

## Study

**We are all cyborgs now, Case (2007)**

According to Amber Case (2007) because people's use of technology is so embedded in their daily lives, they are becoming cyborgs. By this she means that people are part human part machine. She argues that the way that people interact with technology defines their identity. In her study of the effects of mobile phone use, Case argues that people are now in a post modern era much more able to select and develop different

aspects of their identity in a global rather than a local context. Case regards this as potentially beneficial, but warns about the dangers of digital communication which results in a trail of information about someone that can be difficult to remove. For example, the usual mistakes made in adolescence (such as saying the wrong thing, or acting inappropriately) are recorded through digital media, whereas in the past such errors were not as visible.

from the previous section, the feminist Haraway explained how cyborgs could offer women the chance to transcend their gender to avoid traditional assumptions about women and allow them to engage differently with others online.

In online settings such as social network sites, chat rooms, or discussion groups, identity processes are complicated because many identity cues (such as gender or age) are masked and can be selectively shared, withheld, or misrepresented. In these and other online contexts, identity is essentially constructed by the user. Individuals can adopt multiple online personalities, and online activities often leave visible traces which can be captured, tracked, packaged, and shared (Ellison, 2013).

People's online identities continue to overlap with their offline lives, sometimes with positive or negative effects. For example, the UK's first youth police and crime commissioner, Paris Brown, resigned from her post following criticism of messages she posted on Twitter. Police investigated Paris Brown following investigations into tweets she posted between the ages of 14 and 16 which could be considered racist and anti-gay.

## Activity

**Achieved and ascribed characteristics**

- 1 Which parts of your identity are chosen (achieved) and which are given (ascribed)?
- 2 Why might people want to choose an alternative identity to their offline identity?
- 3 What are the benefits and problems with being able to choose your own identity?

**Age and digital communication**

Age has a considerable effect on the way in which digital communication is used.

The Ofcom Report (2014) revealed the following patterns.

- More UK adults, especially older adults, are now going online, using a range of devices.
- Privacy and security attitudes and behaviour continue to vary considerably by age group.
- Over eight in ten (83 per cent) of adults now go online. Nearly all 16–24s and 25–34s are now online (98 per cent), and there has been a nine percentage point increase in those aged 65+ ever going online (42 per cent vs. 33 per cent in 2012).
- The number of adults using tablets to go online has almost doubled; from 16 per cent in 2012 to 30 per cent in 2013. While almost all age groups are more likely than previously to use tablets, the use by those aged 35–64 has doubled, while use by 65–74s has trebled; from 5 per cent to 17 per cent. This undoubtedly means greater use of digital communication.
- Six in ten UK adults (62 per cent) now use a smartphone, an increase from 54 per cent in 2012.
- Gaming has grown in popularity, driven by older age-groups and mobile phones.
- Compared to 2012, those aged 45–54 are twice as likely to play games over the internet (18 per cent vs. 9 per cent).
- 65 per cent of men and 48 per cent of women age 18–34 use Wikipedia, compared with 40 per cent of men and 28 per cent of women age 35+.
- Two thirds (66 per cent) of online adults say they have a current social networking site profile.

## Activity

**Age and technology**

Six-year-olds understand digital technology better than adults

The average six-year-old child understands more about digital technology than a 45-year-old adult, according to a new report. The introduction of broadband in the year 2000 has created a generation of digital natives, the communication watchdog Ofcom says in its annual study of British consumers. Born in the new millennium, these children have never known the dark ages of dial up internet, and the youngest are learning how to operate smartphones or tablets before they are able to talk.

