

NEW TEXT, FRIEND REQUEST, MESSAGE SENT SUCCESSFULLY:
HOW COLLEGE STUDENTS CONTROL SOCIAL INTERACTIONS THROUGH
THE USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

By

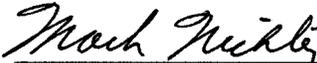
VICTORIA BRIDGET PENUNURI

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in
Anthropology

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

May 2009

Approved by:



Dr. Mark Nichter
Department of Anthropology

STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

I hereby grant to the University of Arizona Library the nonexclusive worldwide right to reproduce and distribute my thesis and abstract (herein, the "licensed materials"), in whole or in part, in any and all media of distribution and in any format in existence now or developed in the future. I represent and warrant to the University of Arizona that the licensed materials are my original work, that I am the sole owner of all rights in and to the licensed materials, and that none of the licensed materials infringe or violate the rights of others. I further represent that I have obtained all necessary rights to permit the University of Arizona Library to reproduce and distribute any nonpublic third party software necessary to access, display, run, or print my thesis. I acknowledge that University of Arizona Library may elect not to distribute my thesis in digital format if, in its reasonable judgment, it believes all such rights have not been secured.

SIGNED: Victoria Penunuri

Abstract

This study examines the various ways in which college students utilize different communication technologies to control an extensive segment of their social interactions. In addition to understanding the evolution and social realm of communication technologies, a collection of interviews, observations, and focus group discussions has provided insight into which technologies are popular modes of communication within the college community as well as how these devices are being used by its members. There are various techniques by which these technologies enable students to create a variety of social meanings, and the development of certain protocols of use has therefore emerged. A wide variety of theories exist regarding the reason these technologies are being used, but all can be tied back to the purpose of regulating the exchange of ideas. The loss of control over these conversations, as demonstrated through cases of use relating to boredom or addiction, represent deviations from the expected norms of usage, and these conflicts have become concerns for members of the college community as well as observers. However, these cases further indicate that as students form, edit, and send these communiqués, what is meant to be conveyed by the author and what is determined to be the message by the recipient is highly regulated. This research will therefore explore how control over communication is integrated into the every day utility of collegiate interactions. And furthermore, this paper will examine how the magnitude of influence that both the speaker and audience have over this dialogue demonstrates manipulation of these interactions through the use of communication technologies.

Introduction

College students have a lot to say. And since college has always been portrayed as a time of self reflection, personal growth, and new ways of thinking, they have good reason to make their voices heard. It is consequently unsurprising that students utilize a vast assortment of communication methods in order to maintain various connections during this period of change. By preserving established social ties as well as initiating new ones, students are much more adept to navigate themselves through the myriad of new experiences and viewpoints that they encounter within the university community.

Throughout college campuses, however, communications have undergone a major facelift due to modern advances in technology. College students, because of their historical affinity for quickly adapting to the rapidly changing technological world, compose a very interesting community to be examined in their use of technological communication. The changes that have occurred within this arena are very evident as they indicate a shift towards greater societal presence. Various technologies available for communication are no longer restricted to individuals who are affluent or strictly business oriented. Where certain technologies are still geared toward those markets, there now exist more accessible and/or more affordable options that are geared towards other communities, like that of the cliché “starving college student.” These shifts are largely

due to the patterns of use that are intensely tracked and forecasted by technology based companies. Because of the high demand from the college student demographic, this will continue to be a swiftly evolving domain.

Correspondence has developed from a small network of highly regulated exchanges into a vast expanse of choreographed interactions which often times are performed using a mixture of various communication techniques. There are now many different tools available with new and distinctive capabilities for initiating, carrying out, and interpreting communiqués. Though these devices have affected the world at large, college students appear to be taking the reins with regards to rapid immersion. Current communication technologies such as the texting function of cellular phones and the online profiles stored to social networking sites have enabled students to share information with greater ease, speed, and on a much larger scale than was previously possible. But in addition to these benefits, new technologies have also provided an original platform where individuals are able to place a greater amount of control over their communications than ever before. The use of these technologies allows for people to conduct multiple tasks at once as well as solicit and share information over a wider expanse of acquaintances. Students are then able to check over and revise an idea or thought before it ever becomes a broadcasted statement. And by employing more control over their interactions, the dynamic of broad-spectrum communication among college students has become a very intriguing subject.

This research is meant to help uncover some of the different ways in which college students can and choose to use various communication technologies to control their every day interactions. The concept of communication technology will be discussed

as well as the reasons certain mediums of information transfer are successful in controlling personal exchanges, especially within the college community. Progressive college students have shown that they are very capable of quickly adapting to changes in technological media and therefore have become early adopters of these communication forms. There are a few major technologies which in recent years, have swept over this population such as texting and Facebook, each which provide different benefits to the controller. Considerations regarding what form of technology can and should be used in certain social contexts will be examined as well as how conversations develop as a result of these messages. Certain communication procedures have also developed in addition to levels of appropriateness, leading to the creation of a very intricate web of communication protocol. As if by a common understanding, patterns of use have emerged, resulting in a certain degree of standardization, even with the way individuals develop personal interpretations of information. Perhaps these protocols have developed due to the sheer influx of use and thus resulting in an established “normative” behavior. But regardless of how they came to be, these patterns indicate an integrative synchronization of communication throughout everyday operations.

