Mind the Mind

Analysis of Media Habits of the Future

Alina Kalashnikova

Abstract

The term "cyborg" commonly refers to a technically augmented organism, a physical (human) body plus devices changing its natural capacities, interconnected in a way that allows regarding the combination as a new entity. However, bodies are much more stubborn than minds, so today's digital cyborgs – us – instead of the laser eyes, have minds augmented with smartphones, social media, and AI. If media is the message, it shapes the sender's and receiver's cognitive structures and changes forms of social connection between them, bringing people closer to technology despite their efforts to approach one another. To identify vectors of these changes, the author analyses 164 autoethnographic essays of Ukrainian students written in 2019-2023 on communication differences and similarities between them and their older family members. The informants mostly regard their parents and grandparents as possessing a stronger information focus and memory, but at the same time, somewhat helpless when dealing with gadgets and sticking to "old" forms of content, whereas the informants themselves are reported to be constantly online and competent at using new media. The early immersion in media content determines conservative practices of its further consumption, even in newer media. Age, occupation, and life stage predict content consumption and production specifics. It is shown how the constant immersion in the twofold space of the online-offline experiences of today impacts society in the future, leading to the gradual redefinition of concepts of presence, attention, knowledge, time, space, self, and even being.

Keywords

social communication, generations, media, habits, Ukraine

Introduction

Contemporary humans are often found to be different from people of previous epochs, as now we are characterised primarily by the unprecedentedly high level of everyday life technologization. This is especially true for "developed" and

DOI 10.14361/dcs-2025-0206

"emerging" economies, where internet and social media penetration are higher; though even the 2.21 billion people without internet connection, who live mainly in Southern Asia and Central Africa (Kemp 2025), may witness the second-hand impact of technologies on their lives, as they are regarded as deprived of a fundamental tool for contemporary humans' global culture and labour market development. For the rest of the world, relying on informational technologies, consumption, production, learning, friendship, any social practice one could name – all of it, if it includes communication, is somehow automatized, digitalized, computerized, or "smartphoned"; and if it doesn't by default, a way to add a technological aspect to it will inevitably be found.

The human urge for connection, belonging, and sharing supports the spread of technologically-superstructured media apps that create additional space for participating in social interactions – the digital space, filled with its special objects we call content and unique perceptions. The effects of these changes are so large in scale and so deep in terms of shaping individual experience that over the last 50 years both scientific and public discourses in the countries with advanced infrastructure have been speculating about the idea of technology changing the very nature of the human, naming the projected result a cyborg, Homo Digitalis, post- or transhuman. Although posthumanism today is a critical approach to the core ideas of the anthropocentric paradigm, and transhumanism is the Enlightenment belief that the next advances in technology will raise people far beyond biologically given boundaries (Can 2023: 984), here the terms "cyborg", "posthuman", and "transhuman" are used as synonyms to describe the core concept of such a form of existence that expands the "human being" over its "natural" way of existing in the world. And at that point, as classic posthuman theorist N. K. Hayles puts it, "[h]umans can either go gently into that good night, joining the dinosaurs as a species that once ruled the earth but is now obsolete, or hang on for a while longer by becoming machines themselves" (Hayles 1999: 283). This grim perspective, however, is accompanied by milder philosophies, suggesting that "the posthuman is not, in fact, a radical break from humanism, but rather an ongoing critique of what it means to be human" (McMillan 2021: 21). Specific examples of cyborgs or posthuman creatures can be found more in science fiction than in philosophy; however, the idea that technologies do change human experiences was explicitly stated by M. McLuhan in *Understanding Media* (1964), and has been actively revisited since smartphones and other wearable gadgets have firmly established themselves in close proximity to our bodies, shaping our ways of perception and thinking (Berland 2019: 362; Cavell 2025: 41-48; etc.). As D. Lupton puts it, "The digital cyborg assemblage is the body that is enhanced, augmented or in other ways configured by its use of digital technologies that are worn, carried upon or inserted into the body, continually interacting with these technologies in dynamic ways. [...] Indeed, our melding with our digital technologies, their incorporation into the envelopes of our bodies, has become so habituated that we no longer think of ourselves as cyborgs." (Lupton 2014: 165)

However, bodies are much more stubborn than minds, so today's digital cyborgs – us – instead of laser eyes, rather have minds augmented with smartphones, social media, and AI. This new form of human life is partially captured in the term Homo Digitalis, built upon the thesis that "gadgets or smartphones have become the existence of human thinking capacity. Homo digitalis is no longer an *I think* as described by Descartes, but an *I browse*. Humans think through the internet". (Dasion 2024: 72) [emphasis added] If media is the message, it shapes the sender's and receiver's cognitive structures and changes forms of social connection between them, bringing people closer to technology despite their efforts to approach one another. To identify vectors of these changes, this article analyses 164 autoethnographic essays of Ukrainian students written in 2019-2023 on communication differences and similarities between them and their older family members.

Literature review

While the question of the boundaries of humanity is a controversial topic, the prevalence of certain digital media usage patterns in different groups does not allow for discussion. The peculiarities in media usage, consumption, content creation, and overall engagement are usually explained by a complex intertwining of factors, influencing at the societal, group, or individual level. The most prominent of them are:

- level of economic development in a country of residence (GSMA report on Mobile Internet Use in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: 6);
- the level of cultural adoption of specific devices, preventing the direct relationship between the income and normalisation of smartphones as a commodity (Jamalova 2020: 1147);
- the socio-economic class, being a predictor of whether the individual or household will gain the necessary equipment (Yates et al. 2015: 5; GSMA report on Mobile Internet Use in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: 8);
- gender, associated with the increased amount of housework for women (Sharma/Ojha 2025: 7);
- the amount of internet skills and overall cultural capital (Scheerder et al. 2017: 1613; Verwiebe/Hagemann 2025: 1863);
- personality traits, mental health conditions, being in close relationships, Covid-19 quarantine (Lythreatis et al. 2022), and many more.

