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NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN CYBERSPACE

Abstract

The virtual world has become a place of a highly social nature over the years. Cyberspace is where a huge amount of interpersonal human activity has been transferred. Nowadays, professional work, education (at various levels of education), the process of acquiring all material goods, etc. are inextricably linked to Internet use. Moreover, the Internet is a sphere where various interpersonal relationships are established and maintained, information is exchanged, one's identity is built, or even a sense of self-worth is shaped. The network as a social place is primarily associated with interpersonal communication. A cursory analysis might suggest that the online world, whose essential element in the context of functioning is the screen (of a computer, smartphone, or tablet), is based entirely on the written word. Today, despite being essentially a form of indirect communication (not requiring physical or even synchronous contact), the Internet is an area of exchange of numerous nonverbal messages. Understanding the psychological aspect of interpersonal communication on the Network can positively impact understanding the growing phenomenon of cyberspace as a sphere of interpersonal contacts. The topic analysis will allow us to find out the specificity of transmitting nonverbal information in cyberspace and compare it with extraverbal communication in real contacts.

Keywords: The Network, interpersonal communication, nonverbal communication, generations.

Introduction

The contribution of cyberspace to an individual's life is continuously intensifying. In the context of everyday life, the Internet is becoming an integral part of the lives of an increasing number of people. Over the years, one can easily observe that the computer network is becoming present in an ever-increasing number of spheres of human life and functioning (Martens, 2012, 20). Being a social being, humans need other people. Individuals, to satisfy their needs (both the most basic and higher needs), to develop and self-improve, require a social environment that enables the achievement of particular goals. People have functioned as herd creatures since the dawn of time, and have numerous psychological prerequisites in their natural behavioural repertoire that allow them to function effectively in a collective.

The modern world, which is extremely technologically advanced, has opened up a new area for people — virtual reality. The network has become a place where wide-ranging and extremely sophisticated social processes emerge. The Internet has become an avenue for establishing interpersonal relationships, maintaining them, and, above all, a place for people to communicate.

1. Cyberspace as a social place

The Internet, in its origins analogous to the development of computer technology, has diverged from its contemporary image. Its origin dates back 60 years, when Joseph Licklider, considered one of the most important pioneers of cybernetics, initiated efforts to develop a system by which several computers could connect without direct wires. Although its origins within cybernetics were linked primarily to the military sector, over time, the network he created began to be recognised as an area with a wider spectrum than the military sphere. From that point onwards, as technology progressed, cyberspace developed tremendously (Cohen-Almagor, 2011, p. 47). It should be emphasised that, in the course of its own development, the Internet has evolved from a typically pragmatic sphere intended for the acquisition of knowledge and the transmission of clearly defined information (on specific, narrow issues) into a place for the functioning of social life in a number of forms.

Changes in the sphere of Internet use in the area of interpersonal relations should be considered in the context of technological change and primarily in terms of civilisational—social change. Theories on the occurrence and development of generations have mainly been developed in the sociological sciences, however, other social scientists have also addressed the phenomenon. Initially, generations were defined through a biological perspective (as the time between a child's birth and their parents' birth). Still, nowadays, generations are mainly represented by periods of technological development. Nowadays, three main generations are identified regarding the collective

of people living at a specific time of civilisational development: Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z (McCrindle, 2014, 2-7). To comprehend how virtual space has shaped the contemporary image of the sphere of social relations and interpersonal relationships, it is essential to understand what place the Internet occupies in the hierarchy of values, or hierarchy of utility, in the different generational groups. Cyberspace, although intended to be available to every user in the same form and shape, is, in fact, perceived differently by particular generations. Consequently, various age groups function differently in the virtual world, and how they use the media differs.