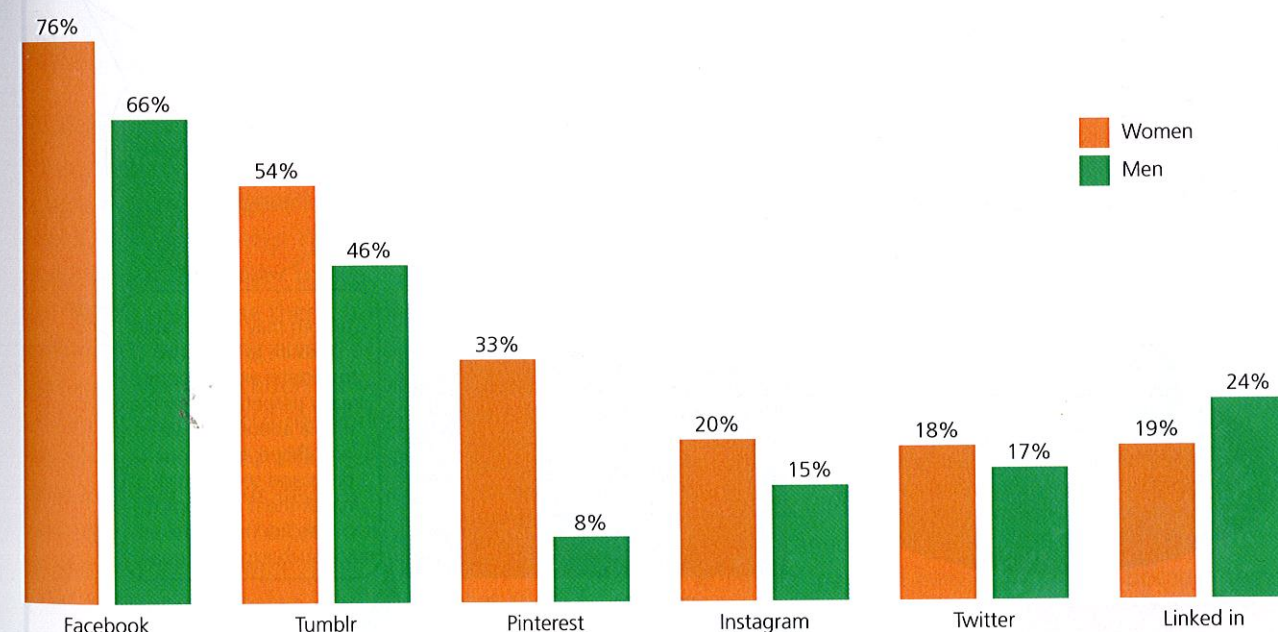
The report suggests that as a result, younger generations are shaping digital communication. Children are developing fundamentally different communication habits from older generations. While half of all adults claimed to know a lot about smartphone and tablet apps, nearly half had never heard of Snapchat, the picture messaging service launched in 2011, which is overwhelmingly used by people under the age of 25.

The most remarkable change is in time spent talking by phone. Two decades ago, teenagers devoted their evenings to monopolising the home telephone line, dissecting love affairs and friendships in conversations that lasted for hours. For those aged 12 to 15, phone calls account for just 3 per cent of time spent communicating through any device. Today's children do the majority of their remote socialising by sending written messages or through shared photographs and videos. "The millennium generation is losing its voice," Ofcom claims.

Source: Adapted from *The Guardian*, Juliette Garside, 7th August 2014

- 1 What does this article suggest about the generational difference in the use of digital communication?
- 2 What effects might this have on young and older people's offline lives?
- 3 How would cultural pessimists such as Marxists interpret this article?

Percentage of US Online Adults Using the Top Social Media in 2013



Source: Adapted from Zeendo.com

The sociologist Boyle (2007) argues that with each successive generation, the greater the reliance on and use of digital communication. So much so, that this has contributed to the idea that there is a 'digital generation divide' between the old, who are less likely to use digital communication and the young, who are very proficient and reliant on it.

## Quick question

Why do you think young people are more likely to use digital forms of communication?

Boyle argues that the generational divide is not particular to digital communication, but can be





seen within the media more generally, with younger generations taking an interest in different forms of music such as rock and pop while adults prefer alternative types of music and taste in art and so forth. Boyle also suggests that young people are more receptive to learning new skills demanded by new forms of technology and communication. It may also be because young people are perhaps more keen to explore and assert their emergent adult identities and digital communication can be the most effective way to do this. Young people are likely to place greater importance on their peer group and social networks, which are highly influential in their lives during their adolescence, which may be another reason why they are more likely to use digital forms of communication.

Another factor to consider is that some (but by no means all) is that parents are spending more money on their children. For example it now costs on average £230,000 to raise a child to the age of 21 (Centre

of Economic and Business Research with London Victoria, 2015). Therefore, young people today have much greater access to expensive phones, tablets and laptops which enable them a wide range of ways in which to engage with digital forms of communication. In the past, not only did people have less money to spend on their children, but there were simply less technological devices available.