Among these factors, age has arguably been the most spoken of recently in both scientific discourse and popular culture, since the wide dissemination of W. Strauss and N. Howe's generational model (2009). It proclaims the similarities of behavioural patterns in the people born during a certain time period, determined by technological innovations, like air-conditioning or birth control, major historical

events, and cultural trends (Twenge 2023: 3-6). The question of the generational boundaries' validity in it is controversial, especially taking into account the differences between the USA, for which the theory was originally developed, and other countries; however, the huge role of age as the digital media usage predictor is already common knowledge (Lowenstein-Barkai & Lev-on 2022: 5-6). Conventionally, all over the world, youth are regarded as more adoptive of new media, while older people – as having difficulties with digital skills, though to the end of the 2010s already "there is little difference in patterns of [media] usage between younger adults and older people in northern Europe and North America" (Gambo/Özad 2020: 6), once again proving the conclusion that age in itself isn't the main cause. Apparently, "the differences between the age groups can [...] reflect the fact that the everyday lives of young people are simply different, and always have been" (Bolin/Skogerbø 2013: 5), because the youth is "the first age cohort to experience and negotiate the new social conditions during their socialization years (according to Mannheim, having 'fresh contacts' with the emerging phenomena)" (Kalmus et al. 2013: 17). Paying special attention to youth in generational studies aims to create a portrait of the expected generation's behaviour while they are adolescents, and comparing their values, lifestyle, work attitudes, and social success parameters to the predecessors at the same age, deriving a prognosis for the future (Klopfenstein 2024: 102-103; Twenge 2023: 464 and further; Zarembo 2017: 120-121).

A common feature of these studies is that they are quantitative and tend to regard the media preferences of age cohorts in themselves, rarely paying attention to the causes and motives behind distinguishing patterns of media engagement and the ways these distinctions shape media habits. These may be related to sharing media spaces and cultural opinions with the closest representatives of the older generations – family members. However, even qualitative family studies focus on functional relationships young people hold with relatives over media (Vasbø/Hegna: 300-302; Capri et al. 2021: 2645), overlooking the complex mutual influences of family, broader social communication, and media.

It is important to study such influences in countries undergoing sociopolitical transformations, as they may become the primary source of media habits. This research is focused on Ukraine, a post-Soviet state with historically low trust in the authorities and official mass media. After the collapse of the USSR, the mass media sphere of independent Ukraine was (and still is) highly oligarchized (Wierschke 2020: 83-84; Panchuk 2022), making major media holdings serve certain political interests. From 2010 onwards, Western donors began actively supporting media literacy initiatives (Detector Media 2010), and after the Euromaidan in 2014, there appeared independent internet media, while Russian TV-channels and websites were banned (Ardan 2024: 11). Establishing a pro-European vector of culture and politics while taking efforts against Russian information attacks, high levels of distrust in politicians, and finally COVID-19 quarantine – are all contributing factors to Ukrainians' shift to digital media as their primary source of news and entertainment.

In 2020, having an internet penetration level of 63 per cent (Kemp 2020), age differences in media usage in Ukraine were as follows: "90 per cent of 18-34s use search engines compared with 62 per cent of the oldest age group, and 83 per cent of the younger group use social media compared with 55 per cent of those aged 50-65" (Thomson Reuters Foundation 2020). Even later, after the beginning of full-scale invasion, age differences were prominent in trust in media: while 80 per cent of those who are 70 and older trusted TV, 67.4 per cent of youth 18-29 trusted social media as the source of news (OPORA 2022).

These statistics, however, also reflect the surface of media usage. Media in this data often equals *mass media, broadcasting news*, though from the perspective of an individual engagement, a work of fiction might be more significant. Intergenerational assessments of media tastes, similarities and differences in motives, content consumption and creation, etc., also remain hidden in such studies. In this regard, self-comparison of youth and older family generations in media usage, while possibly subjective and biased, can shed light on how exactly social communication has been changing over time. This is why the present research takes a qualitative approach and aims to identify vectors of social communication changes through media by analysing the comparison in media usage and engagement of Ukrainian youth with their older relatives.

Theoretical Framework

R. Schroeder mentions three leading approaches to media theory: network theory, actor-network theory, and mediatization theory (2018: 3). Present research, as we believe, falls within the frame of the last one, also synthesizing Bourdieuian ideas of distinction with McLuhan's tradition to take into account the media's ability to impact human perception, and sociocultural understanding of the generation concept. First, we are going to briefly describe the fundamental concepts of media and mediatization. Second, we will show how they are connected to the possible changes in the course of social communication. Finally, we will examine how media may stay connected to a generation throughout its lifespan.

Media here is defined as any non-subject that acts as an intermediary in communication, establishing the means and method of information transfer as a practice. The phenomenon of *thinking through media* isn't something entirely new or uniquely modern, as humanity has previously *thought through* oral language, written text, shared forms of art, etc., so we were, in a sense, mediated long before problematising the process. N. Couldry and A. Hepp (2016) described mediatization as "the variety of ways in which possible orderings of the social by media are further transformed and stabilized through continuous feedback loops." (Couldry/Hepp 2016: 19), which we operationally elaborate to the understanding of mediatization as the process of systematic duplication or transition of social practices

from the space of direct interaction (physical, offline) to mediated (mediatized, virtual, etc.) interaction.

What is different today, though, is the extent and speed with which mediatization changes the basic thinking and perception patterns (presumably) inherent to humans as we are used to think of them. This phenomenon, a "deep mediatization", means that the very elements of the sense of the social become rooted in technologically based mediation (Ibid: 22). "Deep mediatization" is acknowledged as playing a fundamental role in the social world transformation towards interdependence, interrelatedness, and complexity. Whereas the material/physical reality exists even outside of our desires or participation, and the ideal/conceptual reality is embodied through our actions, the virtual reality of digital media is a manifestation of ideologies that mimics (material) reality for our senses. The technologies of today do not so much reflect or reproduce reality; rather, they distort and construct it by means of the digital space architecture, the new media apps' algorithms, and proposed means for editing, publishing, and reacting to content.