There are, however, instances where the level of control a person has over these technologies and consequent communications are diminished. These cases are easily observed through communication use as a response to personal boredom or addiction to the technology. These abnormalities can lead to poorly controlled discussions which are not attractive to any participating parties. Often times, respondents will even turn away from communicating with any of these unskilled individuals. Though the idea that boredom and addiction play a role in the use of these technologies is one that is often

joked about, unease regarding their potential societal presence is not absent. However, the sheer fact that any deficiency associated with the power to control communications creates such concern, displays the outright importance and integration of communication control associated with the proper use of these technologies. College students have become highly skilled in using communication technologies not only for the benefits it has regarding ease or time saving use, but they have developed an infrastructure on how to utilize these technologies to control their social interactions deliberately and effectively.

What is Communication Technology?

New communication technologies have been rapidly growing in popularity. This is especially evident within the college community, where progressive technological devices are readily adopted and quickly become preferred methods for conducting social exchanges. Everett M. Rogers, a scholar on communication and innovation describes the term ‘communication technology’ as a technological tool, including “the hardware equipment, organizational structure, and social values by which individuals collect, process, and exchange information with other individuals” (Rogers, 1986). Though much of his work was done before the current boom in personal media, the same theories regarding integration of new social technologies can be applied to the use of current networked media communications.

Advances in communication technology are intended to provide for enhanced communications that utilize multiple human senses, especially hearing and seeing (Rogers, 1986). In the modern world of mobile communications, this ability enables

individuals to overcome previous limitations of time and space and gives them access to formerly unattainable information. Where there used to stand a difficult or lengthy task of locating an individual and compromising on a time to communicate, there is now an infrastructure in place where people can be reached instantly or left information for responding at their leisure. However, initial uncertainty of new tools or methods is the largest barrier to entry. According to Marlene Burkhardt and Daniel Brass, both professors of innovation, technological uncertainty greatly affects distribution of technological power and the individuals who adjust quickly are able to get an upper hand in controlling the new technology's environment by acting as resources for identified uncertainties. Since college students are early technology adopters they "become early, frequent, and effective users of the new technology. They are the first to cope with the uncertainty created by the change [...] thus early adopters [will have] increased network centrality and power." (Burkhardt & Brass, 1990) Students are able to quickly learn how to operate different methods of communication and because of their rapid adjustment, they are then more eager to explore the different capabilities available as well as find ways to control and manipulate these newly adopted technologies.

There are many studies which suggest that the growing "need for speed" and the time shortage suffered by individuals in the "me generation" is what accounts for the incredible shift towards digital media communication use. These are very probable reasons for this huge influx, as a professor at Kansas State University polled students on the time they spent doing certain activities, which when totaled resulted in about 26.5 hours of occupied time every day (Wesch, 2008). In fact time saving and ease of use were mentioned again and again by respondents of this study as reasons for why students

chose to use a certain method of communication over another. However, the platform on which this integrative method of communication exists is much more complex than simply choosing the easiest form of correspondence.

Continual development and integration of communication technologies within highly progressive societies contributes exponentially to the evolution of modern communication. In his works, Rogers refers to different “eras” of communication innovation, each of which introduce and incorporate a new form of communication with those previously established. He suggests that four distinct eras of communication technology have arisen throughout human history; from the Writing Era, to the Printing Era, to the Telecommunication Era, and most recently the Interactive Communication Era. This latest era utilizes modern technologies to provide an enhanced interface for fast and easy transfers of information to groups and individuals that may or may not be located within an immediately accessible community. This type of communication therefore greatly expands the sphere of contact that people can penetrate, thus making mass communication and long-distance communication quick and easy to accomplish. I believe, however, that another era has been set in motion within the college arena that seems to be quickly spreading to other communities: the Digital Media Era, in which newer and more mobile technologies like online networks and the profiles stored on them as well as mobile phones and their texting capabilities have become preferred methods of communication. These technologies are not only utilized when a communiqué is necessary, but whenever a person feels compelled to share a thought or create a message, a testament to how Generation Y believes their thoughts are well worthy of being shared with their community.

Popular Technologies and Reasons for Use

Throughout this experiment a number of technologies were revealed as playing a significant role in college student communication. Certain innovative methods have become largely popular within the college community of which the most notable are the traditional form of emailing, using the social network site Facebook.com, and texting via cellular phones.

Email, though one of the most antiquated forms of the communication technology used regularly by college students, is still required as a basic communication method. Because of this, it is often considered a default, or fall-back option when contacting late-adopters of new technology, or communicating with those in positions of authority. During a focus group, a good majority of students agreed that emailing was the best method for relaying professional-looking messages but that they are not preferred for communicating with people on a day to day basis. This directly reflects studies that say college students see email as a slow and formal method of communication, but one that they are still obliged to use (Rosenfeld & Novemsky, 2008). One respondent in our male focus group was a student who was in the United States for a semester abroad. He added that when you are away from family and friends who do not have social network profiles and international phone plans, emailing is really the only option for communication. A 1997 study by Anabel Quan-Haase revealed that many students used email on a regular basis for communication because it was inexpensive and readily available on campus, allowing them to integrate distant ties into their everyday student lives. (Quan-Haase, 2007). The other notable feature of emailing is its asynchronicity (Rogers, 1986).

