Part 4: Teenage Language Communication and Identity

Communication, Identity and Gender

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1. Introduction

The role of communication and identity development in adolescence is particularly important, as during this phase of development, young people come to know and define themselves in ways that were not possible during their childhood (Calvert, 2002). Identity, described by Huffaker and Calvert (2005) is a central task that begins in infancy and ends with the culmination of one's life. There are facets of communication which present opportunities for young people to reflect on their own thoughts, ideas and actions, which add a new dimension to self-discovery, particularly in relation to the development of their gender identity. There is evidence to suggest that our ways of thinking about gender roles in communication have changed and the methods of communication with which young people engage, seem to particularly focus around mobile technology, these will be discussed later.

Gender-specific communication differences are first noticeable at a young age and can be seen in males and females as young as three or four years old. Most children spend the bigger part of the day playing and communicating with others. Boys and girls usually play and participate in same gender groups. These same gender groups foster and advance specific and different communication styles and behaviours, which contribute to the identity formation of gender. As children move from the phases of childhood to adolescence, communication is a key means through which gender identity roles are explored and constructed (Harter, 1998). Harter's perspective of adolescent development views the construction of self as one that involves multiple "public" selves, which can be presented according to the demands and constraints of particular situations.

For Erikson (1993), a unitary sense of identity is constructed after a successful search for *who one is*. Erikson (1968) sees adolescence as a critical period of identity formation, he sees adolescents undergoing a "crisis" during puberty in which they address key questions about their values and ideals, their future occupation or career, and their sexual identity and these ideas are discussed later in relation to recent research about gender and communication skills.

2. Gender, Identity and Digital Media

In the 21st century, young people present their multiple selves (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005), through the use of social networking and media platforms where adolescents take on the roles of others through playful attitudes where they assume different viewpoints, thereby allowing them to try on different facets of who they will become (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). These notions of multiple identities suggest different ways of understanding young people's relationships with digital media.

For example, Buckingham (2008) presents two sides of the argument. On the one hand, the Internet provides different opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might previously have been denied or stigmatized.

'Such arguments presume that media can be used as a means of expressing or even discovering aspects of one's "true self," for example, in relation to sexuality. ' (Buckingham, 2008: 8)

Yet on the other hand he states, these media can also be seen to provide opportunities for identity play and for imitation, where young people can adopt identities for them to explore as much for their own sake as for others. In the virtual world where flexibility and anonymity become possible, adolescents may feel more comfortable expressing their sexual orientation and exploring their sexual identity beyond social prescriptions (Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). Language is a key means through which sexual identity can be expressed and explored, particularly in online forums.

According to a large-scale survey in the U.S. which explored the behaviours of teens and texting (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010), adolescents rely heavily on text messaging to communicate with their peers, partners, and to some extent parents and other adults. Findings from the survey demonstrate that text messaging has become the primary way that teens reach their friends, this exceeds face-to-face contact, email, instant messaging and voice calling as the daily method of communication choice for this age group. However, the survey revealed that voice calling is still the preferred mode for reaching parents for most teens.

Similar findings have been presented in the United Kingdom where surveys demonstrate that young people prefer texting to talking, and employers have noted that some young people begin their working lives with limited social skills, because they have not developed their skills of communication in youth to the same extent as young people in the past before the advent of mobile phones and texting.

Research (Lenhart et al., 2010 and Ofcom, 2012), suggests that people send enormous quantities of text messages a day. The average consumer sends 50 texts per week, which has more than doubled in four years – with over 150 billion text messages sent in 2011 in the UK (Ofcom, 2012). Teens send more text messages with half of teens sending 50 or more text messages a day, or 1,500 texts a month, and one in three send more than 100 texts a day. In relation to gender difference teen girls (aged 14-17) lead the field on text messaging, averaging 100 messages a day. The youngest teen boys on the other hand, are more resistant to this method of communication and average around 20 messages per day.