In this overwhelming system, the *produsers* (a term coined by A. Bruns) of digital space retain their agency by engaging with apps, algorithms, and content in certain ways, apparently, specific to their social positions and relevant tastes (Bourdieu 1996). The authors of the concept of the mediated construction of reality propose the term "media manifold" to characterise the contemporary state of inevitably choosing specific media, content, and practices among everything potentially possible. "The set of media and information possibilities on which a typical social actor, at least in rich countries, can now draw is almost infinite, and organised on very many dimensions. But it is, in fact, a reduced set of possibilities from which we choose every day: that reduced set is how, in practice, we actualize, for daily usage, that many-dimensional media universe." (Couldry/Hepp 2016: 66). Indeed, global accessibility of social media exerts a huge impact on cultural globalization, so that "societies become more homogeneous inasmuch as media become more diverse" (Schroeder 2018: 8).

The depth of media usage impact on the individual level is coherent with age in terms of brain development: "higher frequency of internet use in children was associated with decreased verbal intelligence and smaller volume increases in widespread brain areas (language processing, attention, executive functions, emotion, and reward) after a few years." (Boulos 2024: 3). Social media overusage is also known for its negative influence on emotional regulation, attention, and cognitive control (Ibid: 4). Therefore, young people who gained access to digital media earlier in life than their parents and grandparents, and before their basic socialisation was complete, are more deeply involved in digitally mediatized social communications.

Specific patterns derived from this mediatization are shaped by and shape the individual-level distinction: "differences in dealing with cultural products or differences in taste are by no means subjective but are a socio-structurally determined form of aesthetic judgements, which are used both consciously and unconsciously

as a means of distinction from social groups other than one's own." (Trültzsch-Wijnen 2020: 89). This gives ground to the idea that people in one generation distinguish themselves from others by structurally different media usage (production, consumption, communication...), which leads us to the understanding of a generation as the media generation – a category of people, having similar experiences with media. While actively expanding the space of social communication, digital media alter its processes and influence its nature by pulling up certain ways of interaction and concealing others. Therefore, every specific medium (as a technology with a certain architecture, the network of individuals providing the base for it, and the set of social practices, developed in and around it) functions socially by creating certain patterns (one can call them figurations [Couldry/Hepp 2016: 76]), which, from our perspective, also limit and enhance the ways of possible, potential, future media usage. Probably, "the early acquisition of a particular media consciousness continues to shape peoples' world view even though later they acquire literacy in new media" (Gumpert/Cathcart 1985: 29), because "memories of the media as technologies as well as their meaning in the construction of the lifeworld, experienced during one's formative years, have relevance for today's media usage and world perception" (Kalmus et al. 2013: 18). Similarly, the shared media habits and ways to construct intergenerational boundaries of today's youth would shape their future approach to media. We can now hypothesise that the early immersion in media content determines conservative practices of its further consumption, even in newer media, developing the habit of media usage, which conservatively prevails throughout the future life of the generation.

Methodology

Dataset

To test this hypothesis, we analysed 164 autoethnographic essays by Ukrainian students on communication differences and similarities with their older family members (parents and grandparents, sisters or brothers, uncles or aunts) or equally close people (partners, friends). These essays were written in 2019-2023 by 2nd- and 3rd-year full-time students of different subjects, studying at V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (Kharkiv, Ukraine) and attending the interfaculty elective course "Visual Culture of Social Networks". The assignment involved description, self-analysis, and reflection on differences and similarities in four blocks, each accompanied by a more detailed plan:

1. General communication skills: reading, watching videos, listening to music, perception, processing, and recalling of information.
2. New media: examination in detail of the differences and similarities in the usage of internet services, laptops, and smartphones, and preferences for certain social networks and messengers.

3. Consumed content: genres, focus of information, predominant forms, etc.
4. Visual communication: visual identifiers, emoticons, emojis, photo editing – content creation and transmission.

Students were asked to try to explain where the differences and similarities come from, not focusing purely on age-related characteristics of perception (such as the decline of cognitive capability with age, for example), but on the experience of social communication in general.

Though the majority of works were written before AI/LLMs became popular among the general public in Ukraine (early 2023), each year, after the portion of essays was collected, they were text-checked and cross-checked for plagiarism with the tools available at the time. After the removal of questionable works, the final corpus consisted of 164 texts, among which 32 were written in 2019, 45 in 2020, 38 in 2021, 37 in 2022, and 12 in 2023. The typical age of informants was 18-21, "parents" are estimated mainly as 40-55, "grandparents" – mainly as 65+, though it could only be estimated from some of the texts and varies sometimes.

Analytical Framework

The thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical framework for this research; moreover, we would further specify our approach to the thematic analysis as reflexive TA (Terry et al. 2017). Given that the initial vectors of self-reflection and the essay plan were established for students by the researcher, more rigid approaches, such as content analysis or coding reliability TA, possess little to no scientific novelty. On the contrary, deep recurring engagement with research data over all five years' subsamples allowed us to define themes, which aren't explicitly stated in the analysed texts, as in compliance with the chosen methodological approach, we regard themes as "stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset" (Braun/Clarke 2019). To double-check our findings and ensure their reliability, after our initial analysis, we used the Google Notebook LM to define the semantic axes and key concepts for each year's subsample; it didn't show themes not yet included in our analysis, though the results potentially could be used for linguistic and semantic comparison of different years, if we aimed to. The foundation of the present analysis is that it was written solely by the author, without the use of generative AI. This is why the data interpretation was obviously influenced by the researcher's participation over the years in classes with authors of the essays, holding discussions of the close and related topics, but we regard this as a feature enriching the depth of conclusions, rather than a violation of methodological purity.

Method & coding procedure

Thematic analysis is commonly divided into six stages: (1) getting familiar with data, (2) generating a primary set of codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing up (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Utilising the flexibility of the framework, we slightly altered the process, as the initial set of codes was preestablished in our four-block essay plan, and analysis went on for several years.