Essentially, emailing allows the sender and the receiver to engage in a conversation at whatever time is most convenient for each party. An individual may want to communicate with someone who does not have a similar schedule to them. If they choose to use email, the sender has the freedom to sit at a computer and compose a message that will then wait for the receiver until they too can find a free moment. This ability permits communication to occur even though people are not relaying the information in real time. They can communicate even though they are “out of synch” with each other, which eliminates problems like communication tag, often played when calling people back and leaving voice messages in an attempt to find a time when both individuals are free to carry on a verbal conversation. This feature thus removes time as a restraint on communication, but this very process exemplifies the inherent slow factor of email that has become less attractive to college students.

Social networking sites like Facebook.com, otherwise referred to as just “Facebook,” exist to enhance people’s ability to stay connected with those they might not otherwise have the ability to gain access to. Facebook has, since its inception in 2004, been used by college students as “a social utility that connects people with friends, and others who work, study, and live around them” (Facebook, 2009). Facebook’s design allows its users to create profiles that display personal information, pictures, and virtually anything that the author of the profile wants to exhibit. The program is largely used to organize friends and acquaintances so that users can create settings which help them manage their various relationships. Members of a person’s network can be contacted directly or even arranged into groups or lists so that certain repertoires can be more easily maintained. During a focus group, we learned that students believe most of the time they

spend using technological communications is consumed by Facebook. In a 2007 study conducted by professors at Michigan State University, they found that 94% of their undergraduates were members of Facebook and that they reported spending, on average, around 10-30 minutes on Facebook every single day (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2007).

These students have a variety of different communication options when sending a message through Facebook. People can send messages directly to an individual or group, much like through email. There are wall posts, which are directed towards an individual but can be viewed by anyone that has access to their profile. There are also status updates, in which the user sets a short description of what they are doing or how they are feeling to be what looks like a title of their profile. There are many different ways in which Facebook can facilitate communication, but it should also be noted that Facebook is often used as a browsing tool in which many items of information are seen, but do not necessarily require or solicit any type of response. Though the site incorporates applications that can be utilized to initiate, continue, or even block conversations, the informality of its platform is widely used to display information which does not require correspondence. Users can also organize their information by classifying friends and setting personal privacy settings for what exactly they wish to make public, circumstantially available, or private. They can also receive alerts when other people in their network make modifications to their own information. The combined utility of these features gives users the direct ability to essentially edit themselves, both their information and their settings, to appear any way they choose. Due to the ease of editing

options, there is, however, a reoccurring concern regarding the reliability of information posted on Facebook.

The fastest growing method of college student technological communication is text messaging. Also referred to as texting or short messaging service (SMS), it involves the use of cellular phones or other mobile devices to send short fragments of information to selected recipients. Texting can be utilized both as a personal or private method of communication as well as a means to communicate with a large spectrum of chosen recipients. A few years ago, the high cost of texting plans for cellular phones was noted as a deterrent for student use (Quan-Haase, 2007). However, in just a few short years texting use has skyrocketed. So far in 2009, 76% of all mobile phone subscribers throughout the world utilize text messaging (Ahonen & Moore, 2009). The reasons behind this enormous popularity influx are quite extensive. As cell phones have become more widely available, plans that allow for texting have become more affordable. Phones themselves are even being progressively engineered more and more for data communication capabilities. While simple handsets are still available, the success of companies such as Microsoft, RIM, and Apple and their constant new and improved phone models provide proof of shifts in consumer taste. Many new phones are integrating a QWERTY style keypad that incorporates the familiar layout from computer keyboards in order to facilitate text input on the device. Based on the discussions that occurred during two separate focus groups, I would also assume that the increase is largely due to the preference that college students have for using text messages. When we asked a group of college men which form of technology they would choose if only one was available to them, they unanimously agreed that text messaging was the best option

because of its quickness and high utility. When the same question was posed to a group of female college students they also believed that text messaging was the most useful method of the three.

Often times, texting is used when voice communication is unavailable or restrictive due to an inconvenient environment or situation. It can be considered a private way of communicating directly to the desired party, however, confidentiality can also be compromised as messages are stored on a handset that can be viewed by unintended third parties. Texting can also be utilized for public communication. Text messages are frequently used in social situations to communicate quickly, without disrupting whatever the user or those around them are currently doing. However, our study revealed that some respondents become frustrated when people text too often in social situations, claiming that is it rude to be distracted and unengaged from the other people they are with. Texting can also be used to send messages to a group of recipients that either you would like to know all the opinions of or that you can later pick and choose who will continue in the conversation. Texting has become so popular among college students that more and more studies are being conducted regarding their use. Even psychophysiological patterns that occur as a result of texting and hand preference for sending a text message have been explored (Lin & Peper, 2009; Hallett & Lambert, 2008)

Each of the new communication technologies has a place and preferred use in the communication repertoire of college students. For text messaging, students cited it as convenient and polite since you don't have to worry about interrupting what the recipient is doing, and affective since you are often more likely to get a quick response. They found it to be a simple way in which social activities like dinner or going out can be

arranged. Texting was also considered handy because all respondents carried their phones on them the majority of the time. When using Facebook, students found it to be a good way to organize activities farther in the future, which didn't require immediate response, or to reconnect with people whom they haven't spoken with in a while. This relaxed use is because users often don't check their Facebook as frequently as their cell phone and sometimes only do so after receiving notifications, via email, from the website (if they have that feature enabled). Another interesting point observed in the Quan-Haase study was how different modes of communication were used to facilitate offline ties such as spoken, verbal conversations (Quan-Haase, 2007). In both personal interviews and our focus group discussions, we also noted that our respondents believed that initial communication via texting, Facebook, and email would often provide opportunities for offline contact or activities. After engaging in a conversation via Facebook, our respondents noted that there was a natural progression to either text messaging or verbal communication when organizing activities. This corresponds to the Quan-Haase theory that students actually prefer to use more synchronous forms of communication (i.e. texting) since they satisfy a desire for an immediate response (Quan-Haase, 2007). When this type of interaction isn't available, the initial message still often times leads to verbal and face-to-face communications which are also performed synchronously.