According to research carried out by Pew Internet (2007), girls and boys use media differently. Boys watch more television and share videos online, while girls blog, email, or instant message YouTube and other video sharing sites tend to be the domain of boys. Online teen boys are twice as likely as teen girls to post video files online (19% as compared to 10%).

3. Young People and Communication Skills - Their Perspective

What about more general communication skills?

A large-scale survey, the first of its kind, exploring young people's views on communication skills was carried out by the National Literacy Trust (2011) in the UK. The survey comprised 6,865 young people aged 8 to 16, there was an almost equal gender split in the sample, with 51.5% of boys (N = 3,511) and 48.5% of girls (N = 3,309) participating in this survey. The intentions of the survey were explore what young people think about communication skills, how confident they are in their skills and how important do they think these skills are at school, in the workplace or in wider society.

Some of the key findings demonstrated that:

- More girls than boys believed that having good communication skills means being good at talking and being good at listening. By contrast, significantly more boys than girls believed that it means being good at ICT (Information Communication Technology).
- 5 in 10 boys compared with 4 in 10 girls strongly agreed that good communication skills boost their confidence in social situations. 3 in 10 boys compared with 2 in 10 girls also strongly agreed that good communication skills are often taken for granted and that there is the danger that they are not taken seriously if they do not express their views clearly.
- There were some differences between boys and girls in their confidence to use certain communication skills, with boys tending to feel more confident overall than girls. Boys were more likely than girls to say that they feel confident speaking in front of classmates, saying no to friends, talking to new people, explaining their points of view and asking when they do not understand anything. While boys are more confident than girls in these areas, girls would like to be more confident using these skills.
- Boys were more likely than girls to say that they are confident talking with teachers and other adults. There were no significant gender differences in young people's confidence in talking with friends and family.
- Boys and girls did not differ in how important they thought good communication skills are to get good qualifications, to get on with family and friends, and to have a fulfilling life, but girls (8 in 10) were more likely than boys (7 in 10) to say that one needs good communication skills to get a good job.
- Both boys and girls believed that speaking skills are the most important skill to have to succeed in life, though more girls (4 in 10) than boys (3 in 10) believed that. Boys were more likely than girls to believe that maths and ICT are the most important skills to succeed in life. (Clark, 2011: 6)

4. Conclusions

It is perhaps particularly interesting that boys generally rate themselves as more confident communicators with people in authority (teachers) as well as known and unknown adults than do girls, particularly as assumptions have been made about girls' ability to communicate being superior to that of boys. Boys also appear to be more concerned about

the social implications of communication, being more concerned than girls about a perceived link between communication and intelligence for example.

So despite the fact that when they are young, girls tend to speak earlier and with greater complexity than boys of the same age there seems to be a shift in boys' confidence with the move into adolescence. Communication is about more than talking, it is about listening, conveying information, understanding and action. Girls appear to share more information, use more words and use media differently to boys but boys are ahead in the communication and confidence stakes.

Research paints a completely different picture of young males as confident communicators who are incredibly aware of the important role communication skills play in a successful school, work and social life. Stereotypes around communication and gender are misleading and do a disservice to boys in particular, who are often stereotyped as 'grunting, groaning teenagers'. This is an outdated stance and should be challenged in schools, families and our communities.

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„I am seen, therefore I am"[1] – The use of facebook by hungarian teenagers with special reference to uploaded profile

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1. Facebook – Miracle or Plague?

1.1 The social network in the world and in Hungary

Facebook exists since 2004 and has reached about 1 billion user accounts in nearly nine years, in every 7th person is therefore a member of this gigantic, global social network. The numerous possibilities (profile page, uploads of photos and videos, wall with public news, notes, comments, links, notices for friendship connections, timeline, online chat option, etc.) are made available to users free of charge. According to data from Spiegel online, the average age of Facebook users is 22, but in Europe the age limit is much higher (in: Spiegel Online. http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/facebook-zaehlt-eine-milliarde-mitglieder-a -859510.html).