Generation X is the generation of today's 50- and 60-year-olds, for whom virtual space is a sphere that emerged late in their lives. These are people for whom the Network did not exist for most of their lives in society, and functioning in the collective was based entirely on face-to-face, real-world contacts. For this generation, cyberspace is a kind of add-on to their everyday life, an element that is a minor part of their life rather than an essential feature. (McCrindle, 2014, 11-15; Stanisauskiene, Urboniene, 2018, 40-42). Generation X is the generation that was the first to experience the Internet in Poland, the first that could access cyberspace, and simultaneously, it is the generation that, compared to the next generations, has been least prepared to navigate the virtual world. This is reflected, for instance, by the time spent in cyberspace, where statistics clearly indicate that people in late and middle adulthood are least likely to use new media forms (Wasko, 2016, 142-144).

Generation Y representatives (so-called millennials) tend to use technology professionally and take advantage of the numerous functions and opportunities the Network offers them. These include today's 30- and 40-year-olds, who became acquainted with cyberspace in their late teens, a period of particular openness to the world. On the one hand, they can function in the real world, where social contacts take place on a face-to-face basis, and simultaneously, they can function skilfully in digital reality. Some perceive Generation Y as the generation that has begun to discover the various benefits of using the Internet (Wierzbicka, 2015). Millennials will most likely realise that the virtual world is not just an area for exchanging information. It is also a place for creating a social image and, therefore, a venue where individuals can construct their social identity. Generation Y does not repel the Internet, does not treat it as a necessary evil, but perceives the virtual world as an effect of the inevitable digitalisation of society (Waśko, 2016, 149).

Generation Z also referred to as the iGen (from 'internet generation'), is perceived as a group for whom the virtual world is of paramount value in life. Compared to previous generations, Generation Z perceives the virtual world as the norm and an everyday reality. Social media, news portals, and hobby sites are a regular part of the functioning of the young generation, who use the Web to take advantage of all the opportunities the Web provides. From the perspective of Gen Z representatives, life without the Internet is hardly imaginable (Werendowska, Jaska, 2022, p. 26). For

Generation Z, digital communication has become a commonplace method of communicating with other people and the place where the most frequent and intense social behaviour emerges. Face-to-face contact has largely been replaced by online contact via virtual channels. For several years, it has been observed that the importance of in-person meetings has been declining in favour of an increase in social functioning on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat (Twenge, 2024, p. 482-488). According to J. Twenge (2024, p. 538), this youngest generation can be described as people 'functioning with their nose in a tablet'. The researchers also indicate that the age at which people use social media has decreased, with younger and younger children starting to enter the world of modern virtual media. The current generation of young people participates in face-to-face interaction far less frequently than before. This includes making and keeping contact in small social groups (such as meeting up with friends or mates) and huge groups (e.g., parties). The iGen generation has moved most of its social life into cyberspace. Aa J. Twenge (2023, 87) argues that modern teenagers and adolescents are 'Instagramming, snap chatting and texting with friends' instead of seeing, meeting and spending time together. Friendship in the real world has been transferred to the virtual space. Even when young people have a real social life, modern technology enables them to avoid particular problematic social situations. Young people can seamlessly avoid people they do not feel like communicating with, they can completely block out relationships they do not want to have, and they also have the opportunity to effectively disassociate themselves from any undesirable contact on their part (Twenge, 2023, 89).

There is still the modern generation, which has received no official designation. However, it started to be referred to as the polar or alpha generation. Its image with all its characteristics is only beginning to shape; however, most often, the youngest generation is perceived from the perspective of even more intensive use of digital tools. In the context of the youngest users (i.e. children), the screen is beginning to replace toys, various types of books (entertaining, educational), manual (technical) play, talking with parents, and even playing together with peers. Electronic devices are beginning to be seen as 'all-in-one' tools, that is, from the perspective of the youngest user, as instruments that provide access to any desired activity. Nowadays, having digital devices in childhood has already started to become the norm and standard, which no longer arouses negative responses in society (Twenge, 2024, 539-542).

It can be concluded that there are huge differences between individual generations in the context of Internet use with regard to communicating with others. For the youngest generation, the virtual world is like a home that makes its inhabitants feel very comfortable, where everything is arranged according to their expectations and tailored to their needs. However, for the older generations, the Internet is an uncharted place in which they must learn to navigate, not necessarily by their own choice, but because of changes in civilisation and technology that have affected them. Although

cyberspace is open to every user, not every user has the same competencies, capabilities, predispositions and skills to use it exactly the same way. The social functioning (social communication) of individuals on the Network is very different.