This way, the initial data familiarisation for us was carried out as part of the essays' assessment. On the second stage, instead of the primary set of codes, each year we noted the motives which were of apparent interest to students, and concepts filling the given category. For instance, students were asked to talk about the differences and similarities with their relatives in many fields, including reading, watching videos, listening to music, information perception, processing, and recalling; however, it is the difference in music and video tastes that is very accentuated throughout the dataset.

Consequently, on the third stage, we searched for themes *behind* the data, rather than *in* it. In the example of 'listening to music', this topic's significance for informants, from our perspective, is connected to music bearing a large emotional load: not only being an art form in itself, but also being the imprint of personal choice *perceived as the very persona*, either praised or depreciated by older family members.

The definition of themes (the fifth stage of TA) was, therefore, an effort to recreate meanings shared by informants across the dataset. Themes review (initially, the fourth stage of TA, which was shifted here to be the fifth) was executed every year with a new subsample of essays being added, but also later when checking and preparing data for the final analysis and LM, and when writing this paper.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are:

- The very context of writing the essay for the grade assumes a certain amount of stress and deadline pressure
- Students' familiarity with certain views, present across media, discussed in the course, and/or expressed by the lecturer, that are therefore perceived less critically and taken as the theoretical and methodological foundations of their work by default (particularly, the strong influence of W. Strauss and N. Howe's theory of generations, used mainly as a ready-made form)
- The low level of familiarity with theories and ideas, competing both with the lecturers' views and with the theory of generations

- The essential reluctance of some students to complete the task at all and to complete it independently
- An understandable unwillingness to share examples of everyday communication with the teacher(s), hence, information may be concealed or reported inaccurately since students were warned that their texts could be used as data for research
- Different ways of topic understanding, varying thinking depth, and textual articulation, essential for the different authors, almost completely level out the applicability of quantitative analytical methods and/or standard coding procedures
- As the students wrote essays without the researcher's control, the majority of essays do not have an equal amount of information in each of the four blocks
- Informants neither represent the students' majority, as they voluntarily chose this discipline and were already interested in social networks, nor can they be considered a targeted sample, because those who fail to choose their elective course in time are assigned to available courses at random.

Findings

General results: metathemes

1. "Them" vs "us". Though similarities were also mentioned in the initial guide, and differences do not necessarily mean opposition, our informants draw a clear and radical boundary between themselves and older media generations. These texts show subjective pictures, drawn by the often non-neutral narrator, strongly asserting the superiority of their connection to the contemporary world and, figuratively speaking, the right to rule it. It's no wonder, then, that the common feature for a vast majority of the students is the default view of the "old" media as less fast, less convenient, more controlled, and therefore less contributing to critical thinking or self-development than the "new" media. Though this claim is widely stated, in essays it is rarely backed by extensive reasoning – rather, it is recited almost as common knowledge.

[O]n the internet, there is an opportunity to have discussions, whereas in the previous generation, there was no place for discussion, which is why we can criticise information, while they cannot. (2022-5, 3rd year, Karazin Business School)

My father, due to constant exposure to lies and their uncovering, is now quite good at recognising fakes. However, now that the media environment generates a huge flow of information every minute, it can be difficult for him to distinguish between fake and reliable information. (2022-9, 3rd year, Sociology)

2. Civilisation = internet and gadgets, and it has started recently. Informants operate a stereotypical picture of the past, imagining the world before them as a gloomy place, where everyone was doomed to no communication, hard work, and poverty. This view mixes the Soviet Union image with a vague idea of whatever existed between its disintegration and our informants' childhood memories, where the 1980s look like ancient times, and the defining role of modern access to gadgets is emphasised as positive by default. It corresponds to the informants' view of older people as somewhat naive and needing help with access to digital media.

They can do pretty much everything young people can do: [...]. But just because they do these things doesn't mean they understand and perceive them the same way we, their children, do. (2019-17, 3rd year, International Relations and Tourism)
Short or long presses, swipes, multi-finger gestures – all this instils fear that 'If I press the wrong thing here, everything will turn off,' forcing them to call on someone younger for help at every opportunity (even if that 'someone younger' is also seeing a problem for the first time in their life). (2022-3, 3rd year, Foreign Languages)

Grandparents

Grandparents rarely face the need to use the new media opportunities to the fullest, as at this stage in life they are out of active social competition, mainly observing through social media the lives of the younger. According to informants, grandparents tend to be afraid of devices in general or unwilling to leave the comfort zone of their long-known media formats, such as TV programs and real-life communication.

It is difficult for them to adequately analyse what they have read, heard, or seen. And how long does one have to analyse? In retirement years, the brain needs to rest. This is linked to their alienation from the Internet and social media. My grandfather tried to learn new technologies: he knew how to google news, visit websites, and read newsletters, but passive consumption of information from a couple of channels prevailed. (2019-17, 3rd year, International Relations and Tourism)

This confirms the importance of motivation in transfer from media competence to media performance (Trültzsch-Wijnen 2020: 209). The motivations to go digital are mainly the inability to consume content in the preferred (traditional) way, maintaining family connections, or the work-related necessities, if grandparents work. The depth of learning of a new media technology or application is limited by the shared patterns of its usage in a close social proximity and the extent to which younger relatives are willing to help with it.

My grandfather has the record player and a large collection of vinyl records [...]. This way of listening is easier for him because he is used to it. But he can also listen to music on YouTube if he cannot listen to it the way he likes and is used to. (2023-1, 2nd year, Foreign Languages)

The older generation is not interested in a large number of additional features, but is more inclined to use the services that are most popular among their friends, even if their functions are limited to messaging and calls. (2022-8, 3rd year, Philology)

Parents

Parents are regarded as people who are much closer to informants in their media habits, because they frequently share similar ways of digital socialisation: TV – PC – smartphone. Parents are more tech-savvy than grandparents, but often are too busy providing for the family, so they either refrain from any media activity that isn't "deep" and "serious" (work-related, problem-solving, educational) or, on the contrary, consume positive content to relax after work.

