COMMUNICATION
ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

EDITED BY
Jon F. Nussbaum

**INTERNATIONAL
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THE THEME BOOK SERIES

As we grow up and grow old, embrace new experiences, try new roles, and adopt new technologies, our senses of time, space, connection, and identity are fundamentally explored through communication. Why, how, with whom, and to what end humans communicate reflect and shape our ever-changing life span position. And while the "life span" can be conceived as a continuum, it is also one hinged by critical junctures and bound by cultural differences that can be better understood through communication.

The chapters in this collection, chosen from among the invited plenary speakers, top research papers, and ideas discussed in San Juan, explore the multiple ways communication affects, reflects, and directs our life transition. Capturing the richness and diversity of scholarship presented at the conference, chapters explore communication technologies that define a generation; communication and successful aging; stereotyping and family communication; sexual communication and physiological measurement; life span communication and the digital divide; and home-based care contexts across the world, among others.

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Communication
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to
Michael Haley, for his extraordinary service to the
International Communication Association as Executive Director
and
To the memory of
Wolfgang Donsbach for his contributions as scholar, president, editor,
and his many years of service to the International Communication Association.

*ICA Presidents with Michael Haley (front row, 4th from the left) and Wolfgang Donsbach
(first row, 1st on the left) at the 2015 San Juan, Puerto Rico, International Association Communication
Conference. Photo Credit Jake Gillespie.*

Introduction to Communication Across the Life Span

AMY B. JORDAN AND JON F. NUSSBAUM

The 2015 San Juan, Puerto Rico International Communication conference theme *Communication Across the Life Span* encouraged ICA scholars to explore the various ways in which our discipline provides a lens for interpreting the evolving meanings, relationships, and experiences and critical crossroads of the life course. Technological evolution, economic changes, medical advancements, environmental turbulence, political movements, and other evolving circumstances not only influence our experiences across the life span but also the development of social policies and ethical frameworks that shape societies. Across domains, life span dynamics are inseparable from the communication processes surrounding them.

Communication scholars constructed a dynamic dialogue grounded within the theme that produced a rich exploration of the multiple ways communication affects, reflects, and directs life's trajectory. As we grow up and grow old, embrace new experiences, try new roles, and adopt new technologies, our sense of time–space connection and identity are fundamentally explored through communication. Why, how, with whom, and to what end humans communicate reflect and shape their ever-changing life span position. And while the "life span" can be conceived as a continuum, it is also one hinged by critical junctures and bound by cultural differences that can be better understood through communication.

The theme of *Communication Across the Life Span* recognizes that as humans transition through life, communication expectations shift, roles are redefined, media use patterns transform, and interaction patterns evolve. From a thematic

perspective, communication scholars considered the ways in which norms for maintaining relationships through communication shift within and between life stages. From a methodological perspective, communication scholars explored the need for life-stage variables, age-appropriate measures, and research methods and designs that appropriately capture change across the life span.

The conference theme encouraged exploration from a variety of viewpoints. For example, "life span" can be considered as age-connected developmental factors. But it can also be viewed as a place from which to consider social roles and cultural contexts, irrespective of chronological age. Moreover, it is important to recognize that notions of "age," "life stage," and "life span" are socially, geographically, and historically constructed. For example, the ways in which cultures define "generations" may be rooted in the technology, politics, or economy of the time. The conventional construction of children, and older adults for that matter, as asexual may constrain conversations about sexual identity and sexual health in some communities. Additionally, "new" life stages are introduced as educational and economic realities shift (witness the relatively modern construction of adolescence and current interest in "emerging adult" as a distinct time of life). Adding to the ways we imagine the life span is information conveyed through media. Portrayals of characters and celebrities set up expectations of what to wear, how to talk, and how to behave. And rapidly developing media technologies have the potential to change life stage experiences by connecting or isolating individuals, families, or communities.

This book presents a series of chapters that capture the richness and diversity of scholarship that the *Communication Across the Life Span* theme generated during the 2015 ICA conference. The initial three chapters written by Sun Sun Lim, Jean Burgess, and Zizi Papacharissi were developed from the opening plenary session of the conference entitled *Do communication technologies define a generation?* Each chapter addresses the notion that any understanding of a generation or a generational identity must be contextualized within the powerful constructive qualities of the rich technological environment within which we live. The next three chapters address significant topics of communication scholarship that have had a profound impact upon the way social scientists explore significant events within our everyday lives. Jessica Gasiorek, Craig Fowler, and Howie Giles place communication at the core of our understanding of successful aging. Mary Lee Hummert explores the complex interactive impact of aging stereotypes within family communication dynamics. Amanda Denes and her coauthors explore long-term relationships, aging, and physiology within post sex communication.

The final five chapters of this theme book serve as a call to action for communication scholars to vigorously pursue impactful life span communication research. Margot van der Goot focuses her chapter on older adults' mediated communication. Peter Hart-Brinson, Guobin Yang, and Piermacro Aroldi present

a chapter focusing on techno-social generations and life span communication. Fausto Colombo discusses the notions of active aging, media, and communication. Susan B. Kretchmer and her coauthors focus upon the worldwide challenges for communication scholarship across the life span in the digital age. Kirstie McAllum and her coauthors present a unique scholarly dialogue on constructing the carer across the life span of care worldwide.