2. Interpersonal communication

Interpersonal communication is a social process that critically determines the sustainability of a social group. It is the process that structures all the activities of the members of a society, which enables the maintaining of bonds and relationships between people. Through communication, individuals can exchange information, form relationships, and create a whole network of different interpersonal dependencies and correlations (Frączek, 2012, 118). Interpersonal communication encompasses two dimensions: the verbal, based on the word (spoken or written), and the nonverbal, involving any nonverbal communication (so-called body language).

Nonverbal communication, in general, is defined as that part of interpersonal communication in which words are not used or employed. This type of mutual communication has been an interesting research subject for several decades. The research works that emerged during the 1960s have begun to document that verbal communication is not the only way for people to communicate. Various and numerous research works have been published, which have indisputably revealed that not only verbal communication but also nonverbal communication has an enormous impact on the quality of the transmission and reading of information. Consequently, the nonverbal channel has begun to be regarded as a communication method that can potentially shape interpersonal relationships significantly (Hecht, Ambady, 1999, pp. 3-4).

Nonverbal communication includes a very wide spectrum of diverse messages. This communication method includes gestures (movements of the hands, arms, fingers), facial expressions (changes in the tension of individual facial muscles), touch (contact of a physical nature), distance (manipulating the distance between interlocutors), eye contact (number and intensity of glances), posture (body position), or any nonverbal aspects of speech (tonality, tone of voice, paralinguistic sounds). Body language, therefore, comprises various elements and is thus not strongly organised, nor is it given a universalistic character (Frączek, 2012, 126 - 127).

The classical model of nonverbal communication is essentially an adaptation of the general communication model by Shannon and Weaver (the model dated 1949), according to which the essence of communication is the transmission of a message (information) from the sender to the receiver. Later in the process, the addressee provides feedback to the sender. In both levels, the message can be distorted by noise, i.e. a specific disturbance that modifies the reception of the message (and the transmission of the feedback message). According to this communication model, the most problematic factor for nonverbal communication is to identify and determine whether the

message conveyed to the addressee corresponds to the intended message. Similarly, it can be unclear whether the recipient's understanding of the message corresponds to any intention of the sender. In fact, it is often the case that people are convinced that the message they send (sent) can only be interpreted in one way, while the addressee's interpretation may differ. It is not uncommon for people to overestimate both the intensity of their nonverbal expressions and their transparency. Similarly, they recognise that the degree to which they are actually observed and perceived by others is very high, which also does not necessarily reflect the actual situation (Hess, 2016, 209-210).

Nonverbal communication fulfils a variety of purposes. It is not just a mere transmission of information performed via routes other than words, but has an extremely important social role. As argued by P. Ekman and W. Friesen (after Nęcki, 2000, pp. 190-193) in the course of their research, nonverbal messages have specific properties through which they form the social image of a given interpersonal group. Researchers have argued that nonverbal communication is primarily a unique code specific to a culture (society). Collectivities create their own system (schema, emblems) according to which nonverbal messages are interpreted and understood. Each society may create social norms differently, indicating how nonverbal messages that occur should be understood and how to respond to them. Furthermore, nonverbal messages can provide an essential context for (and even dominate) verbal communication. Therefore, the meaning and message of the words presented can be amplified or weakened (undermined). Moreover, nonverbal communication is essential in communicating emotions to the recipient. Many nonverbal messages constitute a kind of emotional expression through which the addressee can receive important and relevant information regarding the emotional state of the other participant in the interaction.

According to the essence of nonverbal communication, it is impossible not to communicate. Every bodily activity of an individual can be perceived as a kind of information transfer, even if this activity occurs unconsciously or uncontrollably by the individual concerned. Any expression of a person's emotional expression can be considered a message with informational value. It is, therefore, indicated that nonverbal communication is considerably more difficult to camouflage or conceal, as it occurs outside the informed consent of the individual sending the message (Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson, 2011, p. 51).

