| Chapter 16 |

Communication in the Digital World

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to give a short review about the main caracteristics of online communication focusing on the minors.

The iGeneration prefer the 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC) or 'mobile-mediated communication' (MMC) versus face-to-face communication.

The onlien communication has different forms and platforms, which are depend from the age of users. The online communication has a lot of positive elements, but very important risk-factors which are not or only to a limited extent recognized by the younger (and of course other) generations.

KEYWORDS

online communication, iGeneration, FTF vs M2M communication, risk-factors

The communication characteristics of young people are significantly influenced by the prevalence of online platforms and the emergence of this specific interaction space. This could be a major opportunity for young people with social anxiety, for example, to engage in meaningful communication, as they do not have to "be seen" in front of others. However, the specificities of the online space do not seem to be able to overcome these disadvantages; in fact, negative characteristics (such as harassing, rude comments) are also capable of such triggering harmful consequences that weaken self-esteem in adolescents with personality disorders.

1. Information Society and Communication

ICT is the communication habitat of today's youth, the alpha generation born after 2005 and the so-called *Z generation* born between 1995 and 2005. While alphas are surrounded by this technology as a natural medium from birth, the Z generation is the first global generation to be digitally socialised, which has a profound impact on their lifestyles and perceptions. The internet and media play such a prominent role in their lives that they cannot imagine everyday life without them. They are terrified of missing out, so they are constantly in touch online, which requires a computer

and a mobile phone (often a status symbol, a symbol of social belonging). They live among digital devices, in virtual communities, and as they maintain their relationships on social networking sites, they spend most of their free time online. They also have another life, another self (or multiple selves), thanks to the realistic nature of computer games. To keep their online character (avatar) 'alive', their daily activities require a constant and increasingly time-consuming online presence. All of this partly reinforces the negative tendencies that young Hungarians already have: a quarter of them feel that they cannot fit into their immediate environment and find it much easier to make friends in the virtual space. This suggests that the role of online communication has increased significantly for both generations.

2. Characteristics of Online Communication

Online communication – be it in the form of 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC) or 'mobile-mediated communication' (MMC) – although fast, time/place-limited, cannot replace the depth of face-to-face communication (FTFC) and can more easily lead to inappropriate interpretations (and thus consequences). Non-verbal cues such as the tone of voice, volume, intonation, facial expressions, gestures or proxemics, which play a prominent role in identifying the content of messages and help to determine the correct verbal meaning are completely excluded or marginalised. Besides the use of underlining, highlighting, italics, exclamation marks or question marks, emoticons can be used to replace them – with the possibility of different interpretations being significant.

Online communication also carries risks beyond this. Anonymity and easy accessibility can increase users' vulnerability to many online communication risks such as harassment, hate speech or other cyber threats to privacy and online data. Moreover, regular visits to so-called 'destructive sites' and the values and messages expressed there can also have a negative impact on young people. Thus, several international studies have shown that there is a significant correlation between the frequency of visits to these social media sites and young people's propensity to self-harm (including suicide)[1].

Online communication risks typically fall into three broad categories[2]: content risks mean that a young person may encounter content that is not age-appropriate and not formally addressed to them (e.g. internet pornography); contact risk means that the young person encounters content that is directed at them that is harassing or manipulative; behavioural risks are the idea that a child's digital footprint or previous online behaviour is seen as part of a larger network of interactions (and managed accordingly).

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1 Csemáné Váradi, 2021, p. 106.
2 Livingston and Smith's theory is analysed in Macaulay et al., 2020, pp. 1–25.

For any of these risks, it is true that their existence can lead to offensive activities, creating the potential for cyber-attacks. In any case, social media communication is characterised by a higher incidence of cyber aggression[3] frequency. Age-independent in its effects, intentional harm caused by the use of electronic means is the risk that the person or group concerned will find the online activity or the content transmitted offensive, derogatory, harmful or at least undesirable (for example, online communication with sexual content among young people can pose a particular – and particularly high-risk – of victimisation[4]).

Online communication has specific features in terms of content, form and technology. One striking example is the asynchronous nature of online *chat*. Synchronicity is a natural element of real-time, face-to-face discourse, regardless of the specific technical platform (3D, telephone, internet (e.g. Skype)) on which it takes place. However, online conversation only has this synchronicity if certain conditions are met: i.e. everyone is uniformly available at a given time in the same virtual space. Without this, the exchange of information becomes difficult, the logical flow becomes fragmented, and by the time a reply arrives, it may be inconsequential and meaningless because of the messages sent in the meantime. The management of the communication is therefore left in the hands of the receiving party, increasing the potential frustration level of the sending party. Even with patient partners, it is true that time lags and changing external events can create new situations. The previous message may be reinterpreted by the receiver, leading to new misunderstandings in communication and unjustified emotional reactions (the chances of this happening are also higher because of the targeted communication toolbox, often using abbreviations or slang of foreign language origin[5], with a few words).

