Online Communication and Body Language

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Abstract: Objectives: This article approaches the problem of body language, in the new context of online communication, trying to see how the latest development of technology influences it. **Prior Work**: The interest in body language has grown in the last decades, first because of the work of scientists like Ekman, who studied micro-gestures and tried to give a universal *decoder*, and second because of the latest technological evolution in communication, that has stressed the importance of non-verbal cues. **Approach**: Using observation and the latest writing in the field, we will explain the consequences that the use of avatars and online communication have on body language and its interpretation. **Results:** Excluding context, posture, micro-gestures, tone and so on, online communication does not only become stereotype, but also affects real communication and especially body language. We can observe pragmatism of gestures, standardizations, lack of customizations, inability to read other's body language etc. **Implications:** All of this shapes the Y-Generation, one that not only fails to interpret other's body language, but also is unable to express themselves in direct communication. **Value:** This paper stresses out not only the consequences of online communication, but also the importance of further technological development.

Keywords: virtual reality; avatar; micro-gestures; Gen-Y

1. Introduction. Context and concepts

Body language has been theorized a lot in the last decades. Body itself has been reconsidered, not only in philosophy, but in lot of other disciplines. The body is nowadays omnipresent in our speech and everyday practice: wherever we turn there is something regarding the body that captures our attention: diet, exercises, massage, dance, beauty, body-building, fitness, therapies and techniques that approach the body (Codoban, 2011).

The body has always been used as means of communication. Apart from specific body language, the body itself represents both the social status of the "owner", but also the internalization of the social accepted beauty stereotype. Body language is

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our first means of communication, a means existing even before the articulate language was used. We still use it, even if technology has far developed and it is widely spread.

What I want to analyze here are the consequences of technology on body language. To do that, we first have to define the terms and to designate our area of interest.

As for the **body** itself, there is no genuine definition. The relative position of the body in modern analyses, can be reviewed by Barthes's question: *Quel corps? Nous en avons des plusieurs: les corps des anatomistes et des physiologistes, celui qui voit ou dont parle la science (...) mais nous avons aussi un corps de jouissance fait uniquement de relations érotiques, sans aucun rapport avec le premier: c'est un autre découpage, une autre nomination*" (Barthes, 1973, 29)

As far as we are interested in, the body is viewed not only from a philosophical (mostly phenomenological) point of view, but also from an anthropological and sociological one. It is important to stress the fact that the body doesn't exist apart from the society, which affects the process of how to *use* it and how to understand the other's use of their body.

Besides, real body is still understood phenomenological, even with the *virtual space* development, as *the only way a subject can exists in, one's only* **here,** *the only way one can experience reality*. Real body is impossible to expel, even if a subject has a dozen of other virtual bodies.

Virtual body, as opposed to the real one, does not exist in the real world. It is *real* only for the virtual reality it inhabits. **Virtual reality** is a term that applies to computer-simulated environments that can simulate physical presence in places in the real world, as well as in imaginary worlds. "*Most current virtual reality environments are primarily visual experiences, displayed either on a computer screen or through special stereoscopic displays, but some simulations include additional sensory information, such as sound through speakers or headphones. Furthermore, virtual reality covers remote communication environments which provide virtual presence of users with the concepts of telepresence and telexistence or a virtual artifact (VA) either through the use of standard input devices such as a keyboard and mouse, or through multimodal-devices such as a wired glove, the Polhemus, and omnidirectional treadmills.*" (Wikipedia, 2011)

So virtual reality is a cybernetic environment, one that allows their users to interfere (up to a limit), and that mostly use visual information. Virtual humans are the users of a certain virtual environment. They can attend that specific reality by writing or by having a body to move, by emoticons or by avatars.