Among the active users, the number of women is 377.7 million (48 %), the number of men is 410.7 million, but, for example, North America has the highest proportion of women at 54 %, and also in Europe the proportion of women with 50,5 % outweighs that of men. The exact number of Hungarian FB users is not easily understandable and for this reason not clear at all. The official Facebook data state that, in January 2011, there were approximately 2.6 million registered FB users. Fresher details of the RG Stúdió (using a total of 12 sources), claim that this number would already amount to 3.08 million in April 2012.

The composition of Hungarian FB users by age is as follows: the group of 13- to 17-year-olds is 576,000, the 18- to 24-year-olds is 754,000, and the 25- to 34-year-olds is at 770,000. As for the distribution by gender, 52% of users are female, the males are represented by 48 %. Unfortunately there is no information about the gender distribution by age. (Hungarian Facebook-site on Wikipedia: http://hu.wikipedia. org/wiki/Facebook, Facebookozásban EU-rekorder Magyarország, in: Origó, 2011. július 12., SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER 359, in: ec. europa.eu/ public_opinion/archives/ ebs/ebs_359_ en.pdf).

As can be seen from the data, the number of female FB users in North America, Europe (including Hungary) is much higher than that of men. The reason for this may lie in one hand, that according to BONKA HERB FROHLICH (2003: 147), the traditional distribution of social roles for maintaining social relationships, is mostly ascribed to women. On the other hand, several empirical studies confirm that even for young girls social contacts are more important than for boys of the same age.

1.2 Facebook as a forum for communication and source of information for young people

As Sziber (2012a) argues, Facebook is the only medium as information source for Generation Z, born after 1992. While the X and Y generation seek information through online news portals, the members of the Z-generation are preferably guided by their own

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[1] Röttgers (2009: 91), quoted by Veszelszki (2011a)

circle of acquaintances, in more informal ways. When it comes to online platforms, such as job portals or websites of companies, these official resources are pushed to the background by them.

Veszelszki (2012a) describes further that with them a generation has come about who wants to make no difference or cannot between strictly taken "oral", but between medially written and traditionally "written" discourse, or text type. She speaks of a new term, the "Digilekt" (Digitality + dialect), as a language variant, which can be defined as computer-mediated communication and is used by the Z-generation as digital communication. This "new" language is regarded by the young Facebook users as a common platform, and it is clear that "digital literacy establishes a special group cohesion and thereby hands outsiders an ostracising language function. The so-called digital divide can not only be related to the fact that one cannot use IT equipment, but that one does not understand and cannot use the special character of digital communication (eg, acronyms, emoticons) which may result in non-digital communication problems "(Veszelszki 2012a: 454).

1.3 Effects of information communication technology on language

In an empirical study conducted in 2008 among school students (13-14 years), focus was put on what differences there are between on the computer written text types and the "traditional" handwriting (Veszelszki 2011b). It was in fact found that the digital communication strongly influences the language use of students, and indeed - against all expectations - in a positive way: in the traditional text types (by hand written texts, tasks, homework at school) the students used extremely creative phrases that they initially used as Digilekt, especially in chat rooms and Facebook applications.

In a subsequent study in 2010, it turned out that most students are able to keep apart the different text types or to differentiate between them. 90% of the students used namely regularly net-specific terms, abbreviations, word forms, emoticons, influence of English, and only 10% did so in official, traditional text types, as in handwritten texts, tasks, homework at school, official letters, documents (Veszelszki 2011b). Sándor (2001) is also of the opinion that, for example, the widespread use of SMS and the Internet language can bring both advantages and disadvantages. Their hypothesis is that these resources (SMS, Internet chat, e-mail) can indeed contribute to the neglect of literacy, that the language is imprecise, less demanding, but on the other hand that oral communication is supported and enriched, and thus strengthens the network of interpersonal relationships. Veszelszki (2011b) and Balázs (2005) emphasize that it is important to integrate communications on the Internet, this new cyber discourse, the new digital text types, the different language registers, dialects, neologisms into the training of communication at school.