There is no talk of watching DIY videos or videos like 'Mixing 1,000 bottles of Coca-Cola with Mentos at the same time, let's see what happens.' Simply because they grew up in a time when you had to be useful to society. And now they prefer to spend even their free time doing something useful. (2020-7, 3rd year, Economics)

In general, my mother [...] doesn't like negative news or negative films. She looks for neutrally-toned content that will help her relax. (2020-5, 2nd year, Sociology)

Older people are constantly trying to solve some problem, even while watching a video. (2021-9, 2nd year, Foreign Languages)

In general, students report that their older relatives are choosing not only familiar technologies for communication and content consumption, but also familiar forms, formats, and content over unfamiliar ones, because it evokes memories and emotions, allowing them to connect to their younger years and perhaps to the value this content had back then.

When I play my grandmother an old song she wants to hear, she seems to really enjoy it. After each time, I realise how valuable that music is to her. For us, it's something ordinary. (2021-3, 2nd year, Psychology)

Content

Preservation of media and content preferences over time from young years through adulthood to older age supports our initial hypothesis, though the real-life content consumption may be altered by the mentioned factors. For one, the application of "usefulness" or "ability to relax" as the criterion for media content choice is connected to the social status and the number of responsibilities and social demands on a person playing the role of a parent, so that age, occupation, gender, and life stage predict content consumption and production specifics. Namely, students reported they were more inclined to consume meaningless content for pure entertainment because and in case they have time to do so. Their parents were declared to seek sense and meaning in content, and grandparents were not actively seeking new content in the first place, because "they didn't need it". The common feature in many essays, when trying to explain the causes of the observed practices, is the mention of some need, apparently, external to the person.

There is a need not only for new information, but also for a new construction of social relations. In this case, [Mother] uses social networks such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. (2023-10, 3rd year, Sociology)

When it comes to the older generation, it seems to me that they use various services as needed, whereas for young people, using them has become a need. (2021-6, 2nd year, Sociology)

In the plan of the essay, there was a proposition for informants to show the excerpt of their favourite content to their relatives. Described reactions differed, though the negative ones were associated with differences in aesthetic views and opinions on whether the time spent is worth the value (for parents and grandparents, the value of content is often reported to be directly tied to its possible practical application or educational potential).

My dad was very surprised that I could watch such nonsense. He commented that it was impossible to watch because the video had no useful content and that the blogger's speech and thinking were unbearable to listen to. (2021-14, 2nd year, International Relations and Tourism)

Positive feedback was associated with the older relatives' previous experience of similar content consumption. Here, again, the age, education, gender gaps between students and older family members, and other objective features may play a meaningful role: the closer children and parents or grandparents are in their habitus, the more they are likely to share patterns of media consumption (though this statement desperately needs separate quantitative research to be proven or refuted).

I played a video [...]. I think my parents liked this type of content because they had watched something similar before. (2020-33, 3rd year, Psychology)

However, even the large differences between generations could be overcome with intensive communication, similarly to the conclusions of a relevant study from Estonia (Kalmus 2013: 30).

After I let [Grandmother] listen to rap and explained all the nuances, she started listening to everything. Sometimes she thinks about the words, and sometimes she just likes to listen to how the music or song sounds rhythmically. (2021-24, 3rd year, Economics)

When speaking about the content, informants often emphasised that elders' different approach to perception may be the result of their socialisation in a system of different cultural production.

The older generation [parents] likes music for the music itself and the lyrics, which are beautifully written from a literary point of view, while our generation prefers something 'cool' that doesn't necessarily have any meaning, and the same goes for content. They watch something more serious and treat everything with seriousness, while we often watch outright nonsense to relax or simply distract ourselves. (2022-5, 3rd year, Karazin Business School)

They [parents] are used to taking everything literally because that's how it was during their Soviet childhood. There were rules, an algorithm for how everything should be. All songs and creative works were more or less the same. They don't even consider such works [today's music] to be creative, and they are not interested in watching music videos. 'Music is meant to be listened to,' my mother says. [...] The same applies to films, YouTube programmes, and YouTube itself. (2020-7, 3rd year, Economics)

As an interim conclusion, we can claim that media habits, shaped by technological, cultural, and social contexts at the time of socialisation, do stay with people for life, even when the contexts themselves change. Despite having enough acquaintance with a certain new application or network, people stick to patterns and routines learned before, which may be specific enough to define a whole separate social practice for each composition of "media + content + context".

The [mother's] perception of printed text is related to how she was taught to perform this action. (2023-10, 3rd year, Sociology)

My dad [56 years old], like many other older people, talks very loudly on the phone. This is not because he has poor hearing, but because he is used to communicating with old telephone sets, where you almost have to shout to be heard on the other end of the line. (2023-4, 3rd year, Foreign Languages)

Perhaps if my grandmother had had a music player since her high school days, she would now be dependent on background music, but there was no music player in her life, and she does not feel deprived because of this. (2020-37, 2nd year, Sociology)

Ukrainian Students and Media Habits of the Future

Given that older people, according to our research data, are rather conservative in their media habits, we can assume that our informants, being young Ukrainian adults at present, will also stick to their media habits in the future. This is why it may be possible to draw from the self-description of our informants the habits that will gradually dominate media consumption in a relevant sociodemographic category of the Ukrainian population. Their comparison to their older relatives allows us to identify the main patterns of how they interact with media, devices, and information to extrapolate it to the future. Moreover, as experience with digital media isn't exclusively inherent to our young informants, we can regard them as an indicator of what impact modern media can have on inexperienced humans. Though this thought experiment may seem rather speculative, the observed conservatism in older family members is a strong enough pro argument to try. Again, this is by no means a proper prognosis; rather, a reconstruction of the dispositions towards interaction with media Ukrainian university students possessed in 2019-2023, and an effort to define the most general emerging trends in their interaction with media.

Perceived differences in upbringing give informants substantial grounds to distinguish themselves in a Bourdieuian sense from their older family members.