The other obvious reason why younger people are more likely to be users of digital communication; they have more free time on their hands as they generally have less responsibilities such as jobs, caring responsibilities and duties and therefore the immediacy of the communication means that it is possible for them to communicate with many different people in a highly effective way. It is also true that adults are spending increasing amounts of their free time on new forms of social media, but their free time amounts to proportionally less than that of young people and teenagers.

### Activity

#### Impacts of digital communication on young people

1 Sort the following statements into negative and positive categories.

Toxic parenting. Palmer argues that good quality parenting is increasingly being replaced by parents using technology to occupy their children. This results in children feeling increasingly isolated and unable to relate to others face to face, offline.

The internet exposes children to adult content much more easily than before where children did not have access to adult worlds (Postman). This includes, sex, violence and disturbing ideas.

There is a risk of children being exploited online, for example, resulting in sexual abuse.

Children can learn valuable new skills, enhance learning and create important new connections with people increasing their social capital.

Children are more likely to engage with political or social issues in new ways which would previously not have occurred. For example, online campaigns and social movements.

Children may feel greater pressure to conform to societal expectations already perpetuated by the media about body size and shape, behaviour, dress and so on which makes them unhappy if they are unable to reach such expected goals.

Cyber bullying and discrimination.

Support groups and networks which enable children to gain help in ways which were previously impossible.

Children are able to access ideas and information quickly, meaning there is less hierarchy in knowledge - in other words there is nothing preventing children learning from a huge array of information on the internet.

2 Once you have done this, write a one page essay about the positive and negative effects of digital communication on young people.

### Study

#### Older users of the internet, Berry (2011)

Berry carried out research on secondary data focusing on the way older people use the internet. His research findings reveal that among those who do not have access to the internet, most people cite non-material reasons such as lack of skills or lack of interest to explain why they are not online. Other research has highlighted the psychological barriers preventing older people from accessing the web. These reasons appear to be more significant than material factors such as cost or lack of physical infrastructure. Older people who do use the internet tend to do so less frequently than younger people. The ONS data shows of all internet users log on

every day, while only 59 per cent of older users (above 65) do this.

Berry notes that there has been content designed specifically to encourage older people to use the internet, based on the use of accessible web design. For instance, the website Finerday is a social network designed to encourage older people to use it: it has a number of the functions of other networks such as Facebook, but with high contrast colours, large font and a simplified format.

- 1 How might the term 'digital divide' be applied to older people?
- 2 What are the main reasons for older people not using the internet?

### Older users of digital communication

According to recent research findings, 79 per cent of households below the state pension age have internet access, while only 37 per cent of households above the state pension age do so. This difference gives rise to the notion of the digital divide, between those who enjoy access to the internet and those who are excluded (Berry, 2011).

### Evaluation

Things are changing, and older generations are beginning to use digital forms of communication much more frequently. This may be because they may have taken longer to acquire the skills which are necessary to use them. It might also be because people are becoming aware of the need to use digital forms of communication for work, for example, as a way to create social networks. It might also be because of increased affluence, that some people can afford to buy various devices today which they may not have been able to previously. Another reason might be that the wide range of ways in which digital communication is being used means that there is greater appeal for older people, for example, online shopping, lifestyle applications and so forth, meaning that they have more practical appeal.

### Social class and digital communication

Digital communication relies upon various devices through which the internet can be accessed. These devices are expensive, need maintaining and regular

updating. For example, tablets can cost over five hundred pounds and monthly internet connection fees are on average £15, a month. Further there are areas of the country where access to high speed broadband connection is possible whereas in other parts of the country it is not available. There is considerable consumer choice and competition, for example, owning the latest phone or tablet has become seen as important by many. For those who cannot afford these items, known as the digital underclass, this results in even greater disadvantage and less social capital. This is because:

- Social networks are largely dependent on digital communication.
- Education for children now relies a lot on digital communication, thus disadvantaging many children who cannot afford to have smartphones or access to the internet.
- A knowledge gap is created between those who have access to the internet and can quickly access information, services and ideas and those who cannot.
- People may feel inferior or lacking because they are not sharing in digital forms of communication.
- Information shared through digital communication can shape cultural ideas and if excluded from this people may feel removed from what is happening in society.

