

Emily Kayden

Dr. Joanne Gilbert

COM 450

10 March 2020

## Senior Capstone Paper: Picturing Communication

### **Introduction**

Picture frames are used to capture and display glimpses of one's life, memories, achievements, and aspirations. Despite my cell phone's capability to store and display all the glimpses that I choose to keep, there is something significantly more personable about having a tangible object. The creation of the digital picture frame allows me to expand the number of images that I can view with fewer limitations of physical space or printing capabilities. It also allows me to easily update and organize the images. Similarly, my communication perspective is like a digital picture frame; it is subject to updates and is a container for a variety of topics. I know at the end of the day, the digital picture frame is programmed to turn on at night, just as my communication perspective provides me the support to navigate the subfields of communication. The primary difference for this metaphor is instead of images, I update and organize my thoughts. Comparing my perspective to a digital picture frame, it allows me to think critically about the relationship between Communication and identity, culture, community, and technology.

Although my studies have become more focused during my time at Alma, I have also been able to take a step back and understand why it is so difficult to change the way we communicate with the world and the people around us. As a digital native, I have been able to experience the way the field of Communication has changed with the introduction of technology

(Prensky). My perspective on the digital world, gender differences, and my worldview has been greatly influenced through the exploration of the subfields of communication.

My Communication Perspective is like a digital picture frame because it allows me to separate and categorize images as well as see the relationship between them. It has granted me the opportunity to see the field differently., I have a new and improved understanding of various communication topics and their connections. Before attending Alma College, I had a basic understanding of the field of Communication. I knew the basics of public speaking, interpersonal communication, and more specifically, technical communication. My Communication major has revealed a heightened understanding of subtopics such as identity, culture, community, and technology. Each subfield has taught me the different patterns and means of communication that have shaped my view of myself and the people around me. Although these topics and images are separate, my communication perspective allows me to understand the intersections between them. For example, my understanding of my own identity allows me to form and maintain relationships through technology by presenting my true self.

### **Identity**

Prior to studying communication, I had never considered that people could perform multiple identities. Now, I clearly understand what it means to represent a true self and the reason why people present themselves differently. My studies in communication have helped me understand this concept of identities and personas in terms of gender performance as well as online representation.

Growing up as a digital native, I was introduced to the concept of online personas (Prensky). Within both my Communication and my New Media Studies majors, I was able to study this phenomenon to learn that social media platforms give people the means to represent themselves differently online. Before this introduction, my own social media usage was my only source of understanding. When crafting my literature review for my senior New Media Studies (NMS) paper, I read an article titled “The Online Ideal Persona vs. the Jealousy Effect: Two Explanations of Why Selfies Are Associated with Lower-Quality Romantic Relationships” (Halpern et al.). This article’s explanation of “The Online Ideal Persona...” really stood out to me because it examined the way people portray themselves according to the platform they use (Halpern et al.). It reminded me of my social media usage and how I have noticed that my friends typically use Facebook to update friends and family and they use Instagram to show off the best aspects of themselves. Although the authors were primarily focused on finding a causal relationship between selfies and romantic relationships, their acknowledgment of an individual’s ability to craft an ideal persona creates an interesting conversation of online identities and representation.

My perception of gendered identities was greatly influenced by Judith Butler’s essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” Gender and Communication was probably the most riveting course I took during my studies at Alma College. In this essay, Butler defines gender as a non-stable identity (pp. 270). Furthermore, it is only real in performance (pp. 278). This piece, as well as other Judith Butler works, were extremely influential in the field of Communication, and her work represented the groundbreaking of gender studies. Ultimately, this piece opened my eyes to viewing gender

identity as a performance and helped me understand its fluidity. I grew up in a small, rural community in which the gender binary was “standard” and socially enforced. Therefore, Butler was extremely influential in shaping my understanding of the range of gender and identity. In total, this has contributed to my enhanced comprehension of individuals’ identities and the extent to which they are performed.

“Race and Identity in Digital Media.” is a chapter written by Lisa Nakamura that raises important concerns about the representation of race and gender online. In this chapter, Nakamura defines the “...normative virtual body...” as “...generally white, conventionally physically attractive, as well as traditionally gendered, with male and female bodies extremely different in appearance (pp. 338)”. Soon after, Nakamura cites Yee explaining “...that many female players adopt male avatars to avoid sexual harassment (pp. 339).” What both issues address is the consistent marginalization and othering that occur online. In terms of identity, Nakamura believes that people adopt different identities (e.g., white male) online to escape potential harassment (pp. 338-339). Related to communication, it becomes clear that how people portray themselves in terms of race and gender matter both online and offline. The primary difference is that online grants people the ability to change and play different identities. Both online and offline communication enables people to harass others, despite the medium used. Essentially, race and gender identities are subject to harassment whether online or offline, even if the online representation does not match the player.

