 6]. However, when it comes to communicating thru technology as a medium, we quickly realize the paradigm of communicating with younger generations thru this medium. The author describes effective communication theory as ...“Effectiveness is the extent to which you achieve your goals in the interaction”... “where you able to convince your subordinate that timelines are important?” [Page 6]. These rules are not as clear to follow when utilizing technology as a medium for communication.

In the *Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life* the author describes textual analysis as ...“the conversation analysis of the content, the nature and structure of messages, and the effect of the message on receivers” [Page 22]. So how has email, texting, Facebook and twitter influenced communication of recent generations? What are the challenges for older generations to effectively cross- communicate thru these mediums?

The pace of technological advance today is unprecedented and every aspect of such technologies can become obsolete any time. Without warning possibilities often quickly appear

and disappear. When it comes to email, for all intent and purposes, is considered the grandparent of internet technologies. As official communication was previously done via printed memos, email started as an informal way to communicate between co-workers. Eventually, email became the formal line of communication in the workplace for all type organizations. Migrating to this type of structure was simple because of the prevalence of email as a medium of communication. Virtually all the characteristics of written messages, letters, official and unofficial memos, and other types of communications are now included in email communications.

Nonetheless, according Alice Philipson, a writer at *The Telegraph* ...“Students prefer to communicate with universities via social networks such as Twitter rather than email”...”The email is as good as dead among students”. However, despite predictions that social media would bring forth its demise, email continues to thrive as the preferred way of communications with Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. In order to effectively communicate using email, there are jargon and acronyms that are specific to email, for example: spam- unsolicited email; bounce- a message that was returned; distribution list – also called lists or listservs; useful- subject lines; “FYI:” “URGENT:” “RE:” and “FW:”; the use of capital letter to express EXTREME!! emphasis; the use of double parentheses to denote “inner voice” ((psssst! Robert!)), or smiley face “:-)” or “:-D”.

Younger generations consider email outdated and slow. Communicating via social media such as Facebook and Twitter is now the preferred medium. However, from the technology perspective email is not considered “slow”. Sending a message via email, text, or Twitter will take just about the same time to get to the receiver or to be posted. The key here is the communication style that is considered “fast”. When sending a text or “tweeting” about

something by nature of the technology the message structure should be 140 characters or less, the receiver is also expecting a short message. To expedite this form of communication, the shorter the better. Therefore, in order to effectively communicate using twitter, there are jargon and acronyms that are specific to this medium, for example: BTW- short for “by the way”; LOL – Laugh(ing) Out Loud; ROTLF – Rolling On the Floor Laughing; B4N – by for now; XOXO – hugs and kisses.

As this jargon can be used for both texting and twitter, the big difference for Twitter comes as the ability to utilize the content of one message to be reposted many times by the simple use of a hashtag. This is known as retweeting. Other aspects include aspects such as follow and follower, or the @symbol to include the reference to any user. And, with the latest update *Twitter* just doubled the limit to 280 characters. This change is supposed to help the user to be more expressive. Or, perhaps, somehow twitter is hoping to be the alternative for email for this generation.

Twitter was created based on SMS messaging and texting, so it is no wonder the level of popularity with mobile devices. There are a number of other applications that are very similar to Twitter, such as Snapchat and WhatsApp, that may take the lead or become more popular in the near future. The same is also true for Facebook. Despite its popularity with older generations, corporations and other institutions are saturating Facebook. We now see a trend starting to show a decline of use by teenagers of ages between 13 to 19 years old. In other words, Gen Z is moving away from these tools. Jargon for Facebook includes: Like, Friends, Groups, Follow, Messages, Badge, Profiles, Comments, Facebook Event, News Feeds, Poke, Tagging, Timeline, Trending, etc. Yet the basics of colloquial communication is still the same.

In order to understand the context of a message the receiver must be part of, or have a relation within, the group or generation from where the communication is taking place. This is nothing new. The impact of technology on the communication process across generations has been both a positive and negative. The most negative impact of technology has been our interpersonal communication. Due to the frequency of texting and tweeting, current generations lack essential skills to properly express ideas and thoughts. Likewise, older generations are not as technology savvy and not used to new communication styles. This has amplified the generation gap. Nonetheless, among the positive impacts, technology has given us the power to communicate across the globe with no barriers, strengthened relations by making it easy to keep in touch, and has played a significant role in promoting development and progress for most societies.

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