[...] for centuries, we have been told that older people have more experience and can cope more easily with difficulties and innovations. But, in my opinion, technology has proven the opposite to be true. [...] When it comes to certain life situations and new information, the older generation is more cautious, and while I sometimes don't even need evidence and facts to form an opinion about a situation, my mother and grandmother do. (2020-14, 3rd year, International Relations and Tourism)

There is a lot of specificity in personal stories. However, we tried to define the most common and general features of contemporary social communication in students' self-portraits, which are:

1. Being constantly online, in contact with family and friends, but also with(in) the media, allows them to keep this contact. This creates a habit of being engaged in the perpetuity of media spectacles taking place simultaneously, all of which call for attention. This operativeness with content and multitasking, however, comes at a cost of weak memory, lack of concentration, unfocused attention, shorter attention spans, and varying levels of smartphone/internet dependence. It shatters

any long-lasting experience into discrete pieces because the mind becomes used to this way of thinking.

Let's imagine a situation: I went to university without any access to the World Wide Web. To be honest, I don't think I would last very long. [...] What can be said, we panic even when our phone has 20% battery left. (2019-7, 2nd year, Philology)

Fifty years ago, my grandfather didn't have to think about whether he should share something on Facebook or Instagram when he attended an event. That's why he has memories of the event as a whole, not just the post he made that day. (2022-6, Karazin Business Institute)

This is where the roots of deep nostalgia lie, a longing not for an epoch, but for immersion in the process or moment, for complete dedication, for focusing one's attention on a single action, that we can call "monotasking nostalgia". In the future, single-tasking will be a luxury, an opportunity to remain in silence and solitude will be virtually non-existent, and the ability to avoid distractions will become a rare and valuable skill. The point of starting to think sequentially and construct long chains of logical reasoning for young people, immersed in media, will likely be shifted later in life, to the point where the aesthetically pleasing artificial distractions will be needed in order to make things work.

If my grandmother is cooking soup, then she is cooking soup. If I am cooking soup, then I am not only cooking soup, but also watching videos on YouTube and replying to messages in a chat at the same time. I have to make an effort to concentrate on one thing. (2021-10, 3rd year, Sociology)

2. High speed of content consumption and high competence in information search, accompanied by limited deep knowledge and experience. The experience will inevitably expand with age, and the ageing will take away some of that speed, but one fundamental principle is very likely to stick as a result of this constant exposure to media: that finding a ready-made answer is faster and more efficient than experimenting on your own. This may potentially lower inventive and creative capabilities – again, not wiping them out completely in the whole generation, but rather demanding additional work to develop, and with a shift towards experiments starting at a later point in life.

If I can process ten videos on one topic, my parents can only process one in the same amount of time. (2021-23, 2nd year, History)

All adults admire how children can work with information. But children simply take it on temporary loan, and it does not provoke the same critical attitude as things that parents view through the prism of knowledge. We are not so much creators as IT specialists: we

simply combine different pieces of data and put together a collage that becomes our view of the world. (2019-24, 2nd year, Geology, Geography, Recreation and Tourism)

3. Highly valuing one's time, energy, and emotions, hence actively decreasing the number of unpleasant interactions.

I like short, forgettable videos that not only dull the thoughts and emotions that have accumulated during the day, but also do not generate new ones. (2020-27, 2nd year, Sociology)

We are very economical with our energy; we are a more selfish generation that takes good care of ourselves. Even if the library is across the street, we would rather download a book online. (2019-28, 3rd year, Philology)

This is possibly a trait that will also soften over time with this cohort maturing, but the very discourse of high vigilance both to internet threats and to situations stripping a person of extra time and energy seems to be related to the experience of digital media. Namely, it can be regarded as a side effect of being the centre of an individually-tailored information bubble (Turner/Moxley 2021), created by media algorithms, where "I" is the measure of all things indeed. It is hard to take other people seriously when they can be swapped to anything else or swiped left at any moment you find them boring. By having the opportunity to control one's digital space, one not only replaces their immediate neighbours from real life with digital contacts that are more pleasant to interact with, but also loses the experience of questioning and critically examining their beliefs and preferences. Enjoying this calm and positive state, it is easy to rid ourselves of the very idea that our beliefs need any justification. As a result, skills in reasoned discussion and consensus-building erode, so that an understanding of their value will probably also come later in life, and regaining them will call for additional effort from those affected.

Discussion

Taking into account the exploratory essence of this paper and its limitations, it is recommended to regard its findings with caution, as they still need to be validated through further, more structured research. Still, social interactions of Ukrainian student youth today are highly digitally mediated, turning media into an additional participant in human-human and human-world relationships. The findings of our study are consistent with McLuhan's ideas of electronic media being a return to the pre-printing media experience: multimedial, non-linear, engaging, building a crowded communicative space, rather than a focused sequential perspective. The differences in media usage of students and their older relatives indicate how rapid was the adoption of an electronically extended "bodily sensorium to which McLuhan gave the name 'environment', [...] that we nostalgically refer to

as 'nature'" (Cavell 2025: 102) and that demands to be comprehended as such: in terms of space, body, and touch (Lupton 2014: 168). High tactility appears to oppose abstract thinking: for instance, the youth is described as the "subjects who only rely on their fingers to "click" without giving more space to the ratio" (Dasion 2024: 75); however, in our study students perceive themselves as far more critically thinking than their elders, clearly reflecting the difference in the very concept of thinking that this dramatic distinction of generations is being built upon. This difference, again, is indicative of the shift in media technologies we witnessed recently.

