FRIENDS ON FACEBOOK: THE IMPACT OF FACEBOOK ON INTERPERSONAL
FRIENDSHIPS OF FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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By
Kathryn T. Schultz
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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

Thesis or Project Director

Faculty Mentor

Faculty Reader

Gonzaga University
MA Program in Communication and Leadership Studies
Abstract

Using the Internet is extremely common among college students, and one major function of Internet use is communicating with friends from their offline lives. With the popularity of social networking sites, it is important to explore how the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is impacting female college students’ relationships. Two theories provided a foundation for this study: Walther’s social information processing theory (2002) and Baxter and Montgomery’s relational dialectics theory (1996).

Quantitative research was done for this work by surveying female college students regarding their feelings about Facebook’s potential impact on their interpersonal friendships. Some initial findings include that, of this research population, most respondents use Facebook because of its convenience, but still prefer face-to-face or over the phone communication. It was also discovered that Facebook did add an element of conflict within some friendships. Convenience was the most positive aspect of Facebook that was reported.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Goal</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions of Terms Used</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Remaining Chapters</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical and Ethical Assumptions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Basis</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Literature</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of the Study</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results of the Study</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Further Study</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent Form/Survey Questionnaire</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor Agreement Form</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION: THE GOAL AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Importance of Study

The use of the Internet as a communication tool has become more and more commonplace, particularly among younger generations (Boyd, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002). According to a 2004 PEW study, 87 percent of teenagers have some form of Internet access, and among those connected teens, 55 percent have created a profile on a social networking site (Boyd, 2008). While there are numerous social networks available, one of the most well-known is Facebook.

Since its inception in February 2004, Facebook has grown exponentially. According to its fact sheet (listed on the facebook.com website), the social network has 500 million active users as of 2011. Due to the incredible growth of Facebook and the usage rates among young adults, it is important to explore the potential impact(s) of this social networking tool. As Postman (1998) stated, the onset of a new medium is not an isolated incident, but rather, it impacts all other forms of communication. There has been much debate over the “richness” of computer mediated communication (CMC) versus face-to-face communication. Some scholars argue that CMC is not as involved or rewarding as face-to-face communication (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). Others argue that, given sufficient time in the medium, CMC can eventually be as rich and rewarding as face-to-face communication (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004; Mesch & Talmud, 2007). Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) discussed the use of CMC and its impact on offline relationships, stating “the characteristics of electronic communication intrinsically change social relations,” (p. 136). They found that young adults use
electronic forums more frequently than face-to-face interactions when communicating with peers.

It is important to explore how the use of Facebook impacts other forms of communication as well as relationship development and maintenance. While there is a plethora of research opportunities in the realm of social networking, the focus of this work will be to determine how the use of Facebook affects interpersonal friendships of female college students. By determining how usage impacts relationships, it will enable young adults to more effectively use this and other emerging forms of interpersonal communication.

**Statement of the Goal**

If social-network usage has an impact on users’ interpersonal friendships, it is important to learn about those impacts. It is also important to develop strategies to effectively use this communication medium.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

For the purposes of this study, “Facebook usage” will be defined as having an active Facebook account and page. Interpersonal friendships will be defined as non-romantic relationships maintained by female college students. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is in reference to communication that takes place through a technological medium.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter two provides a philosophical and theoretical foundation for this study and discusses existing literature on this topic. Topics of previous research include motivations for social network use, personality traits of Facebook users, how users’ offline issues manifest
themselves online, the public nature of Facebook interactions, and cyberbullying. Chapter three explains the scope and methodology of this study. Within the methodology is the design, sample, and instrumentation of the study, as well as ethical considerations, strengths and limitations, and implications of the work. Chapter four provides the analysis and discussion of the results of the study, and chapter five concludes the work by discussing limitations of the study and offering suggestions for future research. Finally, the survey is attached in the appendix.
Chapter 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before trying to determine the effects of Facebook usage, it is necessary to review the overall usage of social media and the possible motivations for utilizing these platforms. This section discusses philosophical assumptions and theoretical foundations, as well as motivation for social network usage, personality traits of Facebook users, issues that users encounter both on and offline, the issue of private interactions being made public through social media usage, and finally, the potential incidence of cyberbullying through social networking sites and how that potentially affects users.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

There are two main philosophical assumptions at play in this work. The first assumption is that gender strongly influences how and why people communicate. According to Adler, Rosenfeld and Proctor (2001), the use of language differs between men and women, with women typically discussing personal issues such as “relationship problems; family; health and reproductive matters; weight; food; clothing; and men” (p. 146) and men focusing on “sports, hobbies, and activities” (p. 146). Men and women also differ in how they communicate within a conversation. Men typically want to create an entertaining atmosphere, whereas women use communication primarily to discuss personal issues and create a feeling of empathy (p. 147). It is assumed that these differences are at play when it comes to computer-mediated communication as well. This would mean that women would use CMC to connect with others and establish dialogues around personal issues.