2. Profile pictures on Facebook as a communication tool

2.1 „I am seen, therefore I am" – Results of a survey amongst teenagers

The Hungarian media authority led in 2012 a comprehensive study on various aspects of media in Hungary. A total of 1645 children[2] and teenagers aged 8-14 years were interviewed, among others about use and habits on the Internet and social networks. 82% use the Internet daily, and among the 12- to 14-year-olds, this number already amounts to approximately 90%. Of the 12- to 14-year-old, 21% of the girls use the Internet several times a day, for boys the figure stood at 27%. Daily, 41% of girls and 45% of boys use the Internet. The intensity of the use of online communication (MMS, e-mail) and social network (FB) shows for the girls a much more significant value (KID.COMM 2 kutatási eredmények).

Another study in Europe, conducted by the EUKidsOnline II, revealed surprising results: 38% (in Hungary 51%) of the 9- to 12-year-old children and 77% (in Hungary 79%) of the 13- to 16-year olds possessed a profile page on one of the social networks (Facebook or Iwiw).

A gender specific study in Hungary showed that boys (aged 14-18 years) on average sit more often in front of the monitor and also spend more time in front of it than the girls (M. Fazekas / Cs. Czachesz 2011). It is widely reported that the goal of using the Internet is much different for girls and boys at this age. It is likely that these differences in interest are also the case for younger girls and boys, and that primarily girls prefer Facebook as a means of communication, while boys use the Internet to play games, to listen to music, to upload and share videos and to download movies.

2.2 Analysis of Facebook-Profile pictures

In the further part of this paper, based on a survey conducted in summer 2010 by Veszelszki (2011a) on the one hand as well as relying on own experiences on the other hand, how young people reveal themselves through their profile picture is presented. The profile picture on Facebook is an expression of the "I-'s", the individual, which is accessible for all and which outlines to the "outside world" something very personal, even intimate. It is defined as a "private homepage", but since it is accessible to all, it really has the objective of an "open secret". Facebook profile pictures are visual "fingerprints" and a form of self-expression, a kind of "marketing communication" towards and with the outside world. They can tell a lot about the "owner" on psychological, sociological, cultural, socio-cultural aspects. Regarding the management of the Internet, the so-called Web 2.0 generation is at the same time the "producer" and the "consumer", ie "prosumer". In Veszelszki (2011a) study a total of 1500 randomly selected profile pictures exclusively of Hungarian FB users were analyzed, with particular regard to aspects of gender and age.

[2] Note that the age limit for Facebook is legally at plus 13 years of age.

Collected

FB profile pictures –

by sex and age.

(Veszelszki 2011a: 4).
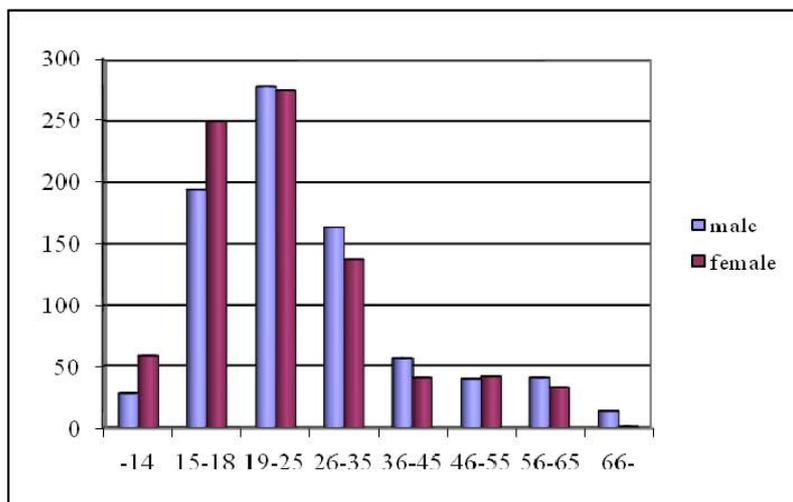
As already mentioned, especially female online users are active on Facebook. For this reason it was difficult to locate pictures of male FB users. If we consider the target group of our Comenius project, it is noticeable that among teenagers under 14 as well as between 15-18 that the number of girls who upload a profile picture, is more than often in the case of older FB users. Even if boys at this age also are Facebook users, it often happens that they either do not upload a "classic" profile picture of yourself at all.