There have been a number of studies around the world which have found evidence of a digital divide based along the lines of social class.



### Study

#### The digital divide, Mertens and D'Haenens (2010)

Mertens and D'Haenens (2010) found in their study of the digital divide in Brussels that lower social class was linked with lower internet use (81 per cent are users, compared to 94 per cent of middle class). Moreover, individuals with low social class tended to focus their technology use on entertainment rather than knowledge and information (79 per cent owned game consoles, compared to 65 per cent for higher social class). While they originally sought to measure digital inequality by ethnicity and gender, they found that social class is the most powerful social variable. In reality, this relationship between social class and

use of the internet and digital media may be even greater than the research suggested because of embarrassment to admit low status, although the questionnaire was anonymous. Similar results are found in digital access divides in Latin America (Brazil and Uruguay), which showed that social class was more important than other factors such as age, gender and education level.

- 1 Describe the patterns in relation to social class and use of the internet
- 2 How do the working class use the internet differently compared with the middle class according to this study?

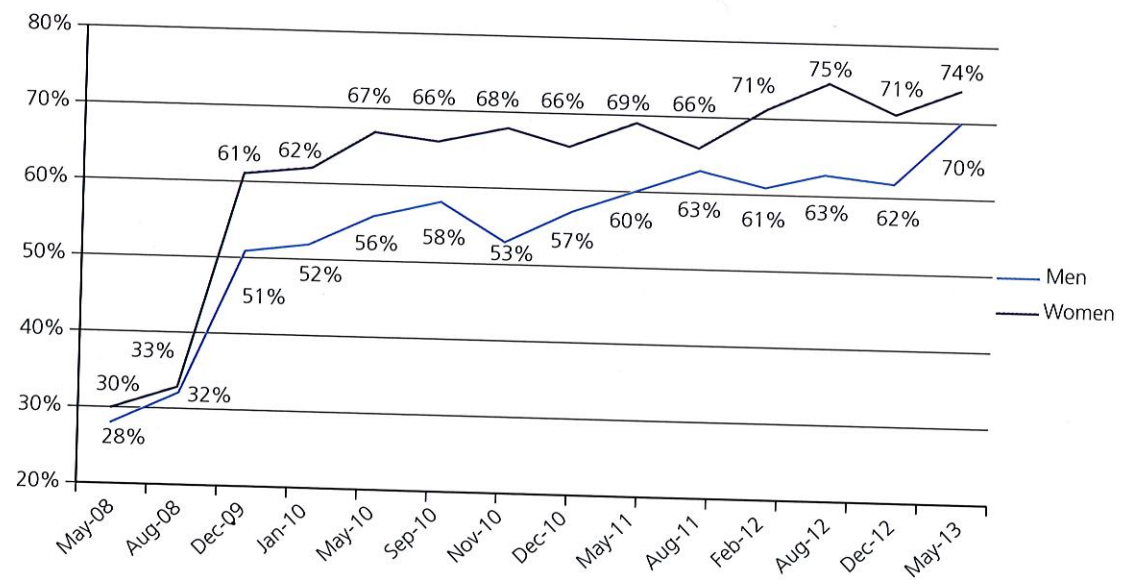
### Activity

#### Access

- 1 In pairs think about who might be less likely to have access to the internet in the UK.
- 2 Make a list of all the different ways this might affect them negatively in terms of
  - a) education
  - b) health

- c) employment
  - d) leisure
  - e) maintaining relationships
- 3 Describe the barriers to people's use of the internet and how these might be overcome.