The second philosophical assumption is that technological advancements can both help and hinder interpersonal communication and interpersonal closeness. One example provided by
Donna Reid and Fraser Reid (2004) illustrates how technology can positively impact interpersonal communication. They focused on the social and psychological effects of text messaging, and separated their survey participants into two groups of cell phone users: those who prefer texting and those who prefer talking. They found that “compared to talkers, texters were found to be more lonely and socially anxious, and more likely to discuss their ‘real-self’ through text…(I)t appears that there is something special about texting that allows people to translate their loneliness and/or social anxiety into productive relationships” (p. 1). This is a clear example of how technology can help interpersonal communication. On the other side of this argument, some advancements are decreasing the personal nature of communication, with virtual contact at times replacing face to face contact. While opinions may differ on whether that is good or bad, at the very least it changes the landscape of interpersonal communication.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Two theories will serve as the foundation for this work: Walther’s social information processing theory (1992) and Baxter and Montgomery’s relational dialectics theory (1996).

Walther’s social information processing theory was developed to identify how CMC can be used in the development of relationships. As summarized by Griffin (2009), a few earlier theories argue that CMC cannot be used for relationship development. Social presence theory argues that CMC cannot be a rich form of relational communication, because users sense that another live person is not engaged in the communication. Media richness theory argues that CMC cannot deliver rich relational messages. Cues filtered out theory argues that CMC is “fatally flawed,” (Griffin, p. 139) because it does not include, among other things, non-verbal communication cues.
Walther disagreed with these stances, and purported that CMC can in fact be used for relationship development, but that the development will occur at a different pace than traditional, face-to-face communication. In his 1992 work, Walther argued that while the formation of relationships through CMC is a different process than exclusive face-to-face communication, quality relationships can and will develop if given ample time. He also stated that users must “adapt their remaining communicative cues…to the processes of relational management,” (p. 67). As Griffin explains, being able to devote extended time to using CMC is the “crucial variable” (p. 142), in order for the communication to be successful and for the relationship to develop. Walther’s conclusion was that, if CMC users are allowed sufficient time to communicate with others in order to establish and develop their relationships, they will eventually develop in the same way as face-to-face relationships.

Once a relationship is established, it needs to be maintained. Relationship maintenance will be looked at through the lens of Baxter and Montgomery’s relational dialectics theory. The main tenet of this theory is that every relationship experiences tension, and that this tension is “produced and reproduced through the parties’ joint communicative activity” (Griffin, p. 156). Baxter and Montgomery maintain that there are three types of tension found in relationships; the main type that will be explored in this research is that of “expression/non-expression” (p. 160).

Griffin summarized this tension by connecting Altman’s social penetration theory with relational dialectics. While Altman stated that “self-disclosure and privacy operate in a cyclical…fashion over time,” (p. 160) Baxter and Montgomery stated that the openness and closedness of a relationship also ebbs and flows, which they discuss in detail:

The self boundary is closed and open depending on the person’s perception of the various costs and benefits associated with candor and discretion. On the one hand, the
self boundary must be protected from the vulnerability and risk inherent in disclosure. At the same time, however, there is pressure for a person to grant others access to his or her private territory; as discussed earlier, self-disclosure potentially benefits both the individual and the relationship between persons. (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 139-140).

This ebb and flow could be further complicated by new forms of communication, including CMC. Griffin stated that “public disclosure is a relational rite of passage signaling partners and others that the tie that binds them together is strong,” (p. 160). Within a relationship, there are conflicting desires to be open and divulge information along with desires to be exclusive and private. Facebook usage could further complicate this conflict; not only are the people within the relationship struggling between openness and closedness, but now their openness is on display for the public to see. This could potentially lead to a new layer of conflict within relationship maintenance; CMC users may have different levels of comfort regarding what is disclosed on Facebook. If the comfort levels are not the same within a relationship, it could lead to potential conflict or roadblocks for relationship maintenance.