2. Body Language

Body language is a form of non-verbal communication that consists in body posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye movements, voice intonation and more. Not only that body language is the oldest form of communication, but even nowadays, it is considered than up to 93% of our communication (to some authors like James Borg) and 55% for Albert Mehrabian - when feelings and attitudes are communicated (Mehrabian, 1971), consists of body language and paralinguistic cues. This makes body language the central form and the starting point of communication, ontogenetically *and* phylogenetic: *"To be accurate, "body language" is really not a proper natural language, such as Chinese or Navajo, but rather, a subset of natural language. Or, depending on your point of view, you might consider it to be a superset of natural language. After all, body language predates human natural language… by a few billion years (depending on how you define "body" and how you define "language").*" (Ventrella, 2011, pp. 18-19)

Back in 1959, anthropologist Edward T. Hall labeled these expressive human attributes "the Silent Language." Hall passed away last month in Santa Fe at age 95, but his writings on nonverbal communication deserve continued attention. He argued that body language, facial expressions and stock mannerisms function "in juxtaposition to words," imparting feelings, attitudes, reactions and judgments in a different register (Bauerlein, 2011).

Body language can substitute, accompany, shorten or even contradict verbal communication. The anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell coined the term "kinesics" to refer to the interpretation, science, or study of body language (Birdwhistell, 1970). He studied how people communicate through posture, gesture, distance and movement. Lately the term *body language* also included many other items, from facial expressions, gaze, gestures, posture and bodily contact. It also includes pauses in speech, uncontrolled body expressions like blushing and also "static" visual attributes of a person, projected though clothing, hair, jewelry and other accoutrements that express one's status, culture, mood, and attitude. All these are sigs and symbols that can be decoded. How?

We can understand better the body as means of communication if we analyze this at least from two points of view: sociology and semiotics.

From a sociological pint of view, there were a lot of theorists that have argued that culture is inscribed in the body (Mauss, 1936) and that *body* expresses society's stereotypes and culture (Baudrillard, 1998). So what the sociologist stress is that most of the body language is not innate, but there are a lot of gestures (like walking, hand gestures, proximity), that are socially and culturally constructed and defined. So a big part of the body language expresses something only because, on one hand, this is how that body learned to react, and, on the other hand, this is how society learned that a particular gesture or posture can be decoded. It's a circular process.

As for semiotics, it has almost the same approach in decoding body language. Structuralism begun with Saussure and the most important aspects that prevails from his work is, (beside the *arbitrariness* of the sign which is relatively easy to understand), the idea that the importance of every sign stand in the fact that it is ***different*** from one another. In this way he institutes the **system**, as the basis for every element's essence and significance. There is no "object *per se*" but only "object in the system", and the slightly small differences between them.

Along this idea semiotics also argues that the language is the one that "cuts" and shows part of reality, according to our previous experiences and our feelings. As in the language system, body language can be interpreted only as a part of the communication system. The gestures have significance only in a context that teaches us to decode them in a way, and only because there are small differences between them. This significance is also relative to the linguistic cuts we have operated, and this is influenced by our culture.

This means that there is no standard interpretation of a gesture, as there is no gesture perceived *in se.* Any gesture is relative to the context it appears in, and to the pattern of interpretation of those who decode it. There is no "accurate" interpretation, as there is not only "one" interpretation of a gesture. The gesture has to be, always, placed in a context, and decoded accordingly to a certain interpretative pattern (in various societies, there are different patterns to interpret a certain gesture. Even Ekman (*Telling Lies*), Allan Peace (*Body Language*) or Peter Collett (*Body Talk*), important authors that have analyzed body language, stress out the importance of context.

But what happens to the gestures considered innate, like smiling or sadness? Or the ones we cannot control, like yawning or blushing? And what about micro-gestures, analyzed by Paul Ekman in his "*Telling Lies*" (Ekman, 1985) or "*Emotions Revealed*"? He argues that there are basic emotions, most of them encoded in facial muscles. So this would mean that a certain gesture or micro-gesture can be decoded in a specific way. For example, smiles are universal interpreted like joy, and it has been proven that even blind children smile.

Ekman proves that there are gestures and micro-gestures, used by a large amount of people, that we cannot control and which, in most of the cases indicate a precise symptom (like fever indicates a virus) and *gives us away*. He supports his ides by analyzing non-verbal cues that, according to him and not only, have ontogenetic traces and that, in most of the cultures, express the same feeling or attitude, even when one tries deliberately to conceal it. It is a lot to discuss here, (for example, to see how much of these feelings are expressed mostly in European culture). But, for the fluency of our paper, we will accept that there are some uncontrollable (and thus less or even no-culturally shaped) micro-gestures and non-verbal cues, that are used by most of people, even if they *apply* them in a particular way (according to their culture, gender or individuality). We can also accept that there are some innate gestures that express the same interior condition, like smile.

