

Effect of Online Communication on Well-Being among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

Tanvi Vijay^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Online communication has become the primary mode of communicating among many young adults; in fact it has taken the place of face to face communication. The purpose of the present study was to understand the relationship between willingness to communicate, perceived interpersonal communication competence and online communication among young females and the ways in which it affects their well-being. Willingness to Communicate Scale and Interpersonal Communication Competence Inventory were administered to 100 females in the age group of 18-25 years and in depth qualitative interviews were then conducted and analysed using Thematic Analysis. Impact of online communication on well-being was found to be influenced by subjective factors. Females scoring high on willingness to communicate and perceived interpersonal communication competence reported higher levels of well-being on communicating face to face rather than using online communication. Thematic Analysis also revealed that factors such as familiarity with the mode of communication, ease of access, relationship with the person they are communicating with, context of communication etc also have an effect on how online communication affects their sense of well-being.

Keywords: *Online Communication, Well-Being, Thematic Analysis, Willingness to Communicate, Interpersonal Communication Competence.*

When the *Short Messaging Service* (SMS) was first introduced in the early 1990s (Ahmed, 2002), no one thought people will be willing to make the effort required to compose these text messages. But its success took everyone by surprise. Youth soon adapted its ways to adopt the SMS service for their benefit and thus emerged the so called *SMS language*, as for them “see you later” soon became “*c u ltr*”.

Such was the success and wide spread use of this service that by 2010 users were sending an average of 193,000 SMS per second (ICT Indicators database, 2010). Today, in addition to SMS

¹ Research Scholar, The IIS University, Jaipur, Rajasthan State, India

*Responding Author

Received: January 2, 2017; Revision Received: February 2, 2017; Accepted: February 7, 2017

© 2017 Tanvi V; licensee IJIP. This is an Open Access Research distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any Medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

many alternative messaging applications (WhatsApp, Facebook messenger etc) are also widely and more popularly used. It is expected that more than twice the number of messages will be sent using these instant messaging applications as compared to the traditional SMS service, approximately 50 million messages as compared to around 21 million messages per day, respectively (Deloitte, 2014).

Based on these statistics it would seem that people are now communicating more with each other, but this increase in communication is only in online communication via text messages. According to recent surveys, people all over the world send or receive an average of 6 calls per day, while sending more than 30 texts (SMS) per day and spending around 14 minutes a day on instant messaging apps (Branley, 2015).

These figures clearly indicate that people now days prefer communicating via text based messages rather than telephone calls. What causes this preference? Is it fair to generalize the obvious conclusion drawn from these statistics to all kinds of people? *No*. Not all people send text messages *that* frequently and there are people who call more frequently. Studies have shown that compared to boys, girls are more likely to participate in social networks, create blogs, use instant messaging, use e-mail, and post pictures (Thewall, 2008). In terms of texting, studies also demonstrate that girls are more likely than boys to send text messages and to carry their phones at all times (Faulkner, 2005). Though, over the past decade, a lot of research has been done to try to understand what affects the use of online communication and why has it become so popular, review of existing literature reveals a paucity of studies that directly try to understand what dictates the preference of people for using online or offline modes of communication.

What is it that dictates the preference for any of the available modes of communication? And what effect does this preference has on their well-being? Are there any distinct advantages that online communication offers to its users? This study was an attempt to try to find answers to these questions with respect to young women.

Online communication seems to affect users in a number of ways. And the preference for online communication is also influenced by the individual attributes of people. Studies that tried to understand the effect of online communication on well-being have often found contrasting and inconsistent results. While some studies demonstrated that online communication has a considerable potential of contributing to expanded social networks and increasing psychological well-being (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Campbell et al., 2006, Shaw & Gant, 2002), others indicated that the impact of online communication for social use (emails, chat rooms and instant messaging software) was associated with decreased depressive symptoms and anxiety. Caplan (2003) found evidence suggesting that individuals' preference for online, rather than face-to-face, social interaction plays an important role in the development of negative consequences associated with problematic Internet use. Most recent Internet studies have

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

demonstrated that adolescents' online communication stimulates, rather than reduces social connectedness and/or well-being. For example, in a 2-year follow-up study based on their initial sample of Internet novices, Kraut et al. (2002) found that Internet use improved social connectedness and well-being (Kraut et al., 2002). Several other recent studies have demonstrated significantly positive relationships between online communication (mostly Instant Messaging Applications) and adolescents' social connectedness and/or well-being (e.g., Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). However, these positive results are only found for adolescents who use the Internet predominantly to maintain existing friendships (Bessière et al., 2008). When they use it primarily to form new contacts and talk with strangers, the positive effects do not hold (Bessière et al., 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). Donchi and Moore (2004) found that girls seem to have developed mechanisms by which their online activity does not interfere with offline friendships, and may even enhance it. For girls, more friendships either online or offline related to positive indicators of well-being. This may relate in part to the fact that girls spend less time on the Internet altogether. In addition, when they do access the Internet, around one-third of this time is devoted to personal communication activities, some of which may involve relating to friends who are substantially of the face-to-face type.