Student respondents revealed that they only checked their email a couple times a day, and that, on average, they had the same number of encounters with Facebook, though more time was spent on the latter. However, their uses differed greatly, with email being used for scholastic or professional interactions while Facebook was largely used for more social reasons. Currently, however, it seems that college students feel that

texting is the most optimal form of technological communication, as they can easily maintain a large number of exchanges throughout the day, to both accomplish tasks as well as find out what people are up to in a way that is faster and easier than making phone calls. Their next loyalties lie with Facebook, and email, as mentioned, is more of a backup plan for communicating.

Communication Etiquette

Throughout the course of this investigation certain protocols and patterns of use were revealed. These common communication exercises indicate that through the use of these various technologies, a common communication etiquette has been established.

With regards to email, there was, as noted before, a formal connotation associated with its use. Because of the length of time it has been in use, students have acquired a high degree of familiarity with the tool and have thus developed a preconceived notion of email etiquette. College students, upon entrance, are given a university email address and informed that it will be used as a means of correspondence between themselves, their professors, the university staff, and their fellow students. In many cases, the university even creates a campus directory in which a list of staff and students, along with their email addresses, are made available to the entire university population. Email is therefore a completely ubiquitous form of communication within a college community. However, because of these rules of contact, students have formed the conception that since email can be used for formal methods of communication, it is inherently formal. Our focus groups revealed that students reserve the use of email for accomplishing tasks like organizing study activities, advisor appointments, and various other school or

otherwise “official” messages. Because of this, the composition of emails is often written with an organization scheme of addressing the recipient, relaying information in a message body, and closing with a signature.

Email has evolved over the past decade to fill many different roles in the life of a college student. Most students entering college already have personal email accounts that they have been using for previous interactions. In college, however, the introduction of email as a professional tool changes the ways in which email is used. Where students previously stayed after class to speak with a teacher or club officer, they now write emails to professors and administrators. If the wrong person is contacted, it is not uncommon to have a message forwarded until it does reach the correct person. Because of this notion, it is then an unwritten sentiment that for any email received in which you do not have the answer or are not the correct recipient, you must still reply or attempt to find the intended recipient. This sentiment was brought up by a student who talked about this protocol during his internship.

Comparatively, Facebook is used in a much more casual manner. Though it has only been around for a few years, college students have become quite the experts of navigating this application. The messages that are conveyed via Facebook mostly denote extracurricular, social activity. The majority of Facebook interactions are conducted with peers, even though networks can and do extend to non-peer relationships. However, even though multiple networks may exist within a person’s Facebook community, the ability to segregate those networks and what aspects of personal information each network has access to is also available. Many students maintain a very different set of communication standards with those they choose to communicate with on Facebook than with those they

choose to communicate with using other methods. College students are typically very open with the information that is published on Facebook and usually only post things that they are comfortable having their peers know. As Facebook has expanded to include non-student profiles such as school officials, family members, and employers, many college students have chosen to limit the degree to which those individuals can see posted information. Some cases in which these authority figures have used Facebook information to expel students, break up parties, and even deny employment because of infractions documented on Facebook have resulted in students re-editing their profiles and removing entire sections in order to disassociate themselves from the information completely (Hass, 2006).

As would be expected, an almost unofficial code of conduct has been implemented by students in regard to their use. More and more profiles are being defaulted to private, displaying only a name and sometimes a small identifying picture to non-friends. This forces potential acquaintances to either initiate communication and/or submit a friend request to gain access to a full (or limited) profile. Multiple people interviewed noted that the ability to assign different individuals and groups distinctive privacy restrictions was one of the most useful features of Facebook. We also found out during our focus groups, that it was considered an uncomfortable occurrence to bring up personal issues on Facebook, both for public display and within private communiqués. Students told us that this made both the person being addressed as well as anyone who could also view the correspondence feel uncomfortable. This practice makes uninvolved viewers feel uneasy because they do not wish to be placed in the middle of a sensitive matter. It also makes the receiver of a direct message feel that the importance of the

message is reduced since it was addressed on Facebook and not in person. Following this pattern, it was brought to our attention that mentioning pieces of information learned on Facebook in face-to-face interactions also creates uneasiness, and was even described by one of the focus group respondents as “creepy.” This shows us that there is also a definite boundary that is present between the information that is relayed using different methods of communication.