But there are differences and degrees in smiling, and a lot of other interpretations: there is sensual smile, simple joy smile, love smile, gratitude smile, false smile etc. There is also the same relativity regarding both the context they are used into and also the semiotic paradigm: they are named according to our interpretation of the reality. We decode a non-verbal cue *inside* a certain (culturally shaped) pattern of interpretation. Also, the name we use to determine a certain feeling or attitude, expresses how we understand reality *now*. As in the word "snow", that we use to designate a certain estate of water – for snow there is one word in English but over 30 words in Norwegian, each expressing a different reality (don't forget about the small differences that make very part of a system significant). Maybe in some years we will discover that there are more kinds of smiling, and, using different names for all of them, we will not *translate* smile as simple as we do now.

3. Recent Mutations

Due to the recent and progressive development of technology, we are now able to communicate far more that in the past. Boundaries of space, age and even language have been overcome. And for communication, there is not only the real space to use, but also the virtual space: Facebook, Twitter, Skipe, email, SMS, blogs, forums, the list goes on.

In September 2008, when Nielsen Mobile announced that teenagers with cell phones each sent and received, on average, 1,742 text messages a month, the number sounded high, but just a few months later Nielsen raised the tally to 2,272. A year earlier, the National School Boards Association estimated that middle- and high-school students devoted an average of **nine hours** to social networking each week. Add email, blogging, IM, tweets and other digital customs and you realize what kind of hurried, 24/7 communications system young people experience today. (Bauerlein, 2011)

Most of the communication is done primarily by text. And, even when online communication doesn't exclude face-to-face interaction, (there are also web cams), it excludes a great part of what non-verbal communication means (context, posture, senses). So, how is online communication still effective, if it suspends so many aspects of what communication really means? And how does this affect communication in general and body language in particular?

When we talk about virtual space and online communication, we also have to talk about **virtual bodies and avatars.**

Lyotard has once asked: "*Can thought go on without the body?*" It seems like this question is more likely to be answered affirmatively in the light of the last decade's technological developments. Informational technology has emerged a new socio-professional human type, which is the *Cybernaut*, a citizen in cyberspace. As for him to be more attractive and human-shaped, *avatars* were made. The **avatar** is a digital character that represents one's embodiment in cyberspace.

The virtual body differs from the biological one in more than one aspect. First there is the space it inhabits: virtual space. Second there is the form – virtual body can be limitlessly shaped and re-shaped, changed even if it stops resample human. There are no limits in this. As the real one, the virtual body makes us *present* in an environment, and lets us *inhabit* it. But we can't feel it and we can't feel the environment. We just see it, not using the other senses to *feel* it.

There are also some other differences between them: the existence of a real body *in the same time* as the virtual one/ones (in different spaces), the possibility to control them both, the possibility to have multiple virtual bodies, the possibility to intensely shape the virtual body, the possibility to use it in ways the real body would not obey, the possibility to have a body that defies the lows of physics, impossibility to self-perception etc.

The cybernaut/**the user** does not exist through its body, but through its *bodily image*. *The postmodern technological body does not refer to a biological entity, but to codes and spread languages, which facilitates connections in virtual space.*

4. Avatars and Communication

What happens in virtual reality and how do these avatars communicate?

The word "avatar" was first used to denote the graphical representation of a user, in *Habitat*, the online role playing game created in the mid '80s by Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar for Lucas film (Ventrella, 2011, 17). From these crude beginnings, avatars have come a long way in terms of realism, and their developing process still proceeds. But still they are *clunky* when it comes to real-time nonverbal expression. *"This is one reason why many scholars are focusing attention on the avatar: as a new medium of communication, the avatar has some behavioral issues, social problems, low EQ, autism spectrum disorders, and the like. The avatar needs help, and it has scholars scratching their heads."* (Ventrella, 2011, 18)

4.1. What are the Particularities of Online Communication?

To better understand avatars and online communication, we first have to approach a little the virtual space and its particularities.