Two types of hypotheses have been proposed to try to explain the effect of online communication on well-being. Some authors believe that online communication hinders adolescents' well-being because it displaces valuable time that could be spent with existing friends (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001; Nie et al., 2002). Adherents of this *displacement hypothesis* assume that the Internet motivates adolescents to form online contacts with strangers rather than to maintain friendships with their offline peers. Because online contacts are seen as superficial relationships that lack feelings of affection and commitment, the Internet is believed to reduce the quality of existing friendships and, thereby, their well-being. Conversely, other authors suggest that online communication may enhance the quality of existing friendships and, thus, their well-being. Adherents of this *stimulation hypothesis* argue that more recent online communication technologies, such as IM, encourage communication with existing friends (Bryant et al., 2006). Much of the time people spend online is actually used to keep up existing friendships (Gross, 2004; Subrahmanyam et al., 2000; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). If adolescents use the Internet primarily to maintain contacts with their existing friends, the prerequisite for a displacement effect is not fulfilled. After all, if existing friendships are maintained through the Internet, it is implausible that the Internet reduces the quality of these friendships and, thereby, adolescents' well-being (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Several studies have investigated the effect of Internet use on the quality of existing relationships and well-being and have provided mixed results: Some have yielded results in agreement with the displacement hypothesis (Kraut et al., 1998; Morgan & Cotten, 2003, Nie, 2001; Nie et al., 2002; Weiser, 2001), while some others did not provide much support. They demonstrated, for example, that Internet use is positively related to time spent with existing friends (Kraut et al., 2002), to the closeness of existing friendships

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

(Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), and to well-being (Kraut et al., 2002, Morgan & Cotten, 2003, Shaw & Gant, 2002).

Most of these studies focus on online communication and its effects among adolescents, but not many studies have been done to understand the effects of online communication among young adults. The few studies that have been done have found contrasting results. One reason could be that studies take into account different aspects of online communication with relation to well-being and hence their findings vary. The present study tried to uncover the aspects of online communication that affect well-being among young females.

Procedure

The present study was conducted on young women in the age group of 18-25 years. A mixed method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, was adopted. The quantitative data provided an objective standard for comparison of scores of all the participants on measures of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) against which the qualitative data was compared to understand their subjective preferences for online communication and individual differences that affect this choice, so that a predictive relationship could be established between WTC, ICC and preferred mode of communication in relation to its effect on a person's well-being. Both methods were combined to get a better understanding of the underlying processes.

The Willingness to Communicate scale and Interpersonal Communication Competence Inventory were first administered to 100 female participants and the scores obtained were tabulated, norms were established and coefficients of reliability were calculated. This was followed by detailed in depth one-to-one interviews with some of the participants to get an insight into their online communication behavior. The interview sessions were designed such as to obtain detailed information about how and why they use online modes of communication and how does it affect their well-being. Most of the questions were open ended to gather as much information as possible. This data was then qualitatively analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Initial codes were generated from the data which were then used to extract themes. Participants' responses in the interview were matched with their scores on the two measures to see how they affect the preference for online modes of communication and how it affects their state of well-being.

Data Analysis

Measures of descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for the scores obtained on both Willingness to Communicate Scale and Interpersonal Communication Competence Inventory. The interview transcripts were then analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It organizes and describes the data in detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis differs

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

from other analytic methods that seek to describe patterns across qualitative data such as “thematic” discourse analysis, thematic decomposition analysis and grounded theory. These different methods share a search for certain themes or patterns across an (entire) data set, rather than *within* a data item, such as an individual interview or interviews from one person, as in the case of biographical or case-study forms of analysis such as narrative analysis (e.g., Murray, 2003; Riessman, 1993). In this sense they more or less overlap with thematic analysis. In contrast to grounded theory (and other methods like narrative, discourse or CA), thematic analysis is not wed to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and so it can be used within different theoretical frameworks (although not all), and can be used to do different things within them. Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It can also be a “contextualist” method characterized by theories such as critical realism (e.g., Willig, 1999), which acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings. Therefore, thematic analysis can be a method which works both to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of “reality”.