A very peculiar feature of nonverbal communication is that the nonverbal signals flowing are automatic in direct contact. Nonverbal messages are very difficult to control; they will occur regardless of the individual's will. An analogy with the emotional sphere occasionally arises — just as it is not easy to surrender conscious control to the experience of emotions, neither is it possible to continuously control one's nonverbal reactions (messages). Regardless of how hard they try and how intensely they endeavour, people cannot entirely refrain from nonverbal behaviour. Furthermore, several nonverbal messages are completely uncontrollable at a particular point in time

- such as the issue of physique and physical attractiveness, which are regarded as nonverbal messages (DePaulo, 1992, pp. 205-206).

It is noteworthy to mention that the expression of emotions is sometimes more intense via the nonverbal channel than through verbal messages. This obviously does not imply that only nonverbal behaviour allows emotions to be conveyed while verbal behaviour does not, similarly, it also does not imply that nonverbal behaviour conveys emotions more often or even more effectively than verbal behaviour (although this is sometimes true). Instead, specific automatic links between emotion evocation and emotion expression are identified to be present for nonverbal but not verbal behaviour (DePaulo, 1992, p. 205).

Therefore, nonverbal communication is an extremely important component of the communication process between people. Due to its refusal to be entirely under conscious control, it is also a distinctive form of contact that cannot be replaced by verbal communication.

3. Nonverbal communication and the Internet

Nowadays, the network provides a huge field for establishing and maintaining social relationships. Cyberspace is where Network users communicate with each other, exchange a variety of information, and transmit a large volume of data. It is, therefore, noteworthy to analyse how the nonverbal aspect of communication has been transferred to the Internet, i.e., a virtual space in which individuals do not function on a real 'face-to-face' basis.

Through rapid technological development, the Network has been transforming and improving very intensively over the years. The virtual world is constantly evolving, and consequently, opportunities for communication regularly undergo progressive transformation. The modern shape of cyberspace allows users to communicate (including nonverbally) through various programmes on various levels.

There are numerous applications and networking programmes that allow users to see each other directly during a call. For instance, Internet users who use software such as MS Teams, Google Meet or Skype can easily communicate with others in full-time synchronisation. By following a webcam image, individuals interacting with each other can retrieve various nonverbal messages, such as changes in facial expression, pantomimic posture or certain changes in the body's physiology (e.g. facial blushing when under severe stress). Connecting with your recipient by using a multimedia channel enables imitating real, actual contact. However, some ambiguities that could question the full transfer of nonverbal messages via the Network may arise. Primarily, when communicating via video, the participant in the relationship is usually not fully visible (but only to the extent allowed by the area provided by the camera), so some messages coming from body language may go completely unobserved. Furthermore,

the type of equipment and the quality of the network connection (understood as the speed of data transfer, i.e., the smoothness of its transmission) considerably affect the quality of the image and sound reaching the recipient. With a low-quality internet connection, where the image resolution is poor, the viewer may not recognise the messages even within the area captured by the webcam. Thus, nonverbal communication is nevertheless impoverished by certain aspects when using a direct online connection between sender and receiver with an image and sound channel.

In the context of nonverbal communication, which is characterised by the creation of expressive social emblems (e.g. greeting and farewell gestures), the virtual world has enabled Internet users to construct their own communication code - based on the indicated nonverbal emblems. An example of nonverbal messages unique to the virtual environment is the emoticons commonly applied by Internet users. These are specific ideograms composed of typographic characters or ideograms with a clear pictorial form. The function of the emoticon is to present an alternate (highly simplified) image of the recipient's face to imitate the sender's facial expression. The primary purpose of employing an emoticon during verbal communication (e.g., instant messaging, internet chat) is to portray one's emotional state. Emoticons are, therefore, first and foremost, a way of expressing emotions, allowing the Internet user to show the feelings experienced at a given moment without using the written (and spoken) word. An emoticon is, therefore, an image of an emotional response. In addition, these distinctive ideographic signs save time in conveying the message, which is analogous to what happens with nonverbal communication in the real area. Similarly to body language, which represents an extremely fast communication method (more rapid than the spoken or written word), using a graphic form of emotion does not require much time (Kumari, Gangwar, 2018, 10-11).