As social media audiences, we observe people and events happening somewhere else in physical/material space, but, subjectively, they happen in the digital space of the media, compactly packed into a smartphone or laptop. The more our attention is focused on what is "happening on the internet media", the less of our conscious intellectual presence goes to things that aren't internet material (unless we are content creators). Social media successfully distracts us from the boredom of "real life", to which we are tied by our existence in primarily physical bodies, so that the space in which we live is now objectively twofold. In the past, there was a clear domination of being present over being telepresent – to psychologically perceive being "present" in another place in technology-mediated communication (Kreijns et al 2024: 7). Now, we ourselves question, where we are when we are watching stories about the rainforest on Instagram while queuing. For younger people, it might not even be a question, because their presence starts online and is mediated most of the time, even though their time can quickly become presentless and therefore pastless this way. Questioning the being, presence, space, and cognition is not a philosophical matter anymore, but suddenly a topical issue of everyday life on the internet, because for the young Homo Digitalis "to be" means "to be media-connected", and not even to other people, but to non-human others, whose presence significantly changes the frames of self-perception, because now "[i]nstead of prioritising our own 'kind', we must ethically engage with the complex systems of others" (Can 2023: 988). It may lead to further restructuring of boundaries not only between classes or social positions, but also of humanity in terms of humanistic practices. The more "devices (and smartphones paradigmatically) are used to communicate with other devices and applications in non-Euclidean (local/global) space, and not primarily to facilitate communication with other people" (Cavell 2025: 102), the more their users – arguably – are ready to be emotionally connected, empathic, and ethical to the content and devices, not the people behind them, and even less so – to the people who they distinguish themselves from by their media consumption habits.

However, if put into perspective, the student youth in Ukraine or wherever else in the wide webbed world aren't that alien to the media legacies of the past, as "[i]f we ultimately inhabit the body of mediation, then the only way we can become aware of that environment is by understanding its interface with the environments that it remediates within the media ecology." (Cavell 2025: 48).

Today, young people first become competent in the newest and the most brilliant media and communication technologies of their childhood, and then, with time, gain fascination and acquire skills for older media when needed from their older relatives. The constant and fast switching between being offline and online with its various formats, excerpts, and processes has had its observable impact on their thinking and worldview; however, these matters are flexible and subject to change with time, whereas preferences in content are seemingly more conservative. Somewhere in the future, the grandchildren of our informants will likely learn the art of fast searching from them, in exchange for teaching them how to use the new media of the time.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the results of the qualitative analysis of 164 autoethnographic essays, written in 2019-2023 by students of V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (Kharkiv, Ukraine) on differences and similarities between youth (mainly 18-21), their parents (mainly 40-55), and grandparents (mainly 65+), regarded in frames of mediatization theory (Couldry/Hepp). The analysis showed that the early immersion in media content determines conservative practices of its further consumption, even in newer media. While external factors, such as job or educational necessities, may alter the media consumption at a given life stage, the preference and habit of preferred media usage, developed in the process of socialisation, tend to stay with the person over a lifetime, though to confirm this statement, a separate quantitative study has to be conducted.

The adoption of electronic media shifted the fundamentals of perception and cognition, leading to self-counterposing of student youth to their older relatives (especially grandparents). Identified vectors of major social communication changes through media boil down to the youth: 1. Being constantly online and engaged in media consumption and multitasking, which shatters long-lasting experiences into discrete pieces and leads to "monotasking nostalgia"; 2. Having a high speed of content consumption and high competence in information search, accompanied by limited deep knowledge and experience, leading to preferring finding a ready-made answer over experimenting; 3. Highly valuing one's time, energy, and emotions, hence actively decreasing the number of unpleasant interactions. These findings connect the perceived differences in generational media habits to McLuhan's idea of electronic media being the return to the sensual and spatial – tactile – perception of the world that opposes the rational, linear, and abstract logic of textual culture. This shift problematizes the questions of presence, space, thinking, connection, and distinction (in a Bourdieuian sense) between human and non-human, potentially leading to the structural changes of the concept of humanity (e.g. the cyborg) and of the commonly accepted ways of experiencing emotional and social connection.

List of References

Ardan, Michal (2024): The Media System of Ukraine and Its Transformation in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War (Master's thesis), Prague: Charles University.

Bolin, Göran, & Skogerbø, Eli (2013): "Age, Generation and the Media." In: Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook 11/1, pp. 3-14. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/nl.11.1.3_2

Boulos, Laura-Joy (2024): "The Brain Digitalization: It's All Happening So Fast!" In: Frontiers in Human Dynamics 6, p. 1475438. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2024.1475438

Berland, Jody (2019): "McLuhan and Posthumanism: Extending the Techno-Animal Embrace." In: Canadian Journal of Communication 44/4, pp. 567-584. http://dx.doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2019v44n4a3725

Braun, Virginia/Clarke, Victoria (2019): "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." In: Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, 11/(4), pp. 589-597. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Bourdieu, Pierre (1996): Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, London: Harvard University.

Cavell, Richard (2025): Remediating McLuhan, London: Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.5117/9789089649508

Can, Dilek Tüfekçi (2023): "Reinterpreting Human in the Digital Age: From Anthropocentricism to Posthumanism and Transhumanism." In: Journal of Educational Technology & Online Learning, 6/4, pp. 981-990. https://doi.org/10.31681/jetol.1341232

Caprì, Tindara/Gugliandolo, Maria Cristina/Iannizzotto, Giancarlo/Nucita, Andrea/Fabio, Rosa Angela (2021): "The Influence of Media Usage on Family Functioning." In: Current Psychology, 40/6, pp. 2644-2653. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00204-1

Couldry, Nick/Hepp, Andreas (2017): The Mediated Construction of Reality, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dasion, Agustinus G. R./Prananta, Arie W. (2024): "The 'New Space' of Homo Digitalis: Questioning Humans in the Digital Age." In: Digital Theory, Culture & Society, 2/1, pp. 71-78. http://dx.doi.org/10.61126/dtcs.v2i1.44.

Gambo, Sarah/Özad, Bahire Ofe (2020): "The Demographics of Computer-Mediated Communication: A Review of Social Media Demographic Trends Among Social Networking Site Giants." In: Computers in Human Behavior Reports 2020/2, p. 100016. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2020.100016

Hayles, N. Katherine (1999): How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226321394.001.0001

Howe, Neil/Strauss, William (2009): Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation, New York: Vintage Books.