In this study Thematic Analysis was used as a realist method, which acknowledges that what works for one individual may not work for the other because people are different and are embedded in different contexts. Since online communication seems to affect every individual differently, therefore to make meaning of their experiences (as they report them), this approach was used for analysis.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics for the scores obtained on Willingness to Communicate Scale and Interpersonal Communication Competence Inventory are summarized in Table-1. As evident from the table, for a sample of 100 young females, the mean score obtained on the Willingness to Communicate Scale is 59.28 with a standard deviation of 13.92. For Interpersonal Communication Competence Inventory, mean was found to be 73.95 with a standard deviation of 13.77. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of reliability obtained for the measures are summarized in Table-2. The Cronbach’s Alpha for Willingness to Communicate Scale was 0.82 and for Interpersonal Communication Competence it was 0.75 which indicates a high level of internal reliability for both these measures.

Table-1: Descriptive statistics for the two measures

S.No.	Test	N	Mean	SD
1	Willingness to Communicate	100	59.28	13.92
2	Interpersonal Communication Competence	100	73.95	13.77

Table-2: Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of reliability

S. No.	Test	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Willingness to Communicate	20	0.82
2	Interpersonal Communication Competence	40	0.75

Thematic Analysis of the data gathered through interviews suggested that a lot of factors affect the impact of online communication on well-being. Themes such as familiarity with the mode of communication, relationship with the person, perceived communication competence, nature of information to be shared, etc were identified during the analysis.

Data collected through quantitative and qualitative methods cater to different aspects of a person that affect her preference for online communication. While quantitative data was used to get measures of a person's WTC and ICC, qualitative data was gathered to understand what other factors affect a person's preference for online communication and in turn, how that preference affects her well-being. The two sets of data obtained were complimentary in nature and taken together, provided a fuller and better understanding of the underlying processes and individual differences that contribute to a person's well-being.

DISCUSSION

The relationship between online communication and an individual's well-being is a complicated one. The results of the study reveal a lot of factors that affect this relationship and have to be accounted for in order to be able to predict the impact of engaging in online communication on well-being.

Willingness to Communicate

First of all, Willingness to Communicate does not seem to affect the participant's preference for online modes of communication. Comparing the participants' scores on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) with their indicated preference for online communication or face to face communication suggested that the two are not related. The scores on WTC do not help in predicting which mode of communication the participant is more likely to use. As the obtained scores and gathered data reveal, some people scoring high on WTC indicated preference for face to face communication, while others preferred to communicate via online modes of communication. Though willingness to communicate does not directly predict a person's preference for online communication, but those who score high on WTC report a positive effect on well-being of using even online modes of communication.

Interpersonal Communication Competence

Secondly, perceived Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) seems to have a direct relationship with the preferred mode of communication. Participants who scored high on ICC were more likely to use face to face mode of communication as compared to online communication. On the other hand, participants who scored low on ICC reported a preference for

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

using online communication over face to face communication. Although a lot of factors can affect a person's perception of her interpersonal communication competence, it is the perceived competence itself that is of importance here.

Interaction of WTC and ICC

These two factors taken together have important implications. It can be said that people who are willing to communicate with others but do perceive themselves as competent in interpersonal communication prefer to use online communication. Such a preference could be because online modes of communication help these people in overcoming the awkwardness and self-consciousness associated with face to face communication, and hence provides a comfortable platform for them to communicate freely. The participants reported that invisibility of the recipient of the message in online communication makes conversation more direct, open and honest as it prevents them from gauging the immediate reaction of the recipient. Such an effect is more prominent when the topic of conversation is more emotionally charged and the sender is sentimental about the topic of conversation. And this phenomenon can be observed irrespective of the relationship of the sender with the receiver. On the other hand, people who are willing to communicate and perceive themselves as competent in interpersonal communication tend to prefer face to face communication. As the participants reported, face to face communication is more satisfying as compared to online communication, because face to face conversations minimize the possibility of any miscommunication or misunderstanding that can happen via online communication. Face to face communication is more enriching as it is accompanied by non-verbal cues and body language which make understanding better during the process of communication.