## Culture

Growing up in a small town, I was sheltered from a lot of the “bad” things the world had to offer. By studying different cultures and communication amongst and within them, I have expanded my understanding of intercultural communication more than I ever deemed possible.

*Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. was a book that greatly affected my world view and changed me for the better. One of the most thought-provoking discussion was of brothels. Particularly, the authors would pay to “free” the women working in the brothels only to find the women had willingly returned. Considering the conditions these women endured, it does not make sense why they would choose to return. However, in terms of culture, these women return because of their culture. It is a business they know and understand. Additionally, their larger culture does not prepare or educate them on how to be successful in other ways. Similarly, in *Only Words* by Catherine MacKinnon, the pornography industry is examined. MacKinnon argues “Protecting pornography means protecting sexual abuse as speech, at the same time that both pornography and its protection have deprived women of speech (pp. 9).” In relation to culture, societies have accepted and allowed pornography, or else it would not be the industry it is today. If we really want to change the narrative about sex workers and create an environment where it is consensual, our culture needs to stop demanding and expecting such porn.

Growing up with a twin brother, I always felt like he had it easy. Biologically, I felt like my body went through many more changes than his. I also felt like males in general did not have the same relational troubles. I remember every time we would argue, I would always feel that he was extremely insensitive and hurtful. However, my Gender and Communication class

introduced me to the book, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. This text greatly enhanced my understanding of what males go through growing up and how their communication is harmful. In terms of culture, it helped me validate my struggle along with other females' in addition to males' struggles. Essentially, it helped me understand that one is not necessarily worse than the other. Both face different difficulties and therefore they should be acknowledged as such rather than be compared. It ultimately helped me realize that the standards to which my brother was held to, such as not showing emotions, are part of the unwritten code he had to abide by. Ever since I have taken that class, I have been able to communicate better with my brother and other males in my life.

During my time at Alma, one experience that I believe greatly influenced my cultural perspective was using my Venture Grant to travel to China for a Spring Term. I believe the only reason I did not experience the same culture shock as my peers is because I tried to approach everything with an open mind. I refused to consider anything as "weird" and did my best to keep my ethnocentrism in check. Spending a month in a country where I knew very little of the language required me to pay a lot more attention to nonverbal cues. For example, I could tell by my conversation partner's expression when I would say or pronounce something incorrectly. Food and clothing were other nonverbal forms of communication that allowed my class to better understand the differences between Chinese and American cultures. From this experience, I learned more about Chinese culture from visiting the country and picking up on their nonverbal communication than I ever could have from reading it in textbooks or seeing it through other media.

## Community

My communication internship with a non-profit organization was most influential in helping me understand communication within communities. This internship was at the Mid-Michigan Children's Museum in Saginaw, Michigan. Saginaw is a larger city in the Bay area, and it is a diverse community that is subject to poverty and crime. The museum is designed to give the children an area to play and learn. My internship was centered around creating social media campaigns and engaging with the community at outreaches. Concerns of access and needs that I would not have previously considered became increasingly apparent to me as the community I worked with had very little money or resources. Similarly, I took a Service Learning Course at Alma College. This course was designed to help EightCAP, a Michigan Community Action Program, better reach their audiences through Social Media and other grassroots methods. Both my internship and my Service Learning Course were extremely influential in my understanding of community and the individual people that come together to form different communities.

As part of my Service Learning Course, I read the first chapter of *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. This reading really opened my eyes to problems people within the United States face daily. The chapter was titled "The Invisible Land," which was representative of how people below the poverty line tend to be marginalized and labeled as "other." Often, there is a tendency for people to believe that people living in poverty are essentially choosing to live below the line. For example, they can be accused of choosing not to find a job, or for spending too much money. Harrington, however, recognizes that "The individual cannot usually break out of this vicious circle (pp. 22)." This line really stood out to me. He is recognizing it as a cycle

that is not caused by only one factor such as losing a job. As a result, my communication perspective was severely impacted and allowed me to communicate about my community with empathy and inclusiveness, without blaming the victims.