3. Specific Forms of Communication

The *specific form of communication* may also have a number of characteristics that are more significant for young people in the online space. It was already true in the early 2000s[6] that 12-17 year olds are not only highly active on these platforms, but around a quarter (28%) are so-called 'multichannel' teenagers – i.e. they use all interaction channels provided by mobile phones and internet access together, and are also present on social networking sites. At the same time, 31% of young people still regularly spent time with friends outside school, and 38% 'socialised' online every day. Even then, communication was still mainly in the form of instant messages (28%) and live chat on mobile phones (35%), with less frequent use of email.

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3   Ibid., pp. 1–2.
4   Budde, Witz and Böhm, 2022, pp. 119–133.
5   For example, the phrase WTF, LOL is often used.
6   Lenhart et al., 2007.

The data shifted slightly towards the online space by 2012, but a marked change occurred in the years that followed. In 2018, research[7] reported that teens have moved beyond face-to-face communication[8]. In parallel, the extent of social media engagement in face-to-face interactions has increased significantly.

While in 2012 almost half of the respondents preferred FTF communication, by 2018 this was only a third. This also means that they preferred to interact via SMS rather than live. There was also a noticeable change in two phenomena affecting interaction between young people. The proportion of those who said that time spent on social media "takes away from time spent with friends in person" has increased from 2012 to 2018 (34% to 42%). But even when young people are together, it is often not face-to-face attention that dominates, but rather preoccupation with the phone.

By 2018, more than half of the asked age-group said that ICT "often distracts me when I should be paying attention to the people I am with" (44%–54%).

Changes in communication platforms have been significantly accelerated by the emergence of the pandemic. Although other forms of real-time, voice-based personal interaction supported by ICT, such as telephony, Skype or other software, were still available, they also seem to be taking a back seat to text-based form of interaction.

But it is not only the specific form of communication that has changed, but also the duration supported by ICT[9]. In fact, media consumption has grown faster in the last two years than in the four years preceding the epidemic.

The time spent with social media, browsing, content creating, e-reading or other digital activities.

The time spent reading is at its lowest, just a few minutes, and unfortunately it has not changed even with the pandemic shutdown. (The so called monitor-time increased to 5:33 hours (children between ages 8–12) and to 8:39 hours per day (youth between the ages 13–18)).

Boys in all age groups spend more than an hour more time online, but there is also a significant difference by social status, with teenagers from lower-income families spending more than 3 hours longer on social media than their better-off peers.

The most common online activities for both age groups are watching videos and playing computer games. This is followed by social media. The growing role of this, along with an increase in age, is illustrated by the amount of time spent on it.

The mere fact that children and young people primarily use their mobile phones as their technical basis for connecting to the internet has many other consequences. According to research[10] conducted in 2023, American (US) 11–17-year-olds use their phones for more than 4.5 hours a day. If we consider that more than half of them receive more than 200 messages, almost a quarter of which are during school hours and 5% specifically during late (night) hours. This means that almost half (42%) of

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7 Rideout and Robb, 2018.
8 This was the title of the press release reporting the results of the research. See for example: Steinmetz, 2018.
9 For more on this, see: Rideout et al., 2022.
10 Radesky et al., 2023.

their mobile phone activity is related to social media. The specific form of social media depends on age. Among 8–12 year olds, social networking is more popular on Snapchat (13%), Instagram (10%), Facebook (8%), Discord (5%), Pinterest (4%), while among 13–18 year olds it involves Instagram (53%), Snapchat (49%), Facebook (30%), Discord (17%), Twitter (16%)[11].

4. The Importance of Online Communication Among Minors and Its Risk-Factors

Three facts show the importance of the online media world in young people's lives: on the one hand, that they cannot imagine their lives without the internet and its services; of the top five platforms, YouTube was the most important source of entertainment – where watching online videos exceeds listening to music; social networking (and the social networking services Snapchat and Instagram provide) also ranked lower in importance; on the other hand, they may do so at the expense of or in parallel with other activities, such as eating, travelling, studying or socialising with peers, in the light of increased media time; thirdly, only 5% of 8–12 year olds and 3% of 13–18 year olds do not watch YouTube or use social media daily; however, 47% of minors spend more than 4 hours a day on YouTube and 20% of minors spend more than 8 hours a day on it[12]; this is true for the whole population: three out of four 8–18 year olds, i.e. 75% of the population, are "prisoners" of the virtual space for more than 4 hours a day, and 41% for more than 8 hours; but there is a significant increase (29% to 41%) in the proportion of young people who use these tools for more than 8 hours a day for entertainment and socialising.