In both these cases, effect of online communication on well-being also varies. People who do not perceive they to be competent on interpersonal communication experience a positive impact of online communication on well-being. They prefer using online modes of communication for all kinds of communication. But, people who perceive themselves to be competent in interpersonal communication do not experience any kind of effect on online communication on well-being. For them use of online communication is limited to sending urgent messages or they use it when no other mode of communication is available. They do not prefer to engage in long conversations online. For them, online communication is not related to well-being.

Content of messages

Another interesting aspect that was highlighted during Thematic Analysis was that for some of the participants, online communication had a positive impact on well-being when they had to send out a personally significant message or a message that had high emotional value. This suggests that the topic of communication or the content of messages exchanged also play an important role in deciding the impact of online communication on well-being.

Role during communication

It is not just the content of messages being exchanged, but also whether the person is receiving or sending the messages that affects the impact of online communication on well-being. Under the same situation, mentioned above, when participants were at the receiving end of such emotionally charged messages, they preferred face to face communication over online communication. This observation indicated that the role of people during a conversation also affects their choice of mode of communication which in turn dictates its impact on the person's well-being.

Relationship with the receiver

Relationship of a person with whom she is communicating also affects her well-being irrespective of the mode of communication. If the person is talking to someone who she is emotionally close to, or has known for a long time, or shares a special bond with, the mode of communication (whether online or face to face) has little significant impact on the sense of well-being experienced as a result of this conversation. And this was observed for participants irrespective of their level of willingness to communicate or perceived communication competence. Similarly, when given a choice, almost all participants chose to engage in online communication when they had to interact with a complete stranger. This suggests that at least sometimes the relationship of the person with whom she is communicating is more important than the mode used for this communication.

Time spent online

Another interesting observation that came up was that level of well-being experienced by engaging in online communication seems to be independent of the amount of time spent in communicating online. The participants who reported staying online almost half of the waking hours or more also reported that online communication did not have a significant impact on their level of well-being. Thus, it can be said that the mere use of any particular mode of communication does not help in predicting its effect on a person's well-being.

Other factors

Besides WTC and ICC, a few other factors were also identified that affect a person's choice of mode of communication which in turn affects their well-being. Familiarity with the mode of communication, ease of access (how readily online modes of communication are available to them), the frequency of their peers' usage of online modes, availability of alternate modes of communication etc also affect how a person uses these modes and how this use impact their well-being.

CONCLUSION

The results drawn from the study indicate that impact of online communication on well-being varies from person to person. While those who scored higher in interpersonal communication

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

competence didn't seem to experience any effect of online communication on well-being, those who scored low experienced a positive effect of online communication on well-being. Willingness to communicate, however, was not found to have any direct effect on well-being or use of online modes of communication. It was also found that factors such as familiarity with the mode of communication, ease of access, and relationship with the person they are communicating with, context of communication etc affect the impact of online communication on well-being. A contrasting effect was also found in terms of the role of the communicating person. When the person acted as the sender, online communication seemed to have a positive effect on well-being, but when she became the receiver, face-to-face communication was reported to have a positive effect on well-being. This finding can have significant implications for understanding the various factors that affect online communication and its impact on well-being.

Based on the results, it can be said that Interpersonal Communication Competence is a better predictor of well-being as a result of engaging in online communication rather than Willingness to Communicate. And that Willingness to Communicate does not predict engagement in online communication. Relationship with the receiver is also an important predictor of well-being resulting from online communication, along with emotional content of the messages exchanged. Contrary to common sense beliefs, time spent in online communications did not seem to have any direct effect on well-being.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude towards my research supervisors Prof. Anand Prakash (Department of Psychology, Delhi University) and Dr. Chandrani Sen (HOD, Department of Psychology, IIS University) for their valuable guidance and encouragement. Without their support this paper would not have materialized. I would also like to thank all the participants of this study.

Conflict of Interests: The author declared no conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, R. Z. (4 December 2002). "UK hails 10th birthday of SMS". *The Times of India*. Retrieved 2015-08-16.
- Amichai-Hamburger, Y., & Furnham, A. (2007). "The Positive Net". *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 1033–1045.
- Bessière, K., Kiesler, S., Kraut, R., & Boneva, B.S. (2008). "Effects of internet use and social resources on changes in depression". *Information, Communication, Society*, 11, 47–70.
- Branley, Dan (2015). "No Time to Talk: Americans Sending/Receiving Five Times as Many Texts Compared to Phone Calls Each Day, *According to New Report*". PRNewswire. Retrieved 2015-08-15.

