The Digital Native Phenomenon: Implications for Counseling Practice

Meredith A. Rausch

Laura L. Gallo

The University of Iowa

Author Note:

Meredith A. Rausch and Laura L. Gallo, The University of Iowa.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Meredith Rausch, N 338, The Department of Rehabilitation and Counselor Education, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242. Phone: 608.751.5996 Fax: N/A E-mail: [meredith-rausch@uiowa.edu](mailto:meredith-rausch@uiowa.edu)

Abstract

A focus on consistent use of technological mechanisms for entertainment and communication practice appears commonplace for the adolescents of today. Counseling practitioners may view these practices as less valuable than the traditional art of face to face communication practiced in earlier decades. The value adolescents place on technological means may create implications for counseling practice regarding rapport, goal setting, and empathy. These authors discuss the digital native phenomenon and perspective, along with implications and suggestions for counseling practice in a digital native world.

*Keywords: Digital Native, social media, adolescent*

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North American citizens born after the year 1980 belong to the group, “Digital Natives” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; p.1). The title incorporates any individual who has never experienced a world sans technology. This population relies upon digital devices and social media for a variety of daily tasks, including communication, news updates, and exploration (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Social media, digital technology, and other online resources transform practice in the counseling arena—with requests to provide telephone or online counseling services, or other practices that threaten the maintenance of confidentiality (Reamer, 2013). With an expanded potential for social and human discourse, counseling practice must grow with the emerging trend and begin to utilize social media aspects within the therapeutic context (Junco & Chickering, 2010). This article explores the digital native phenomenon through implications for counseling practice, including the developmental perspective, ethical and risk management, and techniques for increasing rapport and better understanding the role digital technology plays in this population.

Digital Natives

Digital Natives are accustomed to electronic means of communication—email, chat, texting, Twitter, Skype, and Facebook (Junco & Chickering, 2010; Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Martz, 2011; Reamer, 2010). Fifty-four percent of teens report utilizing cell phones for texting purposes (Lenhart, 2010), 55% are creating personal sites on social media outlets such as Facebook or Myspace (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007), and 93% of teenagers report using the internet for social interactions (Lenhart et al., 2007). Communication is thus experiencing a dramatic increase in both speed and efficiency, complete with short-hand expressions of language and emoticon expressions of feeling. Though a faster and more efficient method of communication, teenagers are experiencing these types of communication as a solitary activity (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001). While it constitutes a solitary activity, children can now endure bullying behaviors 24 hours per day (Goldman, 2012), consistent access to pornography, online predators, and consistent media stimulation (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Adults also worry about the impact of the “disinhibition effect,” or the ability to remain seemingly anonymous by projecting one’s feelings via technological medium, rather than in a face-to-face format (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; p. 91). Other researchers argue social media is addictive, a waste of time, and encourages social isolation (Livingstone, 2008). Although the negative aspects may present themselves more readily in the news and other media, positive aspects have been found from the increasing use of digital technology.

The anonymity of present in the disinhibition effect may be a useful tool for teenagers experiencing embarrassing or emotional dilemmas. Chat rooms provide an anonymous place to discuss and share these trials and tribulations, and online resources such as WebMD can offer insight for anxiety-provoking questions (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004). Along this vein, Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis (2001) found that teenagers appreciate the emotional distance offered through technological medium. Introverted teens may increase opportunities for socialization practices through social websites and online chat rooms (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007), increasing their ability to remain socially connected—a value held by a large number of adolescents (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Working to understand individual client values and beliefs has long been a counseling practice for working within a client’s worldview (Nystul, 2011). Providing a foundation for practice with this population may assist practitioners in incorporating the digital technology aspect into theoretical interventions .