While Facebook is intended to be used as a communication tool, on many occasions college students spend their time just browsing the site’s expansive catalog of personal information. Users can view information about friends, acquaintances, and even strangers who remain unaware as to who or how often their information is accessed, which was noted in all our focus groups as one of the most intriguing aspects of using Facebook. The secretive nature of this observation of information, has even coined the term “Facebook stalking” which symbolizes the obsessive nature of constant browsing and viewing vast amounts of profile information. Though the word “stalking” is normally a social taboo, within the Facebook community is not only accepted as a practice, but so widely used that it can be categorized and even joked about. All respondents of the focus groups and interviews were familiar with this term, indicating that this is a very common trend, or at the very least widely understood. Our respondents admitted that they consider Facebook stalking somewhat of a guilty pleasure, indicating that this practice could potentially grow in use and acceptance. A recent feature added to Facebook which may contribute to this phenomenon is a real-time news feed that displays every activity that the people in your network have most recently performed. Many of our respondents discussed how they believed this feature was mostly annoying

and intrusive, and that it presented them with unsolicited information regarding someone's every move. However, as they further discussed their use of Facebook, they noted how often times their reason for visiting a person's profile was initiated by interest in a news feed item, indicating that the feature is used nearly every time the site is accessed. They conflictingly also talked about how the feature was a convenient way to categorize and see if any new information requires their further investigation, without having to randomly check profiles to see if anything has changed. This type of behavior in which catching up with someone without ever actually contacting them or acquiring a new acquaintance without ever spending time with the person would have previously been deemed as antisocial behavior. However, because of the popularity and social eminence Facebook retains, especially within the college community, these activities are considered normal, and sometimes even socially attentive behavior.

Though texting has been incorporated as the most recent type of technological communication, college students have quickly become fluent in its language. The most obvious difference between texting and the other communication methods discussed is the fact that texting does not require a computer to be used. Instead, it requires a phone, which the vast majority of college students carry around with them on a 24 hour basis. Because of this constant potential for contact, texting is often used for more immediate communications. Our student respondents discussed how texting was used to contact people at any time of the day, with the anticipation that the recipient would receive the message immediately, and most likely be able to see and respond to it in a timely manner. Though text messages can be easily deleted or ignored, our respondents also noted that they feel much more compelled to reply quickly to texts because it is easy and non-

disruptive to do so. The other requirement for sending a text message is a phone number. This necessity indicates that text messages are used to communicate with individuals you are better acquainted with, or whom you at least know well enough to possess a phone number for. Because of the close relationships required for text use, the communiqués are very often informal and short. And the shorthand writing of these messages is used so regularly that researchers have even begun to question whether texting is actually forming its own language, separate from written English (Edler, 2008). This shorthand, however, is necessary for text since the most important features of its use are the speed and ease of operation.

Because of the time crunch usually associated with the fast-paced lifestyle of college students, texting has been implemented as a medium through which social activity and communication can be conducted while still fulfilling scholarly, professional, and otherwise non-communicative obligations. Text messages are sent with the intent of asking a quick question or making a short remark and receiving an equally brief answer as the message itself can only hold 160 characters. Almost all of our respondents from the male focus group stated that a full conversation was both hard to manage and undesirable using text messages. Some respondents in the female focus group brought up the fact that in some instances, it is the only way to communicate at all with otherwise constantly occupied individuals. Throughout a series of contextual observations it was noted that people seemed to send and receive text messages during all different types of activities, indicating that students may use it as a break from their current activity or as way to accomplish a conversation without disturbing the activities of the individuals around them. It should also be noted that our respondents revealed that they were

passionately annoyed by people who seem more engaged with their phone and their texts than with the particular social situations they placed themselves in. Yet, all respondents admitted to texting in these situations on occasion. They did, however, say that there was an understood limit as to what was an acceptable text distraction, so these interruptions are then only deviant when performed in excess. One possible reason for this activity and overall annoyance with it, is that people tend to be left alone when texting, thus creating a “text bubble” around themselves. This removes the user from availability in their immediate environment.

The proliferation of these communication technologies in the lives of college students has forced an evolution in the way users interpret these communications. Writing an email has evolved into the formal perception that was once reserved for letters. Facebook has created a platform for posting personal and otherwise private information to a now large social network. And writing a text message has become the norm for quick messages that were once reliant upon verbal interactions. A recent commercial for Sprint pokes fun at how technologically immersed our society has become.

Welcome to the now network, population 49 million. Right now 379 couples are splitting up, 253 by phone, 42 by email, and 84 by text message. 13,000 people are streaming Pandora on a bus. 3,700 people just found all their friends on Loopt. 92 just realized they were in the exact same place. That’s happening now. (What’s Happening/Social, 2009)

Boredom and Addiction

Throughout our research, I noticed that I was becoming inquisitive of what seemed to be an underlying veiled use of these technologies in uncontrolled situations.

People were using these technologies not just to communicate ideas and information, but to counteract overpowering feelings like boredom and loneliness. And furthermore, the desire to use these technologies in some cases became so overwhelming that users were thought of as being addicted to them. Though this was not present in the majority of technological communication models, multiple concerns and cases of these deviations were noted, begging the underlying question of at what point do they become normative?

