Social Media: Current Trends Among Children and Their Parents and Implications Regarding Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

Social media is an ever-evolving form of technological communication that affects different generations in different ways. As modern children have grown up with social technologies integrated into their daily lives, parents have been left in the midst of a generational gap. Recent studies have shown that older generations are now greatly increasing their social media use, in an effort to, among other reasons, connect with their “digitized” children. Children’s current social media trends indicate slightly slowing growth of new social media users among youth. Both parents and children view modern social media as having both positive and negative consequences, and largely maintain that face-to-face communication is more desirable than communicating through social media. This study examines social media and parent-child communication in the context of Instructional-Affective Communication Theory and Media Richness theory, and presents findings of an originally conducted survey to examine the trends in social media use among children and their parents and what these trends imply regarding interpersonal communication.
Introduction

“We lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now we're going to live on the internet!”

This quote, taken from the Academy Award-winning film The Social Network (Imbd.com, 2010), could not be more representative of modern society. Not only does the film offer an entertaining account of the birth of Facebook, the most popular social media website in the world, its spot-on relevance to today’s technological lifestyle renders it a cultural artifact. The film’s chronicling of the developmental journey of Facebook exactly mirrors the rise of social media technologies to acceptance as legitimate forms of communication by people of all ages. While all forms of social media have been both praised and criticized for their impact on society, youth in particular, interesting trends have emerged as social media have become increasingly used in modern society. As social technologies become ever-more complex, it is inevitable that a generational divide will develop, leaving “parent” generations behind as the “child” generations immerse themselves in the digital culture of the “information age.”

Christian Taske, in his article Experiencing social media across generations, calls individuals growing up in the information age, “Net Geners, those under the age of 35” (Taske & Plude, 2011). “Our generation is the first to be surrounded by digital media. We write blogs, upload videos, create profiles and, in the meantime, sacrifice privacy. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are just as much part of our lives as the phone, radio and television are for Baby Boomers. The older generation of e-mailers needs to adapt to this new trend if it hopes to reach younger audiences in the future” (Taske & Plude, 2011). In light of the continuing discourse surrounding social media as cross-generational forms of communication, my question is: what do the current trends in social media use, particularly Facebook and text messaging, among children and their parents imply regarding interpersonal communication?
SECTION I: BACKGROUND

Before delving into the discussion head-on, it is imperative to first provide some background for the concepts with which we will be dealing, by defining the main terms and theories employed, and presenting a brief history of the technologies in question.

Defining Main Terms

In order to adequately examine the implications of social media on the family, we must first clarify the definitions of each significant term. Though the majority of these terms vary in explicit definition, I will employ the definitions of the widely-referenced Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. (This dictionary is most suitable for my purpose because I will be focusing on the “average” American family who regularly uses online technology. As Merriam-Webster is comprehensive, easy to understand and, most importantly, accessed through the internet, I will assume that many Americans use this dictionary and agree with its definitions.)

Technology is defined as “a capability given by the practical application of knowledge” (“Technology,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). The internet, which was born of modern technology, is defined as “an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world” (“Internet,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). My focus, social media, which are most often accessed through the Internet, are defined as, “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)” (“Social media,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). Facebook, widely regarded as the most popular social media website in the world, defines itself as “a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, families, and coworkers” (Facebook). Text
messaging, another popular form of social media, is “the sending of short text messages electronically especially from one cell phone to another” (“Text messaging,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

*Family*, a concept which many individuals define for themselves, is also defined many ways by Merriam-Webster. For my purposes I will use the particular description of a family as “the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of parent(s) rearing their children” (“Family,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). In the context of this study “child” will refer to an individual in relation to their parent(s), counting adolescents, teens, and even young adults as “children.” The purpose of this is to address the generational division between the “parent” generation and “child” generation, as opposed to whether or not the ages of the offspring individuals categorize them as “children.”

As interpersonal communication between these two generations is an essential component of my research, it is necessary to also define *communication*, “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior” (“Communication,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). “Over the years the definition of interpersonal communication has shifted and changed, but the basic concept that communication is a fundamental aspect of our lives and an integral part of our needs as human beings, has held consistent” (Turnbull, 2010).

**Communication Theories**

Rick Peterson and Stephen Green of Virginia Tech describe the Instrumental-Affective communication theory as a categorization of two types of family communication. Instrumental communication is “the exchange of factual information that enables individuals to fulfill
common family functions” such as arranging schedules (Peterson & Green, 2009). Affective communication, in contrast, is “the way individual family members share their emotions with one another” such as communicating feelings of gratitude (Peterson & Green, 2009).