Our hope is that the chapters within this theme book represent the rich and diverse scholarship shared at the San Juan conference. In addition, it is our hope that this theme book enlightens and energizes all communication scholarship to incorporate a life span communication perspective within research programs across the diversity of international communication research. We feel that advances within the scholarly knowledge base of communication can be reinforced if not accelerated by an understanding of the theoretical and methodological significance of life span communication.

Young People and Communication Technologies

Emerging Challenges in Generational Analysis

SUN SUN LIM

Distinct "media generations" are identified through the association of successive generations of youths with the most prevalent media of their time. The resulting labels, ranging from "television generation" to "digital natives," seem to offer a convenient shorthand for describing media consumers of different eras. However, generational labels are often superficial and sweeping "generationalizations" that are insufficiently nuanced for understanding marginalized, understudied populations whose social and family contexts depart from the norm. Even so, the shortcomings of generationalizations should not detract from the value of the generational approach in studying media consumers and their traits, attitudes, and practices. In this chapter, I argue that the generational approach can offer productive inroads into the study of youth media practices and parental mediation, but is undermined by three emerging challenges. I conclude by suggesting ways in which researchers can strive to overcome these difficulties. I illustrate with findings from my recent research on juvenile offenders and transnational youths and also discuss them in relation to previous literature.

THE TROUBLE WITH GENERATIONALIZATION

Media devices have evolved over time, encroaching into the domestic realm and becoming household essentials. With each wave of gadgets and innovations, new terms have emerged to capture a particular generation's socio-technical relationship

with their media devices, from the "television generation" and "NetGen" (Herring, 2008; Tapscott, 1999), to "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b) and "Generation Google" (Oblinger, 2008; Rowlands et al., 2008). Beyond the English-speaking world, similar generational labels abound. In China, young people are often referred to as "*ditouzu*," literally "the tribe that always keeps their heads lowered" to peer at their mobile devices. While in Vietnam, "s ng o," literally "live virtually," is the label for young people who constantly post photographs or sensational status updates in a quest for "Likes" and social affirmation. Around the world, therefore, there is no denying the appeal of catchy terms that can encapsulate how young people are connecting with, and through, media devices and services.

However, such labels are ultimately generationalizations (Driscoll & Gregg, 2008; McRobbie, 2004), that is, gross generalizations about how particular generations' media practices are distinctive and consistently displayed by every member of that generation. In the area of children, adolescents, and the media, one of the most critiqued generationalizations is Mark Prensky's "digital natives" (2001a; 2001b):

> [Digital natives] have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age…. It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today's students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1)

While such generationalizations tend to gain traction in the media and public consciousness, as well as ignite moral panics, they are ultimately reductionist, lacking in nuance, and assume homogeneity in entire generations of media consumers (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Vittadini, Siibak, Reifová, & Bilandzic, 2013). Previous research has shown that uniformity in young people's media usage and skills is all but a given. For example, Hargittai (2010) assessed the internet competencies of US college students from the "net generation" and found considerable variation in their skills and uses, with individuals from more affluent families exhibiting a greater range of uses and more intensive incorporation of the internet into their everyday activities. Correspondingly, those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds demonstrated lower levels of online competencies and engaged in significantly less information-seeking activity on the internet. Similarly, Jones, Ramanau, Cross, and Healing's (2010) study of "digital native" university students in the UK presented a variegated picture of usage and skills in general computer technologies and online learning tools. Not only were there significant variations in their use of technologies for socializing and recreation, students reported relatively low levels of confidence in their use of virtual learning environments in their studies too. In the same vein, Cheong (2008) probed the internet practices

of young adults in Singapore and, contrary to their tech-savvy image, she found among them secondary level digital divides in internet usage and skills, as well as problem-solving competencies.

Besides perpetuating gross oversimplifications of entire generations' media usage patterns and skills, Selwyn (2009) asserts that such generationalizations are particularly dangerous because they have commonsensical appeal and therefore go uncritiqued. Accepted as irrevocable truths, these generational labels then become unduly powerful. He further notes that the discourse accompanying the "digital native" trope is either overly celebratory in exulting the technological competencies of young people or excessively pessimistic in underlining the multi-faceted risks young people are susceptible to as they use digital media. With respect to the latter, Buckingham (2006) observes that generational labels are technologically deterministic and (erroneously) signal that technology is responsible for emergent fears and concerns surrounding young people.

Should this unbridled spread of the "digital native" rhetoric thus serve as a cautionary warning against taking a generational approach in media studies? Must we steer clear of identifying media usage trends and attitudes toward technology among particular age groups for fear of propagating generational essentialisms? Or is there still inherent value to be derived from analyzing media users through a generational lens?