Internet memos are another form of communication that allows emotions to be expressed in a wordless way. Web memos are most commonly displayed in graphic formats such as photographs, drawings, and images (either real or freely photoshopped). Sometimes, they bear a brief textual note that provides a specific meaning, which is usually clearly understood and interpreted within the online community. The graphic form (rather than the text) is essential to the reception and understanding of memos (Zaremba, 2012, 61). According to S. Blackmore (1998), memos predominantly function in communication by means of imitation, thus analogous, for instance, to gestures. These distinctive images are copied from individual Network users on a repetitive basis, i.e. social learning. Therefore, online society learns memos similarly to how people learn language and verbal and nonverbal communication during real-life interactions. Their meaning is not universal, but defined for a specific collective.

However, there is a difference between expressing an emotional state online and expressing emotions during face-to-face contact. This concerns having control over the transmission of individual messages. In the case of real-life relationships,

emotional expression is automatic, often independent of the will and desire of the message's sender. Individuals are most often not in full control of their body language, particularly in the case of changes in the body's physiology (such as changes in breathing rate or changes in pupil size). As outlined in previous sections of this paper, expressing emotion in nonverbal communication is most often uncontrolled (automatic, non-violent), unlike communicating an emotional state via verbal messages (DePaulo, 1992, p. 205). To a certain extent, the Internet enables people to control their information channels — especially emotional ones. The user decides what message about their emotional state to convey to the recipient. Presenting emotional expression on the network does not occur instantaneously and is not subject to conscious control; instead, it results from a decision made by the message's sender. The Internet user chooses which emoticon or other graphic or sound recording the recipient will receive. Thus, nonverbal communication in cyberspace regarding showing emotions is not performed the same way as in face-to-face communication.

However, technological development, regardless of the level of sophistication, does not allow for one vital type of nonverbal communication — touch. The distance and screen barriers effectively prevent participants from establishing a relationship based on direct physicality. Touch is a vitally important part of nonverbal communication. It allows one to express emotions (e.g. love, attachment, feeling of security) and is also an exceptionally important way of conveying one's attitude towards the other participant in the contact. It demonstrates relationship intimacy and closeness (Frączek, 2012, 126). Simultaneously, the lack of touch is a meaningful nonverbal message, as it can imply a distance or emotional remoteness towards individuals. Nowadays, although technological development is very advanced, cyberspace does not make it possible to replicate physical contact between people contacting each other.

However, another aspect of nonverbal communication on the Network should be highlighted. Research by M. Wasylewicz has documented that being accustomed to online communication can cause issues reading nonverbal messages in the real world. Especially the context of the correct reading emotional signals becomes a challenge, as emotions through virtual contact are presented differently than in actual contact (Wasylewicz, 2017, 248). Some concerns can be raised that nonverbal communication competencies will, on the one hand, develop in an online perspective and simultaneously narrow down in the real area. Nonverbal communication on the Network is not identical to nonverbal communication in the real world and, therefore, shapes different behavioural and response characteristics.

Conclusion

The transfer of social life from the real world to the digital reality is inevitable. There are undeniable conveniences involved, enabling opportunities for relationships and

interpersonal contacts to be expanded as never before. However, this phenomenon does involve some potential risks. Communication on the Network, although based entirely on face-to-face communication, is not an identical representation of real communication. Due to their unique characteristics, numerous aspects of 'face-to-face' communication are not reproduced in the virtual world. The screen is incapable of completely replacing actual contact with another human being.

Simultaneously, a considerable number of studies document that the younger generations are increasingly replacing real with online contact. The expansion of the online social world is a fact of life. It is, therefore, legitimate to pose questions to what extent nonverbal communication will be modified in the forthcoming decades and what manifestations this change will involve.

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