Our research revealed that many respondents stated that they did indeed use these technologies when they felt bored. Boredom can occur at various times throughout a college student's day: during class, during work, while at home, and even while participating in a social activity. Generally, a student's day is very busy as many choose to load up their schedules to include a plethora of obligations. Because of this, there is a shared sentiment throughout the college community that one should always be doing something. Whether this something is a productive task or a random activity, the desire to be constantly occupied, seems to separate college students from other social communities. Students feel compelled to avoid feelings of emptiness, mostly with regard to time, and students are much more inclined to overbook themselves than to have nothing to do. We found that many respondents stated that they often choose to log onto Facebook when they were bored. The application is used as a time-filler when they cannot quickly think of anything else to do. Our respondents did, however, note a distinct difference between using Facebook for directed purposes and using it for an uncontrolled reason. Though they noted that Facebook was, in general, not the most effective or admired way of communicating, they still felt comfortable using it to present or gather information when appropriate. However, when they used Facebook as a

method of coping with feelings like boredom and loneliness, even though they were indeed temporarily entertained, they were afterwards left with the feeling that they just wasted their time. Texting was also used as a way to deal with uncontrolled desires. A professor at Kansas State University noted that his students were often very engaged during his class, but that they just happened to be engaged with something other than him. After realizing his students' attention was elsewhere, he elicited the help of his teaching assistants, who observed his students during class time and informed him that many of them were in fact texting and perusing Facebook (Wesch, 2008). Though these instances may indicate that boredom during a class can make these students inattentive to its lessons, we noted through observations of our own classes that students are still somehow able to discern important information from lectures, and would cease their texting or Facebooking long enough to take notes of important information, before resuming their established communications. We also observed other instances in which text messaging was utilized in situations when the user seemed to be uninterested. These situations ranged from periods of waiting (such as in a line or office), while walking or driving, and even during time spent in the company of others. Though texting itself seems to be a very short fix to a condition of dissatisfaction, students can and do become engaged in the very process of texting, to the point where they become physiologically excited at the knowledge that they have received even an expected text (Lin & Peper, 2009). Because of this, we also began to wonder if Facebook and text messaging were also used to cope with feelings of loneliness, showing that individuals can become so absorbed in the communication process that they begin to care less about the message and

more about the actual contact made. That topic, however, would require further research to answer.

Additionally, there also seems to be a hidden worry about the addictive properties of these methods of communication. These characteristics of both Facebook and texting are not all together apparent, yet our respondents made numerous comments about their concern for this occurrence. In 2000, at Bryant College, a study was conducted on college students and pathological internet use, or PIU, denoted as internet use that causes academic, work, or interpersonal problems, distress, tolerance symptoms, and mood-alterations. The study revealed that 64.7% of students reported 1 to 3 of these symptoms, while 8.1% reported having all 4 indicators. The study also asserted that the more comfortable with technology a student was, the more likely they were to display symptoms of PIU (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). I found numerous other studies that have, since then, been conducted to determine, not so much if, but to what extent college students have become addicted to technological tools, indicating that this topic is of great concern to the general public. During our female focus group, one of the respondents shared a story about the concern she had for her sister, another young adult, who she believed was extremely addicted to technological communications, especially texting. She told us how her sister's mood would change for the worse if she was separated from the possibility of texting and that she used more text messages than her family (and consequently her family's phone plan) could tolerate. The other participants of the focus group, showed great concern, but did not seem all too surprised at the story. This indicates that addiction is also very concerning to members of the college community, but that its realization is not a far-fetched or unbelievable circumstance. The

Bryant College study revealed a correlation between comfort with technology and tendency towards problems like PIU, which means that college students in general, who as we mentioned before are early and quick adopters, are then predisposed to these types of problems.

At a Japanese University, a study was conducted to determine the correlation between mobile phone dependence and what was determined to be a healthy lifestyle. The study found that around 20% of students were highly dependent upon mobile phones and that those individuals scored poorly on a test of healthy lifestyle attributes (Toda, Monden, Kubo, & Morimoto, 2006). This research, conducted prior to the texting boom in the United States, but after the boom occurred in Japan may serve as a model to indicate how cell phone use among American college students will affect the health of their lifestyles as well. And as the trend of college student use in the United States seems to be following the influx of use previously seen in Japan, there could be a definite cause for alarm.

Though both Facebook and text messaging can be used when bored or as a result of addiction, these concerning deviations from acceptable use seem to pinpoint society's idea of acceptable use: controlled use. My research, as well as common understanding, indicates that college students are very likely to rely on technology for an entertaining fix to monotonous situations where they otherwise feel unengaged. Because of the wide availability of these popular communication technologies, they are very easily accessed in times of boredom, loneliness, low energy, etc. However, at the same time, it is considered a social taboo to allocate too much time to these technologies as it may lead to a divergence from acceptable social protocol, most notably, dependence. A study

conducted on Facebook use even stated that users who were highly active on Facebook, as noted by a superfluous number of friends, were looked down upon as trying to overcompensate for actual social desirability (Tong, Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). During our focus groups, the same sentiment was expressed regarding both Facebook and texting. Respondents were very turned off by users who spent an excessive amount of time texting, especially in the presence of others, even going so far as to say that if an individual is so engaged with the person they are texting, then they should leave and go hang out with them. Because college students are the first mature demographic to immerse themselves in the new technological culture, there is still a constant battle of reconciliation between what was socially acceptable prior to the implementation of these technologies versus what is now socially acceptable due to the widespread use of these methods of communication. We may learn that the next generation of college students which was raised in this technological culture may not carry the same moral qualms about technology use as the current. Therefore, what is at present considered deviant could in fact become normal. But what is most intriguing is that even though students wrestle with how socially deviant these actions are, some still engage in these practices. This indicates that there is indeed a loss of control that occurs, which is potentially a step towards addiction. A notable psychologist in London asserted that such a thing exists as a “friending addiction” and that Facebook, and I would argue texting as well, is unsuitable to for people who are predisposed to addiction due to [their] addictive properties (Goodchild, 2008). Since instances in which the control over these communication methods is compromised are considered unacceptable (for now) this

reveals that the ultimate goal of college students is to use these methods then to control their social interactions.