I had always considered myself as environment-conscious, so I chose to enroll in a course titled EcoMedia. Taking a course that discusses the implications of communication about the environment through different media allowed me to better understand my environmental impact online. One such concept that I found extremely relevant to modern society was Greenwashing. The concept of Greenwashing comes from brainwashing. Essentially, companies produce advertisements to make consumers believe their product is eco-friendly, even when it is still extremely harmful. One influential reading was a chapter titled “‘*And No Birds Sing*’: *Discourses of Environmental Apocalypse in The Birds and Night of the Living Dead*.” This piece examines EcoPhobia, or the fear of nature, in the context of popular texts such as *Silent Spring* and *Hollywood Utopia*. This piece analyzes the relationship between humans and the environment. In relation to communication and community, nature and humankind coexist and therefore this directly acknowledges the role that media has in shaping the way society views nature and how it coexists. Essentially, the way society chooses to communicate about nature can shape the community’s interactions with it.

## **Technology**

Being a Communication and New Media Studies double major, my perspective on technology and communication is the most clearly defined. Essentially, I have been taught both media and communication theories and have learned to connect them to better understand communication



and technology. Considering my background in technology, it became clear to me that I would connect my communication perspective to a technological medium. The digital picture frame allows me to present the different thoughts and understandings that compose my communication perspective in an organized fashion.

Marshall McLuhan's 1964 essay "The Medium Is the Message." is the essay that guided most of my studies in New Media Studies and Communication. McLuhan explains that the medium, or how a message is conveyed, is more important than the message itself (pp 1.). An example I use to help me understand this concept is when I receive big news. For example, I was told of my Alma College acceptance by mail before I received any emails or phone calls. In a way, this made me feel more connected to the institution. In this essay, McLuhan also establishes media and technology as extensions of ourselves (pp. 1). Similarly, Sherry Turkle has written several books in which she analyzes the effect technology has on human connection. One such text, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, significantly questions the digital age and how it is changing society. Turkle sees our society as overwhelmed and seeking technology to solve issues of time and efficiency. However, we end up becoming even busier with how wrapped up we are in all of the affordances technology offers (pp. 17). One point that greatly influenced my communication perspective was our gradual shift to seeing online life as our life (pp. 17). Essentially, all our "mindless" scrolling becomes a part of our life. With most of my online friends, I do not have relationships with them beyond our interactions on social media. Essentially, the way they craft themselves is how I know them to be.

In relation to online presentations of the self, this concept raised many questions for me that I sought to answer in both my Communication Honors Thesis and my New Media Studies Senior Paper. One of the first articles I discovered during my research was the article “The Online Ideal Persona vs. the Jealousy Effect: Two Explanations of Why Selfies Are Associated with Lower-Quality Romantic Relationships.” I believe it is important to recognize the way technology has afforded us the ability to truly craft the way we want others to perceive us online. Another factor this article addressed was romantic relationships. This factor ultimately led to my honors thesis in which I hope to better understand the way computer-mediated channels (technology) such as social media and cell phone usage, influence romantic relationship satisfaction. One article that greatly helped me craft my argument and build my instruments for analysis was Irum Saeed Abbasi’s “Social Media and Committed Relationships: What Factors Make Our Romantic Relationship Vulnerable?” This researcher also analyzed the role of social media addiction, which is an interesting concept to consider with the influx of technology this generation has experienced.

I do not consider myself much of a gamer, but from my discussion of identity, it becomes clear that games should be addressed in communication and technology. “The Paradox of Failure and the Paradox of Tragedy.” is a chapter of the book *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* that I believe has implications beyond video games. In this chapter, Jesper Juul discusses the extent to which people try to avoid failure and the paradox that is found in that people enjoyed games in which they failed at least once (pp. 34-36). Ultimately, Juul recognizes that humans want the contradiction, they do not want to fail but they also do, just at different times (pp. 42). To better understand this paradox, it is explained as “Games are a

perspective on failure and learning as enjoyment, or satisfaction (pp. 45).” Beyond the implications of games, I believe this relates to the human understanding that we must fail to succeed. These games also allow people to connect their real life to their character as some present decisions that people may face offline. In a way, such game technology allows us to dissociate failure from its real-life implications. It is much easier to restart in a video game than in the workforce. I, for one, would much rather fail within the safety of a game than to fail in my work or school life. Game technology affords us the chance and space to fail with fewer repercussions than the “real world.”

### **Utility**

In my professional and personal lives, Communication is inevitable. However, my time at Alma has primarily helped me prepare for my future studies. I intend to continue my education and earn my Master’s in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing. Earning this degree would require me to think critically about concepts from my undergraduate studies of Communication and New Media Studies. The way I see this opportunity is that Alma College has taught me the foundations of the fields, and graduate school will teach me the proper application and prepare me to be successful in my future career.