In addition to the countless positive effects of online communication, it also threatens with serious dangers.

As a direct effect – in addition to health and psychological risks – distorted values (idols, the specific mechanisms of action of online models), the unrealistic, often traumatized image of the world (climate anxiety as a psychological illness), the higher incidence of addictions (snuff videos,, deep-internet), the positive valuation of crime and other behaviors (computer games, funny violence), cyberbullying (which can also lead to cybersuicide).

Indirect effects include self-esteem disorders in this context, strong peer pressure to participate, or various victim situations – and not only in the context of cyberbulylying. For example, offensive communication or victim blaming in the context of anonymity are unfortunately typical of online communication.

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11 For more on this, see: Ibid.
12 It is important to note that the multitasking mode makes the calculation of time different from the principles used in mathematical summation.

5. Shortcomings and strengths – or some thoughts on digital communication

Although the digital space is a place for learning, entertainment, socializing, gaming, and even romantic relationships in terms of the socialization of young people, communication in this space has many peculiarities[13].

There are undeniable differences between digital and traditional communication, which are fundamentally due to the specific technical requirements of the latter.

Based on the concept of digital communication, it is a specific form of communication that uses electronic devices, information and communication technologies, and networks to transmit messages.

The differences basically stem from this and are evident in a number of areas, whether it be the medium that „delivers" the message (analog vs. digital); costs (variable: the digital platform is more economical for longer distances or larger market players) or speed (digital is naturally faster). While interactivity in both cases depends significantly on the specific form of communication (face-to-face interaction vs. postal mail // real-time conversation (e.g., Skype) vs. sending an email to the office after working hours).

Both forms of communication have advantages and disadvantages.

While *digital communication* is fast, effective, and accessible from anywhere due to the capabilities of the medium, it is also vulnerable in this regard, partly due to its technical background and partly due to the effective sharing of messages. This can lead not only to misinterpretation due to the absence of nonverbal messages, but also to psychological closure on the part of the recipient due to information overload resulting from productivity.

Traditional communication may be much more limited and slower in comparison (e.g., geographical distance), but at the same time, it is easier to build trust and strengthen relationships between parties due to the nonverbal messages that come through the now complete communication channels.

It is also important to note that, for a number of reasons, digital communication can have a greater impact on the everyday lives of children and young people (and pose a greater challenge for them) than traditional communication.

A particularly 'good' example of this is the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Digital communication has a strong appeal for this age group, as it can reach the target person regardless of time and place. The negative impact of this is not only the difficulty of escaping the pressure of constant and continuous presence, but also the impossibility of escaping harassing behavior such as cyberbullying.

Whereas in the case of classic forms of school bullying – precisely because of the characteristics and limitations of traditional communication: there is the possibility of separation (physical distancing); the bullying does not continue outside school hours;

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13 Weng, 2024.

the fact is known only to a limited group of people (only those who have been involved become aware of it); the right to forget remains; over time, it becomes „boring," the supportive passivity of classmates disappears, and the behavior of the active bully also changes; thus, the process of „healing/processing" can begin; along with this, the feeling of humiliation associated with the abuse may ease after a while.

Since age, physical characteristics, etc. generally play a role in becoming a victim, the abusive behavior typically stops as these change.

In contrast, in the case of cyberbullying – precisely because of the nature of the platform and thus of communication – there is no possibility of separation (the bully can „follow" the victim everywhere with their cell phone); the bullying communication is continuous, regardless of place and time (it does not stop on weekends or during school breaks); an unknown number of people become aware of it (e.g., anyone can save the images); the ‚right to be forgotten' is lost (messages, pictures, etc. can be re-uploaded at any time, on various social media sites, even under new profiles); thus, the psychological pressure and anxiety remain, and the processing process cannot begin; as a result, the feeling of humiliation does not subside, quite the contrary! Given that the victim does not know the perpetrator (either by number or by name), this feeling becomes even more severe.

Overall, digital communication can be much more dangerous than traditional communication, precisely because of its invisibility. It is therefore particularly important that the younger generations (also) learn the techniques and psychological methods that *strengthen* their *resilience* and *their ability to resist harassing behaviour*.

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