### Gender and digital communication



Source: Pew Research Centre's Internet and American Life Project Tracking Surveys, May 2008 – May 2013, from socialmedialondon.co.uk, adapted from socialmedialondon.co.uk

Gender differences reveal interesting patterns about the different ways in which men and women engage with digital communication. Earlier in the

chapter we discussed some feminist theoretical interpretations of the gender divide in relation to digital communication (see page 12). Statistics

### Activity

#### Gender and social media

- 1 Carry out some research in pairs on the ways in which the use of social media is affected by gender, using interviews or questionnaires.
- 2 In your research make sure that you investigate the different ways that boys and girls vary in their use of e-mails, social network sites and games to highlight any patterns.
- 3 Write a report on your findings, suggesting some reasons for the results using the following concepts:
  - a) patriarchal ideology
  - b) gendered socialisation
  - c) gender stereotypes

### Study

#### Attitudes towards the internet and computers, Li and Kirkup (2007)

Li and Kirkup (2007) investigate differences in use of, and attitudes toward the internet and computers generally for Chinese and British students, and gender differences in this cross-cultural context. Using a sample of 220 Chinese and 245 British students, they carried out a self-report survey questionnaire. They found significant differences in internet experience, attitudes, usage, and self-confidence between Chinese and British students. Most significant however, were the gender differences that were also found in both groups. Men in both countries were more likely than women to use email or chat rooms. Men played more computer games than women. Interestingly, men in both countries were more self-confident about their computer skills than women, and were more likely to express the opinion that using computers was a male activity and skill. Gender differences were higher in the British group than the Chinese group. The study illustrates the continued significance of gender in students attitudes towards, and use of computers, within different cultural contexts.

- 1 What does this study reveal about gender and the use of digital communication?
- 2 Name a potential problem with self-report questionnaires.

reveal the following about gender and digital communications in the USA:

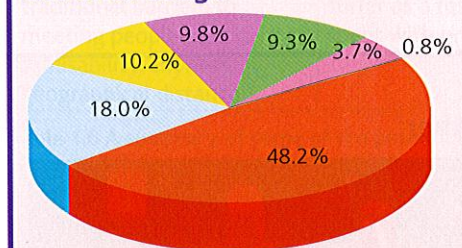
- Younger women are much more likely to use digital forms of communication to maintain social relationships: 42 per cent of women use social media to stay in touch, compared with 34 per cent of women age 18–34.
- Younger users (particularly men) use social media for a wider variety of reasons other than maintaining relationships, particularly entertainment (28 per cent).
- Younger women spend the least amount of time using social media to find information (16 per cent).
- Women have an average number of 394 posts on Facebook and 69 per cent of Facebook gamers are women, again outnumbering the men.
- In each month in 2014, 40 million more women visited Twitter than men and among the top 50 brands followers on Instagram, 53 per cent were woman. Google+ was 64 per cent male user based and 25 per cent of men watched a video daily on YouTube.

### Location and digital communication

Evidence about the use of the internet in different parts of the world reveals interesting patterns of access, which may partially help to explain the uneven distribution of globalisation. In general, more developed affluent countries have greater access to and consumption of the internet, which comes as no surprise.

### Activity

#### Internet usage



- Asia 48.2%
- Europe 18.0%
- Lat Am/Carib 10.2%
- Africa 9.8%
- North America 9.3%
- Middle East 3.7%
- Oceania/Australia 0.8%

#### Internet usage worldwide 2015

Source: Adapted from Internet World Stats 2015

- 1 How might you explain the patterns above?
- 2 Explain some of the effects of these patterns.



Social group	Patterns	Explanations
Age groups	Young people are more likely to use digital forms of communication, but this pattern is changing and there are increasing numbers of older people beginning to use them too.	Younger people: Have more time Are more affluent More able to learn new skills More keen to use new forms of digital communication to develop and express their emerging identities
Social class	Those with less money have higher rates of non-participation in digital forms of communication leading to a 'digital underclass'. The more affluent are able to increase their social capital through networks online, strengthening their position socially and economically in society.	There are considerable costs linked with digital forms of communication including set up and maintenance. This digital divide leads to increasing social inequalities in society.
Gender	Men and women use digital forms of communication very differently; the digital world is perceived to be overwhelmingly masculine, and women use social media much more than men. Thus, gender roles and identities are often reinforced and reproduced through digital forms of communication.	Women are more likely to engage with social media while men contribute more to the work-based networking sites.
Locality	Developing countries are increasing their use of digital communication but are still significantly behind compared with the usage of developed westernised countries.	Globalisation is not occurring evenly and many parts of the world lack the money or freedom to access western forms of digital media which require considerable start-up costs. This results in poorer people being further marginalised and disadvantaged.