**Motivation for Social Network Usage**

One common motivation for social network usage is that users’ peers are utilizing the site and that it therefore becomes a necessity for their social lives (Boyd, 2008; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008). Clearly, young people are motivated to go online because they have friends who are there as well. The Internet is now an additional place where people can maintain their offline relationships. Charlton, Devlin and Drummond (2009) cited multiple works, stating that Facebook gives users the opportunity to interact with other users and build deeper relationships. They also mentioned that these online interactions are not hindered by location, whereas face-to-face communication requires physical proximity.
Facebook usage is particularly prevalent among college students. Kujath (2011) stated that 80% of college students are Facebook users, and that it is the most popular website accessed by people ages 18-24 (p. 76). Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) referenced Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley’s 2009 work and stated that “Facebook has also been viewed as the ‘social glue’ that assists students to become accustomed to college life,” (p. 184). Eberhardt (2007) referenced Michael Arrington of TechCrunch, who stated that Facebook usage is extremely prevalent among most undergraduate communities, and that approximately 85% of students use Facebook if there is a Facebook network available on campus (p. 18). Eberhardt also discussed the fact that, particularly for first-year college students, connecting on Facebook offers students a feeling of community and camaraderie.

Information-seeking and relationship maintenance are also common motivations for using social networks. Facebook allows users to learn information about their “Facebook friends” through the information shared on users’ Profiles and Wall Posts, which may drive users to seek out the social network (Muise, Christofides & Desmarais, 2009). Researchers have also found that a primary use of Facebook is to strengthen existing social bonds (Ellison et al., 2007; Kujath, 2011; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008), and maintain long-distance friendships (Muise et al. 2009). Eberhardt (2007) also discussed the role of Facebook in relationship maintenance. He stated that Facebook usage helps first-year students maintain their existing connections with friends from high school and back home. Since these relationships often endure physical separation, maintaining an online connection may help students adjust.

Another motivation for social network usage is self-disclosure, which is an integral part of relationship development, as it encourages information-sharing and trust (Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor II, 2001). Valkenburg and Peter (2009) found that the use of instant messaging
among adolescent users was often an opportunity for them to disclose issues that they were not comfortable discussing in a face-to-face setting. The authors projected that instant messaging offers an outlet to discuss personal issues with friends if users did not have their own physical space to discuss these issues and didn’t feel comfortable if a parent or guardian would be in close proximity to their face-to-face discussion. They found that this process helped reinforce existing friendships among adolescents. Thelwall and Wilkinson (2009) reported similar findings.

(While these results were specifically related to adolescent users, it could also be argued that college students could experience similar feelings with regard to those they currently live with. If a student did not know his or her roommate(s) prior to the school year starting, he or she may also feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues in close proximity of that person. CMC would potentially offer an outlet to do so while maintaining an individual’s privacy.)

**Personality Traits of Facebook Users**

Another important aspect to explore is the personality traits among Facebook users, and whether certain traits increase a person’s likelihood of using Facebook. Wilson, Fornasier, & White (2010) explored this issue and found that introverts were more likely than extroverts to have higher levels of overall Internet usage, but that extroverts had higher usage levels of social networking sites. They also found that neurotic young adults had lower usage levels on such sites, perhaps due to uncertainty and anxiety related to sharing personal information and photographs. They also found that “self-esteem can either increase or decrease depending on the tone of feedback received on people’s virtual profiles,” (p. 175), suggesting that self-esteem levels are not necessarily good predictors of a person’s social network usage.
The personality trait of shyness and its relation to social network usage has been researched in-depth. Orr et al. (2009) researched this topic and found that shy individuals have fewer Facebook friends than their non-shy counterparts, that shy individuals use Facebook more than non-shy individuals, and that shy users have more positive regard for Facebook than non-shy users.

**Online Manifestations of Users’ Offline Issues**

Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten (2006) stated that the features of “peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback,” (p. 584) have an impact on self-esteem and well-being, and both of these features are found on social networking sites. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) reported that users find instant messaging “as supportive as phone or face-to-face interactions,” (p. 125) and that instant messaging allows them to “[connect] with peers and [enhance] their group identity,” (p. 125.) They also stated that 48 percent of the adolescents surveyed believe that their friendships have benefited from their Internet usage.