Full body photos are pretty rare, so to speak, it is much more often a part for the whole, where mostly the face or a part of it (eyes, eyes with sunglasses, mouth, etc.) is emphasized. Veszelszki (2011: 5) points out: the younger the FB users are on the photos, the more detailed, elaborated, decorated they are. It is clearly seen that these photos were created with great care, even if they want to give the impression that they are spontaneous, casual, cool. Very popular are also distortions, manipulations with the help of different programs, such as Paint, Photoshop, etc. About half of the 15- to 18-year-olds manipulate their profile picture in some way, and even here the difference between the genders is clearly evident - albeit perhaps surprising - : boys engage a lot more in image manipulation than girls.

Manipulation of profile-images
Age: 15-18. Boys / Girls
(Veszelszki 2011a: 5)
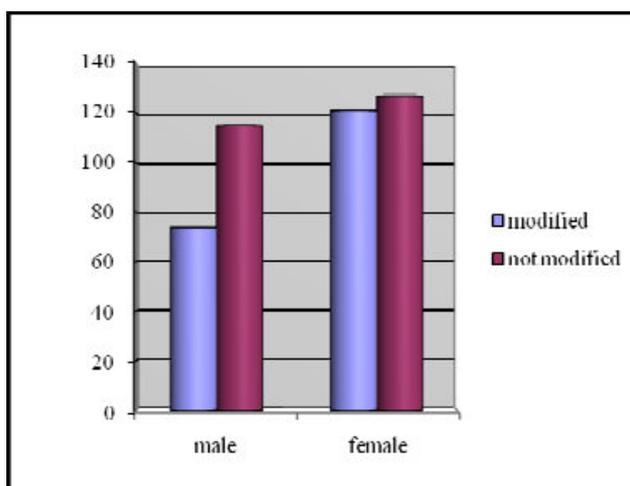
Often girls pose or make collages with girlfriends. Very popular are photos that are made by the boy or girl his/herself (with web camera or smartphone), as for example, in front of a
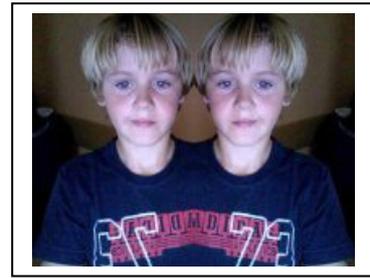
mirror. It is also striking that profile pictures of girls (especially under the age of 14) are much more often changed on the Facebook page, than those of boys.

Veszelszki (2011a: 5) gives a couple of examples:

FB-Profile pictures of girls

under 14.

FB-Profile pictures of boys

under 14 years old

A surprising result and definitely food for thought, is that young people - more often than adults! – provide users with erotic and sexually provocative images. According to DAVID (2009, p 84) such intimate photos are considered as something extraordinary, special, original. and exactly young people want to be that something "special" - even if they just lose their individuality through this generalization.

3. Summary and conclusion

In the age of Facebook, the phrase by the philosopher Descartes "I think, therefore I am." is often rephrased as "I share, therefore I am". According to a study conducted in 14 countries (2010) in the circle of the Y generation (18- to 30-year olds), it turned out that about half of this generation thinks of Internet as an integral part of life, just like water and air (2012 Cisco Connected World Technology Report).

It can therefore be assumed with good reason that the subsequent generation Z, which was practically born into the online world, shares the opinion that they could not live without Facebook. It is a big challenge to teach these young people about conscious, data protecting and secure use as well as about the possible risks, hazards associated with Facebook, whilst the positive aspects of this new, revolutionary communications medium should never be denied.

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