Table 1.5 A summary of the way different groups interact with digital communication.

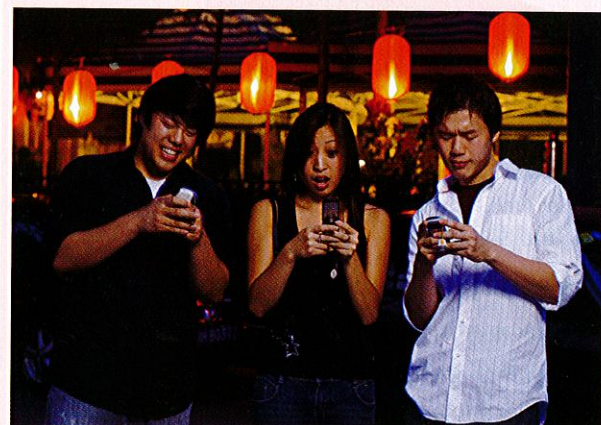
### How has digital communication affected people's relationships?

As a recently emerging phenomenon, digital forms of communication are having a range of effects on people's relationships, yet much is to be learnt

about what these effects are and if there are any general patterns emerging. There are two issues worth thinking about here: how do new forms of digital communication affect both the quality and also the quantity of relationships.

#### Activity

##### 'Alone together'



Turkle (2011) expresses concerns about the ways in which our communication tools distance us from one another because we are 'alone together' – in the same room but using our devices to communicate with others or engage in other tasks.

- 1 What effects might being 'alone together' have on offline relationships?
- 2 Name some of the benefits of online relationships.

### What kinds of relationships are created through digital forms of communication?

Relationships consist of social ties, which are the connections between individuals that link them together, which vary in strength. According to Granovetter (1973) the strength of ties between two individuals can be measured as follows:

- 1 The amount of time spent together.
- 2 The emotional intensity of the relationship.
- 3 The level of intimacy.
- 4 The degree of reciprocity (how much the other person responds in a similar way back).

Relationships with other people are typically broken into two major categories: weak ties, or individuals who are considered mere acquaintances, are differentiated from strong ties, such as close friends and family members.

Granovetter argues that weak ties are in many respects more important than strong ties. The strength of weak ties is that they create connections between members of the network. Weak ties connect an individual to people with whom he or she has little in common and would likely not be able to connect with through strong ties, such as a celebrity. Therefore the removal of an average weak tie would potentially do more 'damage' to the person's social network than the removal of an average strong tie.

This can be directly applied to the social networks created online where weak and strong ties may be equally as significant. With the rise of the internet and digital communication, much recent research has looked at the impact of online forms of communication on social ties.

Activities that connect individuals directly to one another (such as email, chat) tend to have positive correlations to social ties, meaning that they strengthen relationships, while those activities that are more solitary in nature, such as surfing the internet, tend to have more negative correlations to social ties

(Zhao, 2006). Research from the 1990s found negative correlations between internet use and social ties, but these findings were later disproven, especially as most individuals using the internet for social purposes also maintained their offline relationships (Kraut et al. 2002). In addition, Kraut argues that online social ties tend to be weaker than relationships formed and maintained offline.

Feld (1981) suggests that people use social networks to evaluate both themselves and others. In other words, an individual's identity is, in part, determined by the network of friends he or she maintains. Much of the research on friendship networks has focused on how people make friends or how many friends individuals have (Feld, 1981, 1991). One's social network is directly linked to the number of strong and weak ties a person can maintain.

We will now turn to some of the potential positive and negative effects of digital communication on relationships.

Positive effects	Negative effects
Another opportunity to meet people	A lack of privacy or differing ideas about privacy between people resulting in conflict
Immediacy: people can be contacted instantly	Hard to switch off
An opportunity to meet people who you would not normally come into contact with	Having to come into contact with people that the person may not want to
A way of people overcoming traditional barriers to meeting people such as disability, shyness, geographical distance	People's offline relationships suffer as a result of the time spent with online relationships

Table 1.6 A summary of some of the potential positive and negative effects of digital communication

#### Quick question

Can you think of any other positive or negative effects of digital communication on relationships?