Implications for Practice

**Developmental Perspectives**

Developmental needs and behaviors of the adolescent period are important for counselors to consider when working with this age group. Three common behavioral changes in adolescents include: a preference for peer support over parental involvement, increased risk-taking, and more sensation seeking (Giedd, 2012). These types of behaviors can directly impact what adolescents are doing online. The internet provides access to their “peers” on a minute by minute basis, at all hours of the day. Combining this availability with moments of impulsivity, a false sense of anonymity, and a desire to “shock” others, and potentially negative consequences can transpire. The ability to acquire information or chat with others quickly allows for instant gratification, a concept digital natives have more readily grown up experiencing.

Another developmental consideration for counselors includes an adolescent’s formation of self and personal identity. As they separate themselves from their parents, adolescents begin to develop their own values, preferences, and ideas about the world. Adolescents devote a great deal of time not only to creating their “profiles” and social interactions online, but also to information seeking related to areas of interest they have developed. “Surfing the net”, watching videos, and researching interests have become an important part of how adolescents spend their time and how they begin to identify themselves embedded within part of a larger group or culture.

Adolescents also develop a desire for independence and control over their social world. Being able to decide when, with whom, and how they interact online, fulfills this need (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004). Ultimately, adolescent clients value their peer group above most everything else and will devote a great deal of time to these interactions. The sense of belonging they develop from these interactions perpetuates their desire to be “connected” online or through other digital means. Adolescents will go to great lengths to preserve friendships both on and off line.

**Ethical and Risk Management**

Increasingly, clients may expect counselors to communicate electronically regarding their treatment planning and/or appointments via email, chat, texting, or other social media avenue (Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Martz, 2011). Counseling practitioners may wish to respond to these client expectations, guided by ethical standards of conduct to define professional care (Mitchell & Murphy, 2003). Practitioner choice of electronic communication may be described during the informed consent process, and issues regarding client value of electronic communication may be discussed during this dialogue. One growing concern involves the issue of confidentiality when communicating through electronic means. Confidentiality can be increased through the use of encryption software, though there is never a guarantee (Pollock, 2006). Counselors run the risk of sending e-mail to the wrong individual, or having a client voice mail overheard (Wheeler & Bertram, 2008). Ohio currently regulates electronic communications from counselors, solely within the state of Ohio (Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Martz, 2011). It may be beneficial for counselors to review state regulations regarding electronic communications if they are used within individual practices. One area that is currently not state-specific includes HIPAA.

HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) involves counselors and medical employees from every state. HIPAA states that contact with a client should not contain information from private sessions, diagnoses, or treatment planning and information (Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Martz, 2011). A written disclosure will permit clients to authorize information sent through social media or other technological communication methods; however, when working with adolescents and individuals under the age of 18, this population is not able to provide consent. This younger population is of interest as they may be unaware of the impact a digital footprint may have on their future. Creating specific guidelines for a young adult with the assistance of a parent or guardian may be helpful when working to choose communication processes with this population. An additional suggestion for practice involves layering the informed consent process with specific information related to digital native practices.

One such topic that may prove beneficial to add to the informed consent process involves the discussion of texting, emails, chatting, or accepting friend requests through Facebook or other social media sites. In addition, if a counseling practitioner values incorporating the use of text messaging for clients, agreeing on response time is crucial to maintain rapport. For example, many counselors may worry that if a younger client sends a text, the counselor must be readily available to respond (Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Martz, 2011). Having an open conversation regarding response time, posting options, and choice to not friend clients on Facebook should all be held prior to developing a counseling relationship. This may decrease relational strain further into the process. In addition, these types of conversations may create boundaries and reduce problems associated with dual relationships.

Many private practice organizations may have specific rules and regulations regarding social media sites, even for professional use. Kolmes (2009) recommends that if a counselor develops a professional identity social media site, they should state this to the client. Maintaining a professional Facebook, Twitter, or other account may assist a counselor in outlining appropriate boundaries (Kaplan, Wade, Conteh, & Martz, 2011). Privacy settings on these sites can allow filtering of information and an ability to block personal sites from others. Deciding whether to utilize these types of social communication avenues is a professional decision that is affected by both state and organizational regulations, as well as a personal choice and set of beliefs.