Jamalova, Maral/Constantinovits, Milán György (2020): "Smart for Development: Income Level as the Element of Smartphone Diffusion." In: Management Science Letters, 10/5, pp. 1141-1150. http://dx.doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2019.10.027

Kalmus, Veronika/Masso, Anu/Lauristin, Marju (2013): "Preferences in Media Use and Perception of Inter-Generational Differences Among Age Groups in Estonia: A Cultural Approach to Media Generations." In: Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook 11/1, pp. 15-34. http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/nl.11.1.15_1.

Kemp, Simon (2020): Digital 2020: Ukraine. DataReportal, February 2020, 18 (https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-ukraine).

Kemp, Simon (2025): Digital 2026: Internet Users Pass the 6 Billion Mark. DataReportal, October 2025, 15 (https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-six-billion-internet-users).

Klopfenstein, Frei Nadine/Wyss, Valery/Gnach, Aleksandra/Weber, Wibke (2024): "'It's a Matter of Age': Four Dimensions of Youths' News Consumption." In: Journalism 25/1, pp. 100-121. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14648849221123385

Kreijns, Karel/Yau, Jane/Weidlich, Joshua/Weinberger, Armin (2024): "Towards a Comprehensive Framework of Social Presence for Online, Hybrid, and Blended Learning." In: Frontiers in Education 8, p.1286594. http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1286594.

Lowenstein-Barkai, Hila/Lev-on, Azi (2022): "News Videos Consumption in an Age of New Media: A Comparison Between Adolescents and Adults." In: Journal of Children and Media, 16/1, pp. 78-94. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2021.1915831.

Lythreatis, Sophie/Singh, Sanjay K./El-Kassar, Abdul-Nasser (2022): "The Digital Divide: A Review and Future Research Agenda." In: Technological Forecasting and Social Change 175, p. 121359. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2021.121359.

Maguire, Moira/Delahunt, Brid (2017): "Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-By-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars." In: All Ireland Journal of Higher Education 9/3, pp. 335-349. https://doi.org/10.62707/aishej.v9i3.335.

McMillan, Callum T. (2021): Posthumanism in digital culture: Cyborgs, Gods and Fandom, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/9781800431072

Media Consumption of Ukrainians in Conditions of Full-scale War: OPORA's Survey (2022): OPORA [in Ukrainian]. June 1, 2022. (https://oporaua.org/en/polit_ad/24068-mediaspozhivannia-ukrayintsiv-v-umovakh-povnomasshtabnoyi-viini-opituvannia-opori-24068).

Panchuk D., Mass Media in Ukraine // Big Ukrainian Encyclopaedia. [in Ukrainian]. April 24, 2022 (https://vue.gov.ua/Масмедії%20в%20Україні).

Scheerder, Anique/Van Deursen, Alexander/Van Dijk, Jan (2017): "Determinants of Internet Skills, Uses and Outcomes. A Systematic Review of the Second-and

Third-Level Digital Divide." In: Telematics and informatics 34/8, pp. 1607-1624. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2017.07.007

Schroeder, Ralph (2018): Social Theory After the Internet, London: UCL. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20krxdr.

Sharma, Anu/Ojha, Jaya Kritika (2025): "Analyzing the Gender Digital Divide Through Powercube Framework: A Systematic Literature Review." In: Information Development, pp. 1-13. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/02666669251337064.

Terry, Garreth/Hayfield, Nikki/Clarke, Victoria/Braun, Virginia (2017): "Thematic Analysis." In: Willig, Carla/Rogers, Stainton Wendy (eds.), The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology: SAGE Publications, pp. 17-37. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n2.

The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2025: Understanding Mobile Internet Use in Low- and Middle-Income Countries. GSMA. September 2025 (https://www.gsma.com/somic/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-2025-Understanding-Mobile-Internet-Use-in-LMICs.pdf).

Trültzsch-Wijnen, Christine W. (2020): Media Literacy and the Effect of Socialization, Cham: Springer International Publishing. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56360-8.

Turner, Jamie/Moxley, Chuck (2021): An Audience of One: Drive Superior Results by Making the Radical Shift from Mass Marketing to One-to-one Marketing, Columbus: McGraw Hill Professional.

Twenge, Jean M. (2023): The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America's Future, New York: Atria Books. http://dx.doi.org/10.56315/PSCF12-23Twenge.

Ukraine: Media Consumption and Perceptions Research (2020) by Thomson Reuters Foundation: Eastern Partnership Independent Media Project Report. October 5, 2021 (https://epim.trust.org/application/velocity/_newgen/assets/TRFUkraineReport_ENG.pdf).

Vasbø, Kristin Beate/Hegna, Kristinn (2025): "Feeling Close, Disclosing Feelings – Family Practices and Practices of Intimacy in Youth–Parent Relations Across Three Generations in Norway." In: Journal of Youth Studies 28/2, pp. 299-317. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2267481

Verwiebe, Roland/Hagemann, Steffen (2025): "Bourdieu Revisited: New Forms of Digital Capital – Emergence, Reproduction, Inequality of Distribution." In: Information, Communication & Society 28/11, pp. 1861-1883. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2358170.

Wierschke, Katherina M. (2020): Trends in Post-Soviet Media Consumption: Assessing Media Freedom and Russian Media Influence in Georgia and Ukraine (Doctoral dissertation), Texas: University of Texas at Austin

Yates, Simeon/Kirby, John/Lockley, Eleanor (2015): "Digital Media Use: Differences and Inequalities in Relation to Class and Age." In: Sociological research online, 20/4, pp. 71-91. http://dx.doi.org/10.5153/sro.3751.

Zarembo, Kateryna/Gaidai, Daria/Litra, Leonid/Lymar et al. (2017): Ukrainian "Generation Z": Attitudes and Values. Nationwide opinion poll results, Kyiv: New Europe Center, GfK Ukraine, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. (https://neweurope.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Ukr_Generation_eng_inet-3.pdf)