One of the particularities of virtual environment is the possibility to explore unlimited options. An avatar can represent a real person, or one of his many fake or real personalities. Online communication includes a great deal of unawareness of who is really our companion. Exploring different options makes the user mostly unclear about his communication purpose. It also teaches him to be distrustful with his companion. In the same time, it gives him freedom to react as he wants, being protected by his own indistinct identity. Virtual space allows you both to create

intimate scenery and also to keep anonymity between participants. All this reduces the *vulnerability* of the user. First, the disclosure of intimacies it is done without any repercussions, and second there is no other thing or person that can interfere in this relation.

It can also be kept *clean* of any other interference that can occur in real life, and it is a controlled environment. Never a user, in a form of either virtual body or an avatar, will react in virtual reality as in real life. So it is very hard to understand our companion's behavior or even feelings and attitude, when they are expressed in an artificial environment.

Another particularity is that online, the user has the possibility to practice different attitudes, and they are able to express themselves differently than in reality (more often they tend to be more spirited and daring), because there are not such visible consequences. So online communication is proven to be quite un-inhibiting (Joinson, 2003). More and more participants in virtual dialogue share a great deal of intimate information with persons they have never meat, nor really know their age, gender, social status, nationality, etc. Being invisible and unknown to other users, in a virtual environment, makes them able and willing to dissimulate. Even the fact that dissimulation is possible is reason enough. This determines the users to express more emphasized feelings, to use strong words, to experience a kind of freedom that they would never experience in real life. This could also leave to pornography and violence: „*A woman can be unsure about revealing her husband her sexual fantasies,(…). But she would be ready to discuss these fantasies to her virtual lover*" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004, p. 34)

Also, being able to have different virtual bodies or different avatars, *and without the synchrony of real time bodies, voices, and some stream of co-presence*, the user tends to fragment into pieces. Some people like deconstructing themselves into textual fragments. Virtual environment enables relations between users that are alike in at least one common interest. A person interested in, let's say, old movies, can easily find users sharing her interest, and start a dialog on the topic. If he is also interest in something else, than he uses a different avatar to connect to a person with the same interest. The user does not need to find ONE person with whom to share most of his interest, and he is most willing to communicate with different persons on different topics. There is a small and mostly unique topic of conversation between avatars, and this stresses the **discontinuous** nature of the relation. There is no use to sustain that relation outside the informational context, there is no use to extend it more than one desires. It is mostly an **operational**

relation. Also, "*without bodies, virtual or otherwise,* ***we tend to fragment into text-like pieces."*** (Bauerlein, 2011)

The most important particularities are given by the fact that most of our online communication is via text. What does that mean for the course of communication?

First, it means that there is no *body* to study, and so that there is *no body language*. It kind of exclude more than half of the information, so it often leads to misinterpretations. Also, it means that you cannot *read* your companion. You don't know if it is still there, if it looks angry or sick, and you know (almost) nothing regarding his physical presence and appearance. Also, we cannot decode the posture, the tone, the pause, the gaze, the proximity and all the other important aspects included in body language. It is not that we cannot transmit or receive information, but it is very difficult to construct a relationship only on strict verbal information.

4.2. Enabling Online Body-Language

What happened to human communication as it went online? "*Answer: it is getting the cold shoulder. Sandy Pentland, in Honest Signals, suggests that our communication technologies treat people like "****cogs*** *in an information-processing machine", and he suggests that this is based on society's infatuation with the* rational human. *But human communication is always socially and emotionally situated.*" (Ventrella, 2011, p. 19)

The new technological development is now working on how to transmit all these non-verbal information that are missing here and that are proven so important in communication. To make online communication more attractive, recently there has been huge interest in studying human behavioral clues that could be useful for developing an interactive and adaptive human-machine system. *"Unintentional human gestures such as making an eye rub, a chin rest, a lip touch, a nose itch, a head scratch, an ear scratch, crossing arms, and a finger lock, have been found conveying some useful information in specific context. Some researchers have tried to extract such gestures in a specific context of educational applications."* (Bauerlein, 2011).