**Techniques**

Understanding the impact of information overload on teenagers is an important aspect of counseling (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Behavioral science has shown that the more options presented, the greater the chance the individual will feel unable to make a decision at all (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Counselors can help clients learn how to navigate and critically examine the overwhelming amount of information directed toward them via the internet and social media—an intervention that is often neglected (Giedd, 2012). Adolescents may need help understanding the complexity of the internet and counselors may need to be involved in helping them understand potentially harmful or negative consequences of interactions on the internet (Yan, 2006). Initiating conversations regarding privacy, future impact, and empathy regarding social media sites may be an initial step in assisting younger clients to think more thoroughly regarding the messages and photographs they choose to post. Discussing the impact of impulsivity and creating strategies for de-escalating negative emotions may provide alternative methods for coping with reactive posting on social media websites.

Other counseling considerations include the difficulty teens have in gauging the intentions of others through their devices (Giedd, 2012). Online safety is an area practitioners need to consider when working with this population. Adolescents may not consider posting pictures or personal information on the internet as potentially risky behavior. They may have a false sense of security, believing the privacy controls on social media sites keep others from accessing their information (Barrett, 2006). Young people sometimes misunderstand how privacy settings are controlled and assume they are automatically set, whereas many sites require users to set these parameters themselves. In a study by Livingstone (2008), a large proportion of teens were unable to manage or change their privacy settings when asked. Young adults may assume each person on a social media website is an authentic and genuine “friend;” however, raising the possibility of adults impersonating teenagers in an effort to engage in sexual, risky, or other unhealthy behaviors may cause teenagers to be more careful in their online interactions and acceptance of unknown “friends” through requests.

Counselors can also play a role in informing clients of the long-term effects of what they choose to post online. Leaving a digital footprint will remain for all time and may not be something an adolescent considers. Information or photos that are shared are almost impossible to remove once they have been uploaded to the internet (Barrett, 2006). This digital footprint could result in lifelong negative consequences. Particularly in a school counseling setting, classroom guidance may be an appropriate time to discuss the potential impact of a digital footprint, as well as to assist students in discovering some of the benefits technology can offer.

Using the internet for the multitude of benefits it offers is a unique technique for teenage clients. Asking teenagers what subjects they feel more comfortable posting rather than speaking about and the anonymity the internet affords can provide a counselor with valuable insight into their client’s current state. In addition, Cybersupporting campaigns, such as the It Gets Better Project, compile videos and information targeting relevant issues in appealing ways (Goldman, 2012). Counselors can seek out information and websites which use cybersupporting messages to assist clients in ingesting healthy and healing messages. Additionally, school-based creations of YouTube videos, positive school social media website pages, or Twitter feeds for students (regulated by administration), can demonstrate the positive impact teenagers can have on social media on a nationwide level. With second-by-second availability, positive messages are at the fingertips of the Digital Native population. For clients who wish to express themselves through creative methods, a counseling assignment of creating a video that demonstrates meaning for them may be appropriate. Educating clients on how to recognize positive online messages and how to utilize resources in times of trouble is an effective lifelong strategy, on their terms.

Finally, for counselor educators working with future practitioners, technology should be incorporated into current learning. Future counselors may benefit from having a working knowledge of some of the more popular social media sites, as well as the terminology associated with their usage. Discussing ethical implications of technology, possible interventions and strategies utilizing technology, and the growing importance of technology in client lives are all important aspects to consider when assisting future practitioners.

Discussion

For counseling practitioners, educating members of the profession on the Digital Native culture, as well as both the positive and negative impacts of social media, is imperative to providing informed practice. Assisting developing adolescents with the concerning areas of technology may assist them in successfully navigating technology. This includes discussions of interactions online, understanding privacy settings, and the long-term consequences of unflattering material posted online for the rest of the world to see. Recognizing the Digital Native group will soon outnumber those citizens born prior to the advent of technology—“Digital Immigrants,” is a key aspect in creating counseling interventions that serve this growing population’s needs (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

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