One career path I am interested in pursuing post-graduate school is technical writing and communication. This is the path my mother chose, and I grew up learning the ropes and seeing the different projects that she has worked on throughout her career. Originally, as a digital immigrant, she wrote and edited documents such as car assembly manuals (Prensky). Now, she manages intranet sites for content and clarity. Therefore, I believe this career choice would blend

both my undergraduate and graduate majors. My New Media Studies background would help me understand webpages and make the necessary changes. Additionally, my understanding of Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" would assist me in understanding the usage of the sites to convey messages. My Communication major introduced me to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. This writing introduced me to concepts that helped me to understand what messages are being portrayed by the websites' content as well as how they are being received by customers (Aristotle).

Another career path I would be interested in pursuing is a career in higher education. This would particularly require both mass-communication and interpersonal communication. I would have to effectively communicate with colleagues and the student body. If I were to become a professor, I would require the use of interpersonal communication to connect with and teach my students. I would also have to apply mass communication methods to speak in lectures as well as communicate effectively using computer-mediated channels. As an administrator, I would require these same skills and methods. Luckily, these branches of the field are enveloped within my study of communication.

My study of communication has helped me particularly understand interpersonal communications. For example, I did not understand why my twin brother and I communicate so differently until I learned about gendered differences in communication. It has also helped me to understand the way groups and teams communicate with each other in terms of my coworkers, teammates, and bandmates. By combining New Media Studies and Communication, I have built an advanced perspective on communication and technology. The field of Communication itself has been transformed by the integration of technology. By understanding both media and

communication theories, I have an enhanced understanding of communication online. Particularly, I have learned the way technology has reshaped mass media. One of my favorite examples of this is how society seemed to shift from cards and phone calls to large posts on social media to tell someone “Happy Birthday.” On a much smaller scale, I can better understand the way technology influences the way we communicate with each other. For example, my best friend and I live two hours apart, but because of modern technology, we remain close with the help of video and messages daily. To my generation, this may seem normal, and it helps me see relationships for what they are rather than focusing on whether or not they have the same “richness” or “connection” dependent on their medium.

My communication perspective will greatly help me in my future studies, employment, and personal life. It will help me in the pursuit of my M.A. degree in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing and whatever career path I choose. My perspective has also helped me better understand my interpersonal relationships.

## **Conclusion**

By exploring the subfields of communication such as identity, culture, technology, and community, my ability to communicate with people of all different backgrounds has been greatly improved. Not only have I been influenced into becoming an advocate for gender, mental health, and disability issues, but I have also grown to better understand the world around me. My time at Alma may have been brief, but my studies have been extremely influential in creating the glimpses in images that are my communication perspective. Although some of these images have turned out dark or dismal, they have been influential in shaping my understanding of issues and

therefore they remain within the frame. My Communication major has prepared me to better understand the messages that surround me. I feel equipped to handle any career in Communication and to recognize the ability for messages to be influenced by the culture, community, identity, and technology that surrounds them. Reflecting on my past experiences, there are many times where my current communication perspective could have allowed me to better interpret and handle situations. Like my digital picture frame, I must keep my perspective current, while maintaining the glimpses and understanding my education has provided me.

## Bibliography

- Abbasi, Irum Saeed. "Social Media and Committed Relationships: What Factors Make Our Romantic Relationship Vulnerable?" *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, 13 June 2018, pp. 425–434., doi:10.1177/0894439318770609.
- Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Classics, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, pp. 270–283.
- Halpern, Daniel, James E. Katz, and Camila Carril. "The Online Ideal Persona vs. the Jealousy Effect: Two Explanations of Why Selfies Are Associated with Lower-Quality Romantic Relationships." *Telematics and Informatics*, vol. 34, no. 1, Feb. 2017, pp. 114–123., doi:10.1016/j.tele.2016.04.014.
- Harrington, Michael. *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. Macmillan, 1963.
- Juul, Jesper. "The Paradox of Failure and the Paradox of Tragedy." *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, The MIT Press, 2013, pp. 33–45.
- Kimmel, Michael S. *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. Harper Perennial, 2018.
- Kristof, Nicholas D., and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Only Words*. Harvard University Press, 2002.
- McCluhan, Marshall. "The Medium Is the Message." *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, 1964, pp. 1–18.
- Nakamura, Lisa. "Race and Identity in Digital Media." *Media and Society*, 5th ed., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010, pp. 336–347.
- Prensky, Marc. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 05, Oct. 2001, pp. 1–6., doi:10.4135/9781483387765.n6.
- Soles, Carter. "'And No Birds Sing': Discourses of Environmental Apocalypse in The Birds and Night of the Living Dead." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 21, no. 3, 8 Aug. 2014, pp. 526–537., doi:10.1093/isle/isu082.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books, 2017.