Emoticons

So the rudimentary form of transmitting feeling appeared – and this is by emoticons. The *emoticon*, a kind of primordial static avatar expression, has rescued many email messages from dire misinterpretation. First as simple signs, like: **:)**, then as faces, ☺, and then as moving pictures (.gif): *"The emoticon is a species of body language that is coevolving along with other forms, including the avatar — sometimes even being used to trigger avatar expressions in virtual worlds. I believe that the emoticon currently still has more leverage than the avatar: its roots are in typographical soil, an ecosystem that is much older and more established than virtual worlds."* (Ventrella, 2011, p. 20)

And this does not stop here, because they become more and more complicated in their process of trying to replace the lack of physical interaction. Based on the study of the usual forms of expressing feeling (gestures, postures, etc.), the people working with emoticons and avatars have implemented lots of expressions that mostly express known feelings and attitudes that can easily be understood by both users. (Just try to text on Messenger and a lot of emoticons will be ready to help you to deliver your message).

But physical touch and direct interaction can still not be replaced (although there are some rudimentary devices that try to). To understand better what an avatar cannot do regarding to body language (and won't be ever able to do) we have to go back a little to the beginning of this paper. We have discussed there about some issues in body language that can be culturally defined and implemented, and about some others that are unconscious, and that cannot be controlled. We have also stressed the importance of the *difference* between objects from the same system.

What emoticons and avatars were able to do by now is to express, more or less accurate, the gestures and non-verbal cues that are culturally defined and/or consciously used. They also made emoticons that display unconsciously used gestures or signs, but it is very hard to use them to reveal your companion true feelings. There are two major particularities of the use of emoticons:

- One: they transmit the rudimentary attitude and feeling, but they reveal nothing of the particularities of the user. There is no difference and customization in the gesture, and so the emoticons cannot always express the real feeling behind it (a Smiley can, of course, transmit joy, but it cannot say if it is a sincere smile, a half-smile, a sad smile etc.).

- Second: the emoticons are sent by the users by a deliberate act. So, in reality, the person can smile, or blush, or even display certain micro-gestures that betray some other real feeling. But online, the user displays only what he wants.

What is important in online communication is that emoticons and avatars can be controlled, and their expressions as well. The person can transmit more or less body-language through avatars or emoticons, and they can neglect involuntary reactions (that are the most important when it comes to decoding body-language).

Jeffrey Ventrella enumerates three primary reasons why avatars in virtual worlds lack emotional expression and behavioral realism (Ventrella, 2011, pp. 32-33): 1. Virtual world interaction evolved to a large degree within the industry of games, which emphasizes action over communicative and socializing expression. 2. Virtual worlds typically use a third-person view, behind the avatar, as a default vantage point, which means you are watching your avatar's derriere most of the time. Facial expressions are pointless from this vantage point. 3. Many virtual world programmers are trained in math, physics, and engineering, and not in the affective sciences, and they are also male-dominated.

Video Chat

Another way we are reconstituting body language online is by video-broadcasting our expressions. Video chat is the visual counterpart to the telephone, and it is making a huge difference. Video chat can give us face-to-face interaction. We can now analyze our companion's micro-gestures, his posture, his clothes, and it really makes a great step forward.

But even video chat can be restrictive and distort communication. Why? Because the user is constrained to the limitation of space and time: *"It therefore does not qualify as a plastic language that scales up—as an out-of-body kind of body language. Virtual body language is very different than expression via video chat. Similar to the way that written language provides an encoding of verbal communications, an emerging* body language alphabet *(not yet articulated) will come into form, and enable real time nonverbal expression on the internet. Stephen Hawking's speech synthesizer is a tiny microbe-sized glimpse of what I'm talking about."* (Ventrella, 2011, p. 22)

5. Consequences on Real Behavior and Body Language

How does online communication interfere with real body language? Does virtual life have consequences on the real one? We argue that it does. One of the first consequences of online communication on body language is **its deliberate and practical** use.