Taking Control of Interactions

All of the communication technologies that college students utilize in order to transmit messages and uphold correspondence with individuals, are intentionally both managed and maintained. Throughout the course of this research, it became apparent that there was more to the employment of communication technologies than just the transfer of messages. These methods are in fact used to control social interactions entirely.

The idea of creating a profile on Facebook or sending out a text message accomplishes much more than the obvious relay of information. Technological communication methods and the information they provide, are very effective in accomplishing the intended social objectives. Additionally the use of social networks and cellular phones can also act as an effective message.

The obvious form of communication manipulation is within the message itself. The various forms of technologies used by college students are very useful in manipulating these messages because so much of them are subject to influence. These communiqués are entirely static. They do not incorporate facial expression or body language, and they are devoid of inflections and intonations of speech. It is not always evident the context in which statements, pictures, or “jokes” are in, and therefore there are multiple ways in which the author may have intended them to be interpreted and likewise multiple ways the audience can, in response, interpret them. Because of this, these messages are highly regulated on both ends of the transmission. The author has the

freedom and time to think, re-think, and apply edits to these messages giving them a heightened degree of control before the composition even becomes an actual message. The recipient is rarely presented with a context through which they should interpret the message, thus giving them the freedom to interpret the message in whatever context they choose. In many cases the author will have edited the message so that the intended context is apparent, but sometimes it will remain ambiguous. Though this characteristic can present a problem when trying to accomplish things using these technologies, it nonetheless provides individuals at all ends of the message some degree of control.

Facebook is used as much more than a medium by which students post information about themselves. It is actually manipulated as a means of constructing and negotiating identities and subsequent relations with correspondents. A study conducted at UCLA by Stuart Wolpert revealed that Facebook allowed students to create an idealized version of themselves with their profile, which they are then later able to strive to become (Wolpert, 2008). Many of our respondents noted that they did indeed present a myriad of information on their profiles. However, they later revealed that they only skim through the same information displayed on other's profiles and furthermore, don't expect their associates to take much more notice in theirs. This then leads to the question, who is the profile made for? Users can post whatever they want to be associated with, whether it is a comment they wish to appear connected to, a job title they may or may not actually hold, or a picture that could have potentially been edited by a photo manipulation program. However, any "false information" that can occur on an individual's profile is in fact not false at all, but rather an unrealized image that the author will post until good or bad feedback allow them to move on with their self identity

project. This idea of controlling your online interactions in order to create a profile for yourself rather than for others, seems to be a very prominent situation among college students.

Additionally, Facebook has the capability of alerting people to what others are doing. However, it seems that it is actually not Facebook, but the individuals who “edit themselves” that are controlling the alerts. Since individuals compose their profile and await feedback as to whether that information is pleasing or not, essentially the author has full authority to take into account or completely dismiss others’ communicated opinions. Facebook, as a program, allows for respondents to acknowledge edits and put in their two cents regarding their pros and cons. It is much less scary for both sides of the communiqué to confront each other in this way since any agreement will be broadcasted to other viewers in a sentiment of approval of the profile. On the other hand, a disagreement does not entail a face to face confrontation, and if the owner of the profile does not like the response(s) they get, they can always just delete the message(s). It is also interesting to note that the news feed which many people called annoying, in its revealing of unsolicited information about the happenings of individuals, was still utilized as a tool for checking profiles. This annoyance may stem from the fact that being presented with this information gives you less control on your own interactions. A person is no longer free to pick and choose the profiles they wish to view, but are instead compelled to visit the ones that Facebook has tagged as recently updated. Alternately, this display of updates makes it much easier for the posted information to elicit the necessary feedback to their profiles that individuals require, and therefore, seems to illustrate why so many people still utilize the feature.

Texting also plays a large role in controlling social interactions. During multiple observations and even in a couple of the interviews it was deduced that students sometimes use a texting device, mainly cell phones, in order to “appear” to be texting, regardless of whether they were or not. In our contextual observations it was noted that people who were alone often times found themselves using a phone to text or check Facebook. This practice could be the direct result of wanting to appear as if they are consumed by communicating and are relaying some type commentary about the type of person they are. On another note, texting can be used at a way in which communication can actually be avoided. Pruthikrai Mahatanankoon and Patrick O’Sullivan discussed how text messaging, in addition to creating communication possibilities with people that are not around, is also used as a method for avoiding communication with people as well (Mahatanankoon and O’Sullivan, 2008). The process of texting allows individuals to exert control over when and how they relay a bit of information. The time that elapses between when a text is sent and received, could very well manipulate the intended message. If a text is sent from someone wanting to do an activity that you don’t want to engage in, the message can be ignored. Or an even more elaborate tactic would be to ignore the message until it is too late to join the activity, and then text the initiator that you were away from your phone and would like to do something else to make up for it. In this scenario, the individual has successfully said “no” to a request, but yet has maintained a positive relationship with the correspondent. To take it a step further, texts can also be used to avoid interactions with individuals who are not part of your mobile network at all. Respondents, though somewhat hesitant to agree, did finally admit that “texting” is sometimes used as a deterrent for people in your immediate vicinity to

initiate communications with you. When people appear to be texting, others tend to leave them to that activity, a practice noted as a form of texting etiquette. However, this situation can be manipulated so that users who do not wish to encounter an individual in their environment can appear “busy” with texting in order to isolate themselves and further avoid communication.