Media Richness Theory was developed by Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel in 1986. Alan R. Dennis and Susan T. Kinney of the University of Georgia, Athens, describes Daft and Lengel’s theory as a communication theory that “argues that performance improves when team members use ‘richer’ media for equivocal tasks” (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). The main premise of Media Richness Theory is that “media differ in ‘richness’ (‘the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval’ Daft and Lengel 1986, p. 560), with face-to-face communication being the richest, while other media capable of sending fewer cues (e.g., vocal inflection, gestures) or providing slower feedback (e.g., memos, voice-mail, or e-mail) are ‘leaner’” (Dennis & Kinney, 1998).

Both Instrumental-Affective Theory and Media Richness Theory are significant aspects of my study and will be discussed in the succession of the essay.

Social Media: A History

As social media are primarily internet-based, a brief history of the internet would be helpful to laying the groundwork for the larger focus of the study. On January 1, 1983, the official “birthday” of the internet, new communications protocol were developed to allow varying types of computers on diverse networks to communicate with each other. This linked international networks together with one “universal language” (Board of Regents, “A Brief History of the Internet”). By the mid-1990’s, “private internet service providers (ISPs) began to pop up in most major metro areas in the United States. This gave millions of home users the
chance to enjoy unfiltered, unlimited online experiences,” writes Brett Borders of SocialMediaRockstar.com (Borders, 2009). The second generation of the universal network, the modern version, is referred to in Aliza Sherman’s The Problem With Social Media as “Web 2.0”, which is defined as “interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web” (Sherman, 2010). “Commentators have suggested that social media networks lend themselves to more diverse and eclectic tastes, organized around generational and/or local populations and shaped by norms of sociability. Such a premise, followed to its logical conclusion, suggests that Web 2.0 connections, mediating the distinctive tastes of users, should facilitate peer sharing of favourite texts” (Rutherford, 2009).

Social media are said to be tools generated from Web 2.0, as they facilitate the large-scale “peer sharing” that defines this second generation of internet (Sherman, 2010). While various social media websites have dominated the World Wide Web in the past, Facebook is currently the most popular social media website by almost any standards. Facebook’s basic functions include a user’s Home page and Profile with which the user can send, receive, display and view his/her own and/or others’ information. The website was founded in February 2004 by then-Harvard Law student Mark Zuckerberg and has grown to over 500 million users. 70% of those users are outside the U.S. as Facebook has been translated into over 70 foreign languages. Facebook’s user-base continues to grow as “an average of 10,000 new websites integrate with Facebook every day” and ever-increasing numbers of users log in to their Facebook accounts using Facebook Mobile (Facebook).

Text messaging, the other form of social media on which I will be focusing, is a more direct form of communication, in most ways, than Facebook. While the latter incorporates a digital display of one’s personal identity (to a certain extent) that the user’s Facebook friends can
constantly view, text messaging consists of instantaneous textual conversations sent from one cell phone to (usually) one other cell phone. This technology does not require the internet as Facebook does, and its development began in the 1980’s with Motorola creating alphanumeric text messaging for its paging networks (Grey, 2008). Since the transmission of the first consumer text message in 1992, text message use has grown steadily, as has cell phone ownership and usage in general. From 2009 to 2010 alone, the percentage of “cell phone users that send and receive text messages” rose from 65% of cell phone users to 72% of cell phone users (Text Message Marketing Service for Business, 2010). An astonishing 95% of 18-29 year olds text message and the average teen sends about 10 texts per hour during the day (Text Message Marketing Service for Business, 2010).

Relevance to My Discussion

To some, these definitions and histories may seem a bit obvious or even unnecessary. However, my aim in explaining these technicalities is not only to provide information for those who may be behind the modern technology learning curve, but to point out the fact that there is a learning curve. While the majority of today’s youth sees social media as completely ordinary parts of everyday life and their constant use as second nature, just one generation senior may be relatively unfamiliar with today’s ever-evolving digital world. Hamline University Law Professor David Allen Larson writes in his article Technology Mediated Dispute Resolution (TMDR): A New Paradigm for ADR, “there is a distinction between those of us who have learned to use new technologies as adults and our children. Our children are learning to communicate with technology at the same time they are learning their most basic communication skills, and that makes their ability to use technology more intuitive” (Larson, 2006). Though many adults
actively communicate using social media, it seems less intuitive to grasp each emerging technology as quickly as those who grew up immersed within it. The use of personal computers was not widespread until after much of the older generation was out of college; even then, the computers were used for academic purposes, not social communication. Technology is evolving as we speak, becoming ever-more complex and advanced. Theodore Modis, founder of Growth Dynamics business forecasting agency and former Columbia University instructor, writes in his article *Forecasting the Growth of Complexity and Change*,

“The marvels we witnessed during the 20th century surpass what happened during the previous one thousand years, which in turn is more significant than what took place during the many thousands of years that humans lived in hunting-gathering societies. What is new is that we are now reaching a point of impasse, where change is becoming too rapid for us to follow. The amount of change we are presently confronted with is approaching the limit of the untenable. Many of us find it increasingly difficult to cope effectively with an environment that changes too rapidly” (Modis, 2002).

Later in the article, Modis presents a chart illustrating the rate of complexity change throughout technological history. He measures “milestones,” or “major turning points in the history of evolution,” against “complexity,” which “increases both when the rate of change increases and when the amount of things that are changing around us increase” (Modis, 2002). The projections of this chart, entitled *Complexity per Milestone* (Modis, 2002).
(right), show, not surprisingly, that with increased milestone frequency (time) there is a direct positive correlation with respective complexity increases. Modis’s forecasting acts as scientific support of the notion, as stated above, “Many of us find it increasingly difficult to cope effectively with an environment that changes too rapidly” (Modis, 2002). “Us” in the context of this discussion means, most often, older generations who grew up using, for instance, Walkman headsets instead of iPods, and typewriters instead of laptops.

But hasn’t technology been evolving since the beginning of time? Haven’t older generations always felt left behind as change persists without cease? In most cases—yes. Of course. The focus of this discussion, however, is not whether or not this generational gap in technological knowledge occurs, but the implications it has when it does occur. Specifically, the implications it has on the interactions between a “parent” generation and a “child” generation. As social media is one of these ever-changing, “all-the-rage” modern technologies, it is nearly impossible for it not to have some effect on parent-child interaction and communication.

Method

In an effort to identify the effects of social media on parent-child relations, I conducted a survey. I administered the survey to a group of high-school and college students regarding their views on communicating with their parents using Facebook and text messaging. The sample size of my survey was 61 students, consisting of 27 high school sophomores, and 34 college undergraduates. 64% of the students were female, while 36% were male. The results of the study will be explained in greater detail in the progression of my discussion.

Like most survey research, however, my study was not without limitations. The sample size was smaller than originally desired, and the gender proportion is obviously imbalanced. It is
also a self-report survey, so therefore vulnerable to the possibility that the students may have misreported their personal information, social media habits, and opinions. While the college student demographic appeared to consist of a socially and racially diverse group of individuals (94% of which ranged between the ages 18 and 24), the high school student group appeared to be made up of students from similar social, racial, and economic backgrounds. As the high school sample was taken from a privileged, upper-middle class Minneapolis suburb (in which I grew up), the surveyed students tended to be relatively sheltered, white 16-year-olds with “young, hip” parents. (In the context of my research this could mean that this particular group of high school students has more access to technology and social media, as do their parents, than the average American high school student.) Obviously university campuses have a propensity to be more diverse than suburban high schools, so even though this variable was somewhat out of my control, it should still be recognized. As an academic, I am compelled to acknowledge there are inevitable limitations on what I am able to do with the limited amount of resources at my disposal. That being said, I believe the demographic inconsistency has worked to my advantage, providing me with a well-rounded student base that accurately represents modern youth and certain social situations in which they are raised. Overall, my results closely reflect statistics of similar research conducted by more experienced scholars and statisticians.

SECTION II: THE INFORMATION AGE

Digital Generation

It is inherent in human nature to crave a connection with another person and, most often, to establish this connection through communication. Today’s youth demonstrates a strong
preference towards the use of electronic technology to communicate and socialize. Yet electronic communication, one of today’s most popular forms of communication, seems to invoke a sense of chaotic addiction in its users, something atypical of past methods of communication. Dr. J. Gerry Purdy, Ph.D., a Principal Mobile & Wireless Analyst for MobileTrax LLC, examines this phenomenon in his newsletter entry Why Kids Text So Much, writing, “Most adults over 30 never did any text messaging when they grew up. They talked on the phone or met in person. Now, talking a lot has been replaced by texting a lot. Why?” (Purdy, 2010). Why indeed. Just what makes modern technological communication so much more all-consuming than past forms of technology-based communication?

Purdy goes on to list the main reasons he believes youth is so drawn to texting as a form of social communication, beginning with the unique sense of emergency a text message brings to the element of conversation. The compulsion to reply immediately is reinforced not only by the actual alert that indicates a text message is waiting to be read, but by the notion that the people involved in the textual conversation are, in Purdy’s view, “connected in real time” (Purdy, 2010). To speed up the process even more, Purdy writes that the 160-character limit simplifies messages, causing textual exchange to happen very quickly. Then, “there’s the cultural factor that plays into the process. Young kids tell other kids how many text messages they are sending. There’s a cultural norm that’s created where texting is what you’re supposed to do,” Purdy notes (Purdy, 2010). This sense of immediacy, swift message exchange rate and cultural pressure often carry over to other forms of modern technology, and can be generalized as common motivations behind youth’s use of social media.