THE VALUE OF GENERATIONAL ANALYSIS

A generation has been defined as "a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time" (Eyerman & Turner, 1998, p. 93). Transposing the changing media landscape over definitions of this nature, the "media generations" approach posits that different generations can be distinguished by the media that they avidly use in their youth, are united by this shared experience, and will consequently sustain a special connection with that medium for the rest of their lives (Aroldi, 2011; Gumpert & Cathcart, 1985). In other words, media generations have cultural, temporal, and technological dimensions that collectively shape subsequent engagement with media content and contexts. Cohort analysis of media consumers also takes a generational approach, although some may disagree that a cohort necessarily equates to a generation (for a more extensive discussion, see Bolin, 2014). In this chapter, I use the term generational approach more broadly to refer to studies that focus on both generations and cohorts. Let us first consider how a generational framework can aid in our understanding of media consumers.

To begin with, attaching labels that demarcate different generations by salient characteristics of their media use can have symbolic value, with accompanying practical repercussions. While the term "thumb tribe" serves as a metonymy for young people's intensive use of mobile devices, it also sensitizes society to the principal means by which these young consumers are communicating, learning, and socializing and can motivate parenting, pedagogical, and policy responses that are suitably attuned. As Selwyn (2009) posits, "the notion of the 'digital native' could be welcomed as providing a ready rhetorical space for the expression of adult concerns over current developments in digital technology" (p. 376).

Beyond mere symbolic value, prior research has also amply demonstrated that the generational approach has been used to productively map different generations in terms of their initial introduction to media, media use patterns, exposure to media content, attitudes toward media and technology, and media literacy skills. Danowski and Ruchinskas (1983) analyzed different generations' first introduction to television and its impact on their news consumption. In this early study on televised presidential campaigns in the US from the 1950s to the 1970s, they found that variance in television exposure could be attributed to cohort effects. The cohort that in midlife was exposed to television when it was first introduced went on to use television at a higher rate in later life compared to other cohorts. They observed that it was cohort, and not age or life stage, that determined television use and, correspondingly, exposure to televised political campaigns. They further argued that early to middle adulthood socialization to communication had a stronger effect than pre-adult socialization on media consumption in later life.

Similarly, Dou, Wang, and Zhou (2006) adopted a cohort approach, in combination with uses and gratifications theory, to identify the media preferences of China's Generation X consumers. This generation's formative years coincided with China's reform and modernization of the late 1970s and are the key target group for advertisers. Using syndicated data from a large random sample of urban Chinese consumers, they found that compared to preceding generational cohorts, Generation X consumers have a strong preference for entertainment-based media programs, such as television drama series and radio pop music, and eschew information-based news or business reports. This preference was especially sharp for urban Generation X consumers and less pronounced for their rural counterparts.

In the area of technology domestication, Haddon and Silverstone undertook cohort analyses of different generations, studying how their life experiences, values, and worldviews shape their communicative practices and expectations of technology (Haddon, 2006; Haddon & Silverstone, 1996). Their study of older adults in the early 1990s showed that particular cohort had enjoyed relative affluence from the 1950s, but their fundamentally non-consumerist values disinclined them from

acquiring new technological devices unless there were compelling reasons to do so (Haddon, 2000). Their adoption of newer technologies was thus fairly conservative, and they would only purchase items that were an extension of those they were already accustomed to, such as video recorders and cordless telephones. Since they had retired from active employment before the age of office automation, they were also averse to acquiring information technology (IT) skills in later life.

Over time, with the rising diffusion of the internet, generational trends in internet usage have also been tracked. Apart from the studies mentioned earlier that focused on "digital natives," research has also delved into the internet use of the wider population. Notably, Helsper (2010) explored the relationship between generation, gender, and life stage (measured as employment and marital status) in British internet users. She found small but significant gender differences for most uses of the internet that vary for different life stages, with gender inequalities in internet use being smaller among younger people. The study also concluded that generation was less important than life stage in predicting gender differences in internet use.

The growing ubiquity of the mobile phone has also impelled generational analysis of its adoption. Bolin and Westlund (2008) studied three generations of mobile technology users in Sweden and found generational distinctions in their uses of SMS, MMS, and voice calls and observed that the differences between the generations seemed to persist over their five-year period of study. Their survey results show that both the youngest and middle generation make more voice calls than the oldest generation, whereas for texting, the youngest generation are the most avid users with the middle and oldest generation trailing considerably behind. Overall, the youngest generation displayed the greatest breadth and intensity of use of mobile phone functions, diametrically opposed therefore to the oldest generation.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the generational approach to understanding the predilections, gratifications, and impediments encountered by media consumers can usefully inform public education, policy planning, media production, marketing, interface design, and parental mediation. With specific regard to parental mediation, a generational approach can help to chart the extent and nature of divergence between parents and children in their media use so that prescriptions can be made for bridging the generation gap.

THREE EMERGING CHALLENGES IN GENERATIONAL ANALYSIS

However, even as the generational approach to media studies offers analytical profit, the rapid pace of change in our prevailing media landscape poses significant challenges for generational analysis. I will draw on examples from my media