We have stressed at the beginning of this paper that there are two perspectives on body language: on one hand, most of it is constituted and decoded in a cultural form and by cultural based patters of interpretation, and on the other hand that there are some bodily reactions that we cannot control, and that *give us away*, like blushing or smiling. Avatars neglects and seldom use/express the unconscious body reactions. What does that mean?

It means two things: that, in time, we won't be able to identify these non-verbal cues in our real conversational partners, and that we will start using grimacing and gestures only with operational purpose. Meaning that, if until now body language came naturally, now we become aware of it, we analyze it and use it intentionally in real conversations. It is an evident circularity, with the main side effect that gestures and micro-gestures are now used with a purpose of emphasizing something. Most of the unconscious gestures are now ostentatiously displayed, both in virtual reality as in real life, just to cause a certain reaction from the interlocutor. We're not saying that before this, fake-gestures weren't used in a deliberate misleading way. We're just trying to stress the fact that now more and more users become aware of their display of feeling, and use them deliberately and operational both in real as in virtual life.

Even more: There is also a huge interest in learning to avoid any unintentional gesture that might leave a negative impression on the onlookers. A large number of people are starting to attend special sessions on controlled body behavior and take advice from expert sociologists. Learning good body language, such as living styles of foreign people, is important during interaction in any sort of global community.

Another effect is the **standardization** of gestures. Even if the industry of avatars is strongly developing, avatars are still using standard expressions. Yes, it is true that those gestures or micro-gestures are, more or less, universally accepted, but every man has his own way of smiling, his own way of enjoying something, etc. Using emotions on an avatar can really make online communication more expressive and can avoid a lot of misunderstandings, but the emoticon or avatar do not have that

person's "trade mark". It is an increasing process of uniformity in expressing our feelings and attitudes. Online expressions lack customization: "*The BBC published a large coffee table book called The Human Face, by Brian Bates, with John Cleese, to accompany a television series. Concerning new communications media, the authors warn, "…today, we are doing more and more faceless, and therefore, expressionless, communicating*" (Ventrella, 2011, p. 20)

This doesn't mean that real body language becomes uniform, because I still smile my own way (involuntary); it means that I also start using a new expression in an indistinct manner. Using over and over the same emoticons in online communication, we start to use the same reactions in real live. A person may have never use the *grin* expression in real life, but, by using the emoticon frequently, it starts using that in real life too. This implies adjustment of body language, but also its **impoverishment**. Not only that we tend to stop using our own rich gestural potential, but also become real poor at trying to reveal the expressions.

Living in a world where there are so many means of communication, most of us suffer of what is it now called "continuous partial attention." With a device close by, attendees at workplace meetings simply cannot keep their focus on the speaker. It's too easy to check email, stock quotes and Facebook. While a quick log-on may seem, to the user, a harmless break, others in the room receive it as a silent dismissal. This is considered normal for most of the young people, but inacceptable for seniors.

One of the most important consequence of online communication is, as we said before, the **difficulty both in relating with another person in real world, and also to read other's body language.** We first have to talk about **Generation Y**, a term that is lately used to designate young people that have access to technology and use it on current basis. This is the generation mostly affected by online communication and by the strong technological developments.

First: there is **difficulty of interacting with one another in real life**. In real life the person is not protected by the anonymous avatar, nor helped by the artificial and *clean* virtual environment, nor uninhibited by the lack of real consequences from online communication. So, as willing as young people are to communicate online, as poor communicators are in real life: "*We live in a culture where young people—outfitted with iPhone and laptop and devoting hours every evening from age 10 onward to messaging of one kind and another—are ever less likely to develop the "silent fluency" that comes from face-to-face interaction. It is a skill*

*that we all must learn, in actual social settings, from people (often older) who are adept in the idiom. As text-centered messaging increases, such occasions diminish. The digital natives improve their adroitness at the keyboard, but when it comes to their capacity to "read" the behavior of others, they are all thumbs."(*Bauerlein, 2011).