One of the more intriguing means of control is with regards to relationships. Relationships can be broadcasted to whatever degree those involved in the association feel comfortable with, by making certain settings or communications private or public. To a more extreme degree, individuals can even access their partner’s communication devices to examine their digital footprint, gaining control of information they might otherwise not be privy to. Through the manipulation of communication technologies, especially Facebook, you can even continue to monitor individuals whom you do not wish to continue having a relationship with. In this sense, some respondents told stories of how a person would control their profile appearance to reflect how happy or busy they had become after ending a relationship with someone. This was noted to be used to show that they would be seen as doing fine without the former acquaintance’s presence. On the opposite side of the spectrum, social impediments like shyness can be helped through the informal and non-confrontational characteristics of Facebook, thus allowing individuals who wish to create relationships to do so with less effort.

The fluidity of a community is a key aspect of anthropology and the way in which college students use technological communications to control their social interactions is a perfect example of this quality. There is a definite rise to prominence in the college community regarding these technologies and further exploration will need to be

conducted as changes in use occur. The various evolution in products should be studied, noting how college students respond to these developments. Once shifts occur, it should also be examined which current forms are retained and to what degree. Also, with regards to using communication technologies to “appear” busy, it would be beneficial to understand why that is a desired characteristic to be associated with. Lastly, what I believe will be the most interesting topic to track is how college students will use these methods of communication in the future. In an age where even priorities have to wait their turn in line, communication methods are the natural progression of how society handles a more demanding time schedule and controls their social interactions. While these technologies are currently used to negotiate individual identities and issues, will this trend continue? Though this research project ended up creating many more questions than the answers it provided, what was revealed is that presently, college students are well adept at organizing their personal communications and that these interactions are both deliberately and effectively controlled by these students.

Bibliography

- Ahonen, T., & Moore, A. (2009). *Communities Dominate Brands: 3 billion use SMS, what does that mean?*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://communities-dominate.blogs.com/brands/2009/03/3-billion-use-sms-what-does-that-mean.html>
- Burkhardt, M., & Brass, D. (1990). Changing Patterns or Patterns of Change: The Effects of a Change in Technology on Social Network Structure and Power . *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35(1), 104-127.
- Edler, M. (2008). *Instant messaging -- a new language?*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2008-05/ksu-ima050108.php
- Ellison, N., Lampe, C., & Steinfield, C. (2007). The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students Use of Online Social Network Sites. *Journal*

of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(4), 1143-1168.

- Facebook / Press Room. (2009). Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
- Goodchild, S. (2008). *The women addicted to Facebook friendships / News*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23576325-details/The+women+addicted+to+Facebook+friendships/article.do>
- Hallett, C., & Lambert, A. (2008). Hand preference for sending mobile-phone text messages: Associations with sex, writing hand, and throwing hand. *Laterality*, 14, 1-16.
- Hass, N. (2006, January 8). *In Your Facebook.com - New York Times*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/08/education/edlife/facebooks.html>
- Lin, I., & Peper, E. (2009). Psychophysiological Patterns During Cell Phone Text Messaging: A Preliminary Study. *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback*, 34, 53-57.
- Mahatanankoon, P., & O'Sullivan, P. (2008). Attitude Toward Mobile Text Messaging: An Expectancy-Based Perspective. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(4), 973-992.
- Morahan-Martin, J., & Schumacher, P. (2000). Incidence and correlates of pathological Internet use among college students. *Computer in Human Behavior*, 16(1), 13-29.
- Quan-Haase, A. (2007). University Students' Local And Distant Social Ties: Using and integrating modes of communication on campus. *Information, Communication & Society*, 10(5), 671-693.
- Rogers, E. M. (1986). *Communication Technology: The New Media in Society (Series in Communication Technology and Society)*. New York City: Free Pr.
- Rosenfeld, B., & Novemsky, L. (2008). *E-Mail is Not Just for Old Fogey's: A*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from digitalcommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=nera_2008
- Toda, M., Monden, K., Kubo, K., & Morimoto, K. (2006). *MOBILE PHONE DEPENDENCE AND HEALTH-RELATED LIFESTYLE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3852/is_200601/ai_n17183985/
- Tong, S. T., Der Heide, B. V., Langwell, L., & Walther, J. (2008). Too Much of a Good

Thing? The Relationship Between Number of Friends and Interpersonal Impressions on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(3), 531-549.

Wesch, M. (2008). *A Vision of Students Today (& What Teachers Must Do)* / *Britannica Blog*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/10/a-vision-of-students-today-what-teachers-must-do/>

Whats Happening - Social. (2009, April 13). Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M68U5U3WrpM>

Wolpert, S. (2008). *Crafting your image for your 1,000 friends on Facebook or MySpace* / *UCLA Newsroom*. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/PRN-crafting-your-image-for-your-1-71910.aspx>