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) "Using thematic analysis in psychology". *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). pp. 77-101.
- Bryant, J. A., Sanders-Jackson, A., & Smallwood, A. M. K. (2006). "IMing, text messaging and adolescent social networks". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), article 10.
- Campbell, A. J., Cumming, S. R., & Hughes, I. (2006). "Internet use by the socially fearful: Addiction or therapy?" *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 9, 69–81.
- Caplan, S. E. (2003). "Preference for online social interaction: A theory of problematic Internet use and psychosocial well-being". *Communication Research*, 30, 625–648.
- Damour, L. (2011). "Girls and the Internet". *Center for Research on Girls at Laurel School*. Retrieved 2016-01-22.
- Delloite (2014). "Short Messaging Services versus Instant Messaging: Value versus Volume". *The Creative Studio at Delloite*, London. Retrieved 2015-08-16.
- Donchi, L., Moore, S. (2004). "It's a Boy Thing: The Role of the Internet in Young People's Psychological Wellbeing". *Behaviour Change*, Volume 2, Number 2, 76–89.
- Faulkner, X., & Culwin, F. (2005). "When fingers do the talking: a study of text messaging". *Interacting with Computers*, 17(2), 167-185.
- Gross, E. F. (2004). "Adolescent Internet use: What we expect, what teens report". *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 25(6), 633–649.
- Hewitt, G; S. Sims; R. Harris (2012). "The Realist Approach to Evaluation Research: An Introduction". *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation* 19 (5): 205–259.
- Kraut, R., Kiesler, S., Boneva, B., Cummings, J., Helgeson, V., & Crawford, A. (2002). "Internet paradox revisited". *Journal of Social Issues*, 58, 49–74.
- Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., & Scherlis, W. (1998). "Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well being?" *American Psychologist*, 53(9), 1017–1031.
- Morgan, C., & Cotten, S. R. (2003). "The relationship between Internet activities and depressive symptoms in a sample of college freshmen". *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*, 6(2), 133–141.
- Murray, M. (2003). "Narrative psychology". J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 111-131). London: *Sage*.
- Nie, N. H. (2001). "Sociability, interpersonal relations and the Internet: Reconciling conflicting findings." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3), 420–435.
- Nie, N. H., Hillygus, D. S., & Erbring, L. (2002). "Internet use, interpersonal relations, and sociability: A time diary study". In B. Wellman & C. Haythornthwaite (Eds.), *The Internet in Everyday Life* (pp. 215–243). Oxford: *Blackwell*.
- Nimrod, G. (2013). "Challenging the Internet Paradox: Online Depression Communities and Well-Being". *International Journal of Internet Science* 2013, 8 (1), 30–48.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: *Sage*.

Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis

- Shaw, L. H., & Gant, L. M. (2002). "In defense of the Internet: The relationship between Internet communication and depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and perceived social support". *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 5, 157–171.
- Statista (2015). "Number of text messages (SMS) sent per second worldwide from 2007 to 2010". *The Statistics Portal*. Retrieved 2015-08-14.
- Subrahmanyam, K., Kraut, R. E., Greenfield, P. M., & Gross, E. (2000). "The impact of home computer use on children's activities and development". *Future of Children*, 10(2), 123–144.
- Thewall, M. (2008). "Social networks, gender, and friending: An analysis of MySpace member profiles". *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(8), 1321-1330.
- Valkenburg, P.M. & Peter, J. (2007b). "Online communication and adolescents' well-being: Testing the stimulation versus the displacement hypothesis". *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 12(4), article 2.
- Valkenburg, P.M., & Peter, J. (2007a). "Preadolescents' and adolescents' online communication and their closeness to friends". *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 267–277.
- Valkenburg, P.M., & Peter, J. (in press). "The effects of instant messaging on the quality of adolescents' existing friendships: A longitudinal study". *Journal of Communication*.
- Weiser, E. B. (2001). "The functions of Internet use and their psychological consequences". *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 4(6), 723–744.
- Willig, C. (1999). "Beyond appearances: A critical realist approach to social constructionism". D. J. Nightingale & J. Cromby (Eds.), *Social constructionist psychology: A critical analysis of theory and practice* (pp. 37-51). Buckingham, UK: *Open University Press*.

How to cite this article: Tanvi V (2017), Effect of Online Communication On Well-Being Among Young Women: A Qualitative Analysis, *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, Volume 4, Issue 2, No. 88, ISSN:2348-5396 (e), ISSN:2349-3429 (p), DIP:18.01.063/20170402, ISBN:978-1-365-74161-6