Second: the **difficulty in reading another's body language**. Using all the time the same emoticons, expressing basic and invariable emotions and attitudes, young people tend more and more to ignore micro-gestures, or just to interpret them as in the clean virtual environment, disregarding the context. And this is interesting because now libraries are full with books telling us how to decode our partner's body language, but they also do the same mistake, most of them excluding differences, customization, context and cultural basis. Or even if they don't do this mistake, most of the readers do. This is a really ironic effect: emoticons were made by the study of body language and micro-gestures, only to have as an outcome a weakly ability of decoding them. Less and less young people are even interested in decoding them, using communication only as giving-receiving information, and less as constructing a relationship.

There are probably many other consequences, but t is hard to know the extent of the problem. It is too early to assess the effect of digital habits, and the tools change so quickly that research can't keep up with them. By the time investigators design a study, secure funding, collect results and publish them, the technology has changed and the study is outdated.

6. Conclusions

This paper has shortly analyzed body language and the particularities of online communication. We have talked about avatars and emoticons, and their role in completing online communication and avoiding misunderstandings. We have also stressed the fact that, even with these tools, or with web cams, online communication still has a great impact on real live and real body language.

It makes body language more *purpose-centered*, unified and expressionless; it impoverishes it. Online communication also affects Generation Y, by making them not only poor judgers of the other's body language, but also unable to tart or handling a real conversation with a real person.

There is still a lot to analyze and discover, because technology changes fast, and so the possibilities of online communication. *"Still, we might reasonably pose questions about silent-language acquisition in a digital environment. Lots of folks grumble about the diffidence, self-absorption and general uncommunicativeness of Generation Y. The next time they face a twenty-something who doesn't look them in the eye, who slouches and sighs for no apparent reason, who seems distracted and unaware of the rising frustration of the other people in the room, and who turns aside to answer a text message with glee and facility, they shouldn't think, "What a rude kid." Instead, they should show a little compassion and, perhaps, seize on a teachable moment. "Ah," they might think instead, "another texter who doesn't realize that he is communicating, right now, with every glance and movement—and that we're reading him all too well."* (Bauerlein, 2011)

There is also the possibility, as Vigarello imagines it, that online communication will develop so strong that will allow us not only to understand better body language, but also to enrich it by the use of different contexts while online communication: "*Once this communication medium has sufficiently matured, it will allow people to communicate visually and behaviorally over remote distances, and to build their own semiotic process within which truth-telling (and lying, and all nuances in-between) are possible— determined by how the technology is used. Video conferencing allows us to use natural facial expressions and bodily gestures, but is limited by the physical constraints of our bodies (and the cameras that capture them). Virtual spaces on the other hand permit endless modes of expression, where embodied effects like eye-gaze, pointing, and posture manifest, and where extra-body expressive accoutrements can be synthesized and articulated as part of a virtual semiosis."* (Ventrella, 2011, p. 27)

This is not only Vigarello's position. He is also sustained by others, for example Goman that sees *The High-Tech Future of Body Language.* She considers that "*The visual technology revolution is making body language more important than ever. Soon you will be interacting face-to-face with even greater frequency, even if those interactions are mediated by a screen. Leaders will need to master these new technologies to communicate effectively with their followers, employees, customers and clients."* (Goman, 2008).

She mentions five new advances in technology and research that show how non-verbal cues will remain as significant - if not more significant - in our digital future: telepresence going mainstream, avatars learning body language (with the

help of "Project LifeLike?"), *sociometer's* predictions (based on analyzing patterns of unconscious social signals that pass between people), robots' gaze (to guide the flow of the conversation) and **PASION (Psychologically Augmented Social Interaction Over Networks)** whose project is to facilitate the functioning of online groups by restoring and even enhancing this information as users interact digitally.

Our position in this is kindly reserved. Yes, it is true that technologies expand and develop new ways to use body language in online conversation. It is true that performance web cams and virtual common environment could help in this. And they could make a significant progress, at least in making Generation Y aware of the plenitude of possibilities, and able to understand better body language and non-verbal cues. But still we are talking about controlled environment, about man-controlled avatars or images, and about mediated communication. And this disturbs communication and also affects (more or less) the understanding of genuine, real face-to-face interactions.

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Priority Axis 1. "Education and training in support for growth and development of a knowledge based society"

Key area of intervention 1.5: Doctoral and post-doctoral programs in support of research.

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