Boyd (2008) explored the impact of MySpace on adolescent’s relationship development. She stated that the public nature of these sites can impact relationship development, because users are publicly acknowledging connections for the online world to see. While her work focused on MySpace, it can be argued that the same issues exist within other social networking sites, including Facebook. As Boyd stated, “there are social consequences in publicly announcing ones’ friends, best friends, and bestest friends. Feelings are hurt when individuals find that someone that they feel close with does not reciprocate,” (p. 130).

Gershon (2008) delved into this issue, citing a woman she interviewed who learned through Facebook that her friend had broken up with a significant other. The interviewee stated
that she did not know how to acknowledge the event with her friend, since she was not told the news personally, but instead found out through Facebook. This is an example of how social networking sites are presenting users with new challenges within their offline relationships.

Identity construction is also an important aspect of social networking. In her 2010 study, Mehdizadeh explained that users are able to construct their online selves however they want, selecting what photographs to display and what personal information to share. She also stated that gender plays a role in online identity construction. When looking at narcissistic individuals, she found that females were more likely to include flattering photographs of themselves, while males were more likely to display their online identity through the “About Me” section of Facebook.

Another interesting topic worth exploring is the incidence of jealousy in the online world. Muise et al. (2009) explored the relationship between jealousy and Facebook usage in the context of romantic relationships. They found that there was a “significant association” (p. 443) between time spent on the social networking site and feelings of jealousy experienced on the site. They attributed it to the public nature of Facebook, and that users are able to see more information and interaction than one could see without using the site. While this study focused on romantic relationships, it highlights an important impact on existing, offline relationships, and one that should continue to be explored in the realm of platonic relationships.

A fourth issue worth exploring is the potential relationship between Facebook usage and self-esteem. One main tenet of the social network is that users can provide feedback on their Facebook Friends’ profiles and photographs. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) stated that self-esteem can be increased or decreased depending on the type of feedback received. They
referenced Valkenburg et al.’s 2006 study which found that positive feedback lent itself to higher self-esteem, while negative feedback had the opposite effect. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) posed the important question of, how is self-esteem affected when a user’s peers choose to acknowledge or not acknowledge the user in the online world? It is important to explore the impact on self-esteem as well as how a relationship may be impacted by online interactions (or lack thereof).

Valkenburg et al. (2006) made the case that, since social networking sites are public and feedback is viewable by multiple users, that peer evaluations will likely have an impact on users’ self-esteem. Wilson et al. (2010) echoed this sentiment, stating that the type of feedback received will either increase or decrease self-esteem. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) accurately summarized these issues, stating that “society’s traditional adolescent issues – intimacy, sexuality, and identity – have all been transferred to and transformed by the electronic stage,” (p. 139.) This conclusion could perhaps be extrapolated and applied to social network users of all ages.

**Public Nature of Online Interactions**

An important thing to remember about most online interactions is that they are put on display for the virtual world to see. Users are now faced with personal information becoming very public, and that can influence online interactions. As Boyd (2008) stated, it may be difficult for older generations to imagine private information and personal conversations being broadcast on a website, but that is a common facet of interpersonal exchanges on social networking sites. She reiterated the importance of teaching users how to navigate this online world and to remind them that their online interactions impact their offline lives.
Cyberbullying

The final topic of discussion is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying has lately received a significant amount of coverage through news and popular media, but researchers have been following this issue for quite some time. Aricak et al (2008) discussed the fact that, prior to the technological surge, bullying victims were able to find respite from bullying once they were physically away from the bully. With social networks and cell phones being commonplace for younger generations, the physical barrier is removed and victims are accessible regardless of physical location (p. 253). The authors also stated that boys tended to be cyberbullies more than girls, and girls were more often the cybervictims (p. 254). They also discussed the impact cyberbullying has on mental health, stating that exposure to Internet harassment has a negative impact on users’ mental health and can be related to depression (p. 255).

Geach and Haralambous (2009) discussed this issue specifically relating to Facebook, and stated that harassment through Facebook can range from creating a group that targets a particular individual, to sending friend requests or “poking” an individual directly. (“Poking” is a function through Facebook where the user is alerted that they have been “poked” by another Facebook user. While “poking” is not strictly a negative action or one used exclusively in the realm of online harassment, Geach and Haralambous did include the function in their discussