Considering Cultural Factors in Emerging Adult Use of Communication Technologies: Culture in Technology Use

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ABSTRACT

Focus groups with young adult college students (N = 13, 8 females, 5 males, Mage = 20.46, SD = 1.27) from different ethnic and generational backgrounds were conducted to examine how Asian American and European American young adults may use digital media for social support and how they may interact with specific social partners (family members, romantic partners and friends). Findings suggest that participants, regardless of cultural background, feel greater ease with disclosing to family members and romantic partners. Intimacy in friendships varied greatly, required more impression management, and, therefore, was often facilitated by digital media. Individual and cultural differences may also explain differences in communication patterns with friends. Future directions and practical implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Communication Technologies, Culture, Emerging Adults, Social Media, Social Support

INTRODUCTION

Individuals are becoming increasingly dependent on digital technologies for interpersonal communication. This may be especially true among emerging adults who have grown up immersed in new media (Lenhart et al., 2010). At rates far outpacing older adults (aged 30+), 95% of emerging adults (age 18 – 29) are online—they are texting, visiting a social networking site, emailing, instant messaging, and connecting in multiple ways on a daily basis (Pew Research Center, 2012; Common Sense Media, 2012). Within this new context, social connection and support has grown more accessible through “virtual networks” (Wills & Ainette, 2012). However, despite greater technology integration and opportunities for online communication, researchers are only beginning to understand the individual and cultural factors that shape how emerging adults adopt and use technology in their everyday lives (e.g., for a review, see Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). The mixed-method study explores this gap in the literature.

Emerging Adulthood: A Period of Identity and Intimacy Exploration

Emerging adulthood (age 18 – 25) is a period marked by important transitions in Western culture—emerging adults in the United States are tasked with exploring who they are and who they want to be.
with (Arnett, 2000). As part of these identity and intimacy exploration processes, individuals must grapple with management of their self-presentation to an audience (Goffman, 1959). In everyday life, identity can be informed by verbal symbols that convey information (what an individual gives) and non-verbal mannerisms (impression an individual gives off) (p. 136). Interpersonal relationships play an important role in this process as they are an instrumental part of identity exploration and presentation processes (Barry et al., 2009; Montgomery, 2005). During childhood or adolescence for prior generations, ‘performances’ of identity in social relationships primarily occurred face-to-face within formal school settings. Identity and intimacy processes may look different for emerging adults with 21st century technology tools.

New media, including hardware like smartphones as well as software applications like the Internet, provides many affordances for emerging adult development. New media is different from older, traditional forms of media (e.g., broadcast television, radio) in that it is asynchronous, interactive, and individualized (Rogers, 1986; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010). Individuals are both consumers and producers and have greater control over their online self-presentations to a broader audience. On the one hand, given these opportunities, the idealized-virtual identity hypothesis (Back et al., 2010) suggests that emerging adults will present an idealized online rather than true or false sense of self (for empirical example, see Michikyan et al., 2015). On the other hand, these affordances may allow particular individuals (e.g., introverts) greater opportunities to express themselves and self-disclose in authentic ways to others (Reid & Reid, 2007). The privacy, brevity, asynchrony, ubiquity, and reduction of nonverbal cues offered by text messaging make it a generally convenient, comfortable and desirable medium for interpersonal communication (Kelly et al., 2012).

Theoretical Considerations: Individual Factors in Technology Use

According to the technology acceptance model (TAM; Davis, 1989), people’s perceptions of (a) technological usefulness and (b) ease of use affect intentions to use technology. In addition to these situational motivators, recent extensions of the model include individual factors. A growing literature suggests that the traits from the five-factor model of personality, that include neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992), may be associated with technology use (Barnett et al., 2015). Specifically, researchers have found that higher levels of agreeableness, extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness was predictive of greater self-reported Internet use and technology use for social connection (e.g., communicating through cell phone, instant messaging, and a social networking site; Barnett et al., 2015; McElroy et al., 2007; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Wilson et al., 2010; Witt et al., 2011). However, decision-making models such as the TAM are often based on usage patterns of a single program or platform and usually do not account for the social or cultural factors that may inform an individual’s needs, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

A dual-factor model (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) might complement decision-making models like the TAM in exploring how young adults use technology to meet developmental needs. The dual-factor model suggests that individuals are motivated to use social media (e.g., social networking sites) to fulfill a need (a) to belong and be accepted by others, and (b) for self-presentation and continual impression management. These dual motivations of belonging and self-presentation may be especially true during developmental periods like emerging adulthood in which individuals explore new roles and responsibilities.

Additionally, from a socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1987), technology use, as with all tool use, is embedded within developmental, social, and cultural contexts. Individuals use tools and symbol systems in culturally-constructed ways to represent their world and also to mediate action and meet needs. An individual’s experience of the tool to meet these needs often shapes their future
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