While Purdy’s article provides possible explanations of youth’s aforementioned chaotic addiction to social technology, it does not address youth’s views on the actual functions for
which they use text messaging. In the context of communicating with their parents, my survey results revealed several reasons high school and college students may employ text messaging as a significant form of communication. 41% of college students surveyed reported that the most common reason they text message their parents is to share news or quick notes, and 22% of college students like text messaging their parents because it is quick when a call is unnecessary. 48% of high school students text message their parents primarily to update their location, and 28% use texting to organize rides (to and from school-related functions) with their parents. The differences in reasons for use of texting between high school and college students are undoubtedly related to their respective dependence upon their parents (i.e. whether they have their driver’s licenses, live with their parents, etc.). The most interesting differentiation, however, is that as children grow up and, presumably, leave home for college, the reasons they text message their parents appear to become more personal, or emotional, as opposed to functional or practical reasons. In the context of family communication theory, these communicative exchanges shift from instrumental motivations of high school students to affective motivations of college students. Whereas high school teens would text a parent to request a ride home from a sporting event, college students may text a parent to inquire about the parent’s reaction to the event.

For example, in my survey when high school students were asked, “What is the main reason you and your parent(s) text message?”, “to pick me up from school” and “update my location” were common (instrumental) responses. College students, conversely, answered most commonly with affective responses such as, “random I love yous,” “family, money, or job issues,” and “just to say hi!”

Facebook users, on the other hand, appear to use Facebook as more of a long-term
relationship preservation tool as opposed to a means of exchanging instantaneous messages and
information. Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe of the Michigan State
University Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media, conducted a
study in 2007 on college students’ use of Facebook. In their article, entitled The Benefits of
Facebook “Friends:” Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites,
Ellison et al. state that social media users use sites such as Facebook to “present themselves,
articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others” (Ellison,
Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Both the high school and college students I surveyed reported a main reason they use
Facebook as a form of communication with their parents is that it is a positive, efficient way that
the students and their parents get to know each other. 26% of high school students stated this as
the main reason they communicate with their parents as opposed to only 12% of college students.
The main reason college students reported using Facebook to communicate with their parents is
because it is easy when they are busy and not living at home. 22% of college students named this
reason as their primary reason for communicating with their parents via Facebook, which seems
to signify that college students view Facebook as a more impersonal form of communication
when their parents are concerned.

Parents’ Views

As the youth demographic is my focus, my survey research only addressed high school
and college students’ views about communicating with their parents using social media, yet it is
important to include parents’ views on the subject as well. In her report entitled Older Adults and
Social Media, Mary Madden, a Senior Research Specialist for Pew Internet & American Life
Project, found that “47% of internet users ages 50-64 and 26% of users age 65 and older now use social networking sites” (Madden, 2010). My survey results provide further evidence of the “parent” generation’s increasing use of social media as a viable communication tool, revealing that 64% of all high school and college students’ parents have Facebook profiles. Of these parents with Facebook profiles, 97% of them also use text messaging. Only 3 students of the 61 surveyed reported their parents not using either Facebook or text messaging.

Parents are more inclined to use text messaging as opposed to Facebook as a form of communication: only 2% of parents use only Facebook and not texting, while 31% of parents will text without having a Facebook profile. This may imply that older generations view certain types of social media as being more advanced, thus possibly more difficult to use, than other types of social media; 53.5% of parents do not use Facebook because they, in their children’s words, “do not understand how to use it”. Yet recent trends show the “parent” generations are willing to overcome this unease regarding social media use as they see personal benefits in using modern social technology.

Madden describes three main reasons the “parent” generation may be increasingly attracted to using social media as a form of communication; the first two being the desire to connect with people from their past, and that older adults, who “are more likely to be living with a chronic disease,” are “more likely to reach out for support online” (Madden, 2010). The third reason, and perhaps most valuable reason in regard to the discussion at hand, is “social media bridges generational gaps:”

“There are few other spaces—online or offline—where tweens, teens, sandwich generation members, grandparents, friends and neighbors regularly intersect and communicate across the same network. Photos, videos and updates shared on a daily basis can provide a valuable connection to faraway family and friends who are tied together in a variety of ways. The children and grandchildren of older adults are documenting many aspects of their lives through social media, and these are also becoming popular spaces for professional networking, continuing education, and political participation… With 86% of internet users ages 18-29 using social networking sites and 60% doing so on a typical day, it is not hard to imagine that some of these young mentors would be eager to share their skills in profile management with older users” (Madden, 2010).
Madden’s study also reveals that though older adults may be behind the social technology curve that does not mean they will never jump on the social media bandwagon. “Social networking use among internet users ages 50 and older has nearly doubled [meaning the number of people using social network has doubled, not the amount of time spent using social media]—from 22% to 42% over the past year,” the report states (Madden, 2010). Social networking use among internet users ages 18-29, however (the “child” generation), has increased only in the slightest. Though youth’s use of social media has skyrocketed over the past decade as social media has become increasingly integrated into everyday life, Madden’s graph Social networking continues to grow among users (below) illustrates a changing growth pattern of recent.

“Between April 2009 and May 2010, internet users ages 50-64 who said they use a social networking site like MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn grew 88% and those ages 65 and older grew 100% in their adoption of the sites, compared with a growth rate of 13% for those ages 18-29,” Madden noted (Madden, 2010). Madden’s research suggests that the older generation is quickly trying to grasp onto new social media technologies to, often times, close the generational
gap with their children’s generation, yet it looks as though the growth rate of the younger generation has begun to slow somewhat. The older age groups’ social media use has grown exponentially in the past few years, yet they appear to be a few years behind as the younger generations made this exponential growth jump years ago. If older generations are beginning to use social media outlets to reach out to and communicate with their children, since it is obvious that is youth’s preferred method of communication, yet the number of new users among youth is slowing, how effective are social media as communication tools between generations?

Results

Of the students I surveyed, 85% were Facebook friends with their parents if both the parent and child had Facebook profiles (75% of high school students and 95% of college students). 75% of high school students surveyed reported receiving Facebook friend requests from their parents instead of choosing to “friend” their parent, as opposed to 81% of college students being “friended.” These statistics, in conjunction with only 17% of high school students and 20% of college students reporting they would create a Facebook page for a parent if the parent asked, suggest that younger generations are not as willing to interact with their parents via Facebook as their parents are to interact with them. In fact, of the students whose parents do not have Facebook profiles, 58% of college students would only be Facebook friends with their parents if they assigned their parent to a “limited profile list” (restricting the parent from seeing certain areas of the child’s profile), and 40% of high school students would not be Facebook friends with their parent at all. The main reasons students would not be Facebook friends with their parents are: they do not want their parents to see what they do on Facebook (55.5% of all students) and that their parents would annoy or embarrass them (27% of all students).
Texting, on the other hand, seems a more favorable form of social media for texting one’s parents. An average of 16.5% of students that text message their parents report text messaging with their parents for 50-100% of the total time they spend text messaging. Only an average of 5.75% of students that use Facebook with their parents report using Facebook (view each other’s profiles, pictures, or status updates, message/write on walls) with their parents 50-100% of the total time they spend on Facebook.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you interact with your parent(s) via text messaging?</th>
<th>High School Students</th>
<th>College Students</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-25% of the time I text message</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-50% of the time I text message</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>32.50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-75% of the time I text message</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-100% of the time I text message</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13.00%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you interact with your parent(s) via Facebook?</th>
<th>High School Students</th>
<th>College Students</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-25% of the time I am on Facebook</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>53.50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>25-50% of the time I am on Facebook</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35.50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-75% of the time I am on Facebook</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-100% of the time I am on Facebook</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
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The above breakdown shows that college students text message their parents a higher percentage of the time than high school students do, as more high school students use smaller proportions of their text messaging to text their parents. The frequency college students spend text messaging their parents is distributed more evenly than the frequency of high school
students. College students also appear to use Facebook with their parents more frequently than high school students use Facebook with their parents. Of students that are friends with their parents on Facebook, I measured the proportion of the total time they spend on Facebook communicating specifically with their parents as opposed to any other Facebook friends. 92% of high school students use Facebook to communicate specifically with their parents 0-50% of the total time they use Facebook; 8% of high school students communicate specifically with their parents 50-100% of the total time they use Facebook. 86% of college students communicate specifically with their parents 0-50% of the total time they use Facebook; 14% of college students communicate specifically with their parents 50-100% of the total time they use Facebook. This data shows that higher percentages of college students spend more of their total Facebook usage time communicating with their parents than high school students spend using Facebook to communicate with their parents. Essentially, college students use Facebook to communicate with their parents more frequently than high school students do.

The quantitative data acquired in my survey points to certain social media use trends present in the “child” generation, yet cannot explain this generation’s actual views on how Facebook and text messaging affect parent-child communication in general. The following graphs (below) depict students’ qualitative responses to questions concerning the direct relationship between social media and parent-child communication.
SECTION III: SOCIAL MEDIA AS AIDS OR HINDRANCES TO COMMUNICATION

“Child” Generation

As the graphs show, more students feel Facebook may slightly hinder parent-child communication than improve it, if Facebook affects parent-child communication at all. Of the few students who felt Facebook positively improved communication, their reasons were, “I don’t have to spend hours on the phone with my mom and can pick and choose when to talk to her,”
“more involvement with everyday life,” and “when kids are no longer at home it helps to stay updated on each other’s lives.” Most students that rated Facebook as having no effect on parent-child communication did not bother to write in a reason for this view, but the students that did give reasons wrote, “my mom is never online/isn’t very good at using Facebook,” “I interact and communicate with my mom all time so we don’t use Facebook that much,” and “doesn’t change relationship.” The reasons students viewed Facebook as hindering communication were, “Facebook isn’t reality, it’s junk, better to talk and not get exaggerated story,” “disrupts elements of privacy,” and “it’s all via computer and technology and we lose the personal feeling of talking in person.”

Most students think that text messaging, in contrast, tends to improve parent-child communication—at least more significantly than Facebook improves communication. As previously stated, the “child” generations tend to use text messaging with their parents for more practical, short snippets of conversation (instrumental communication) as opposed to more quality, interpersonal (affective) communication. The students reported viewing Facebook as a positive, efficient way to keep in touch and get to know each other (affective communication). In light of these two responded uses for each form of social media, it is interesting that high school students would choose instrumental text messaging as a more effective mode of conversation than the affective Facebook form of conversation. Several scholars are beginning to link youth’s rapid use of social media technologies, and the “shorthand” snippets of conversation employed when using these technologies, to youth’s sense of feeling entitled to instant gratification in every area of life. This expectation has lead to interesting impacts on the children’s behavioral and communication patterns. Hamline University Law Professor David Allen Larson writes in his article *Technology Mediated Dispute Resolution (TMDR): A New Paradigm for ADR,*
“For instance, young teens and pre-teens are embracing text messaging enthusiastically. Messaging technologies tend to strictly limit the number of characters that can be included within each message. Consequently, the need to perfect the ability to communicate in an abbreviated fashion will, if anything, become more commonplace. Even if you are not enamored of the new shorthand, your children are embracing and creating new terminology daily. When they receive the message ‘SUP 4 NEXT WKND?’ for instance, they may quickly reply ‘WAN 2 C A PIC?’ Cryptic messages are not merely stylistic. Short messaging service (SMS), which supports rapid message transmission, is generally limited to 160 characters and spaces per message. Children are communicating in a clipped, rapid manner that does not provide much opportunity for subtlety or nuance” (Larson, 2006).

“This technology has allowed teens to have inane communications and in doing so, contributes to the ‘dumbing down’ of society. Teens today are lacking basic social skills because of an absence of face-to-face communication assisted by this technology,” writes Corinna Howland of JustFocus.org (Howland, 2005). “The art of personal communication is being lost as it gives way to a new era of interaction. The introduction of cell phones and the Internet has challenged our notions of space and time by putting communications into hyperdrive” (Howland, 2005).

“Parent” Generation

This loss of interpersonal communication is one of the parent generation’s main concerns regarding their children’s use of social media technologies. This popular criticism is explored in Elon University’s Courtney F. Turnbull’s research paper Mom Just Facebooked Me and Dad Knows How to Text: The Influences of Computer-Mediated Communication on Interpersonal Communication and Differences Through Generations for which she surveyed both the Baby Boomer generation and Generation Y. In regard to the effects of modern social media technologies, Turnbull writes,
“The absence of face-to-face communication is a concern that was raised by the members of both generations. Baby Boomers and Generation Y members believed that the absence leads to their missing out on many aspects of interpersonal communication, which enhances their life and wellbeing. Concurring with some who showed concerns for communication in future, a member of the Baby Boom Generation stated: ‘I fear my grandchildren aren’t going to be able to function at a normal level. Are they going to have to email me to say hello because they won’t make the time to see me? It scares me what is going to happen to kids in the future. I can talk to a tree but I fear they won’t be able to talk to their friends without their cell phones in between them.’ (Personal communication, November 20, 2009)” (Turnbull, 2010).

Despite the notion that modern technologies were created in large part to streamline and maximize communication while at the same time making task completion efficient and convenient, modern technology has, in some ways, seemed to have the opposite effect. Youth seems to use the time that modern technology has “saved them” just using more technology, as the Baby Boomer in Turnbull’s paper asked, “Are [my grandchildren] going to have to email me to say hello because they won’t make the time to see me? It scares me what is going to happen to kids in the future. I can talk to a tree but I fear they won’t be able to talk to their friends without their cell phones in between them.” (Turnbull, 2010).

In terms of communication theory, the parent generation’s concern with loss of face-to-face communication is considered a factor of Media Richness Theory. As previously stated, Alan R. Dennis and Susan T. Kinney of the University of Georgia, Athens, explain the main premise of Daft and Lengel’s Media Richness Theory as ‘media differ in ‘richness’ (‘the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval’ Daft and Lengel 1986, p. 560), with face-to-face communication being the richest, while other media capable of sending fewer cues (e.g., vocal inflection, gestures) or providing slower feedback (e.g., memos, voice-mail, or e-mail) are ‘leaner’” (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). In the context of this discussion, parents, and apparently students, recognize the value of richer media, such as face-to-face communication, as opposed to electronic technologies as communication. Dennis and Kinney explain that more
personal, more rich, communication methods are more effective communicative tools than the “leaner” media (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). The image below illustrates Daft and Lengel’s Media Richness Theory as interpreted by Dennis and Kinney.

Other concerns parents have regarding their children’s social media use focus on personal privacy issues and safety from potential harm online (Turow, 1999), yet most parents agree that social technologies are not all bad—they have their benefits too. In addition to the reasons older generations use social media discussed on page 13 in reference to Mary Madden’s *Older Adults and Social Media*, parents view social media as particularly beneficial ways to relate to their children (Madden, 2010) and as means of connection during unique circumstances.

“On November 5th, 2009 my daughter Marie was living with her husband, a corporal in the U.S. Army, on Fort Hood Army base in Texas. I heard about the shooting on the news and immediately tried to call her (I live in St. Louis, Missouri) only to learn later that she had locked her and daughter (who were home alone) in the bathroom as soon as the shots rang out. She didn’t have time to grab a phone but somehow managed to have her lap-top with her. After several fearful hours without a call from her, I found out she and her family were alive by communicating to her through my Facebook page, which my younger daughter had set up for me only the day before the shooting” (D. Simonpietri, personal communication, March 12, 2011).

This story, told to me by my aunt, is just one example of a parent grateful for social media technologies in the face of unique circumstances. While these new forms of social media are able to accomplish things most of us can only dream of, good old-fashioned face-to-face
communication must not be discounted. Interestingly enough, young people, who are most often the first to embrace and advocate social media, are beginning to show trends of craving more face-to-face communication. As mentioned previously, the growth rate of the “child” generation’s adoption of social media has greatly slowed (Madden, 2010). My survey yielded a strong response in support of this slight move away from social media by youth, with several students responding a significant negative consequence of social media is the fact that social media hinder face-to-face communication.

The following graphs measure students’ views on the effects of text messaging and Facebook in parent-child communication, as two graphs did above, however these graphs illustrate more clearly the students’ tendencies to view social media as hindrances or aids to parent-child communication.

![Graph showing effects of text messaging on parent-child communication](image)

The above graph shows that while both high school and college students view text messaging as a *communicative aid* between them and their parents, the high school students view
text messaging as more of a hindrance than college students do. The graph below shows a much stronger contrast between high school and college students’ views on the effect of Facebook on parent-child communication. College students still view Facebook as an overall aid to communication, though it does not have as positive an influence on their communication as text messaging. The majority of high school students, however, view Facebook as, quite definitively, a hindrance to their communication with their parents.

![Graph showing the effect of Facebook on parent-child communication](image)

With 17.5% of all students naming the loss of face-to-face communication with their parents as the main reason it hinders their communication, it is clear that the child generation still recognizes the importance of this basic human interpersonal relationship. The majority of both high school and college students do not view either Facebook or text messaging as significant aids to parent-child communication, yet high school students seem to feel stronger about this view than college students. This suggests that, consistent with Madden’s graphs depicting slowing growth of new social media users among youth, younger generations may be beginning
to watch for the next new social technology with which they can communicate—and the cycle continues.

**Conclusion**

While older generations are often slower to adopt social media technologies as preferred forms of communication, their children’s generation, “Net Geners,” do not even know life without these hyper-drive forms of communication. “Our children are learning to communicate with technology at the same time they are learning their most basic communication skills, and that makes their ability to use technology more intuitive” (Larson, 2006). As the majority of high school students I surveyed reported getting their first cell phones at age 13, as opposed to most college students surveyed not getting their first cell phones until age 16, this “digital generation” is rapidly expanding to include increasing numbers of children at even younger ages. Children are acquiring the ability to text message an average of 3 years earlier (and this is only one form of social media technology), ever-widening the generational gap between them and their parents. Although one would expect children’s increased social media literacy to lead to their decreased desire for “old-fashioned” forms of communication, research has shown nearly the opposite. While children are willing, for the most part, to communicate with their parents using social media, they appear to want more face-to-face communication with their parents. Some students even feel that using social media with their parents hurts their parent-child communication and studies have shown trends that signal children may be ready to move away from using social media as their preferred mode of interpersonal communication (at least with their parents) in favor of the next new social technology.
Parents, on the other hand, show signs of increased social media use. They seem keenly aware that social media technologies are modern youth’s preferred method of communication, thus they are increasingly using social media as communicative practices in order to connect with their children. Parents maintain that connecting with their children should still happen first and foremost through face-to-face communication which would ideally open lines of parent-child communication. As technology continues to evolve, just discussing the topic of social media remains a catalyst for productive parent-child communication and metacommunication. Interpersonal communication does not have to become a casualty of increased use of social media across family generations.
APPENDIX A
1. What is your gender?
   Male      Female

2. What is your age group?
   Under 18       18-24       25-32        33-40       over 40

3. Which of the following academic categories do you fall into?
   High School         College (Undergrad/Grad School)

SECTION A

4. Do you currently have a Facebook page?  A. Yes    B. No

5. Does at least one of your parents/primary guardians have a Facebook page?
   A. Yes   (If YES, proceed to question 6, and ignore question 7.)
   B. No    (If NO, ignore question 6, and proceed to question 7.)

6. YES, at least one of my parents/primary guardians has a Facebook page:
   i. Are you Facebook friends with your parent(s)?
      A. Yes, both parents       B. Yes, one parent          C. No, neither/none
   ii. Did (A) you friend request your parent(s) or did (B) they friend request you?
   iii. Do you have your parent(s) on a limited profile list (restrict them from viewing certain areas of your profile)?
         Yes   No   Why or why not?
   iv. How often do you interact (view each other’s profiles, pictures, or status updates, message/write on walls, etc.) with your parent(s) via Facebook?
         A. 75-100% of the time I am on Facebook
         B. 50-75% of the time I am on Facebook
         C. 25-50% of the time I am on Facebook
         D. 0-25% of the time I am on Facebook

7. NO, neither of my parents/primary guardians have a Facebook page:
   i. What is your parent’s reason for not having a Facebook page?
      A. They do not understand how to use it
      B. They say it is unnecessary or too time-consuming
      C. I asked them not to/asked them to delete it
      D. I do not know why they do not have one
      E. Other:
   ii. If your parent(s) had a Facebook page, would you be Facebook friends with them?
      A. Yes     B. Yes, but only limited profile friends    C. No
      If (B) or (C), what is your reason?
         a. I do not want them to see what I am doing on Facebook
         b. My parent(s) would not want to be friends with me
         c. My parent(s) would annoy or embarrass me
         d. Other:
   iii. If your parent(s) asked you to create a Facebook page for them, would you?
      A. Yes     B. Maybe     C. No
8a. How important of a role do you think Facebook plays in your parent-child communication?
Very important Somewhat important Not important at all
7 6 5 4 3 2 1 8b. Why?

9a. How do you think using Facebook affects parent-child communication in general?
Positively (improves communication) Negatively (hinders communication) Does not affect communication
7 6 5 4 3 2 1 9b. Why?

SECTION B
10. How old were you when you got your first cell phone?

11. Do you use text messaging? A. Yes B. No

12. Does at least one of your parents/primary guardians use text messaging?
   A. Yes B. No
   If no, why not? (Skip to question 15)

13. How often do you text message with your parent(s)?
   A. 75-100% of the time I text message
   B. 50-75% of the time I text message
   C. 25-50% of the time I text message
   D. 0-25% of the time I text message

14. What is the main reason you and your parent(s) text message?

15a. How important of a role do you think text messaging plays in your parent-child communication?
Very important Somewhat important Not important at all
7 6 5 4 3 2 1 15b. Why?

16a. How do you think using text messaging affects parent-child communication in general?
Positively (improves communication) Negatively (hinders communication) Does not affect communication
7 6 5 4 3 2 1 16b. Why?
SECTION C
17. Would you consider (A) Facebook or (B) text messaging a better method of communication between parents and children?

18a. Could any of the following be utilized in the future to improve parent-child communication?
   A. Yes, Facebook could improve communication
   B. Yes, text messaging could improve communication
   C. Yes, both could improve communication
   D. No, neither could improve communication

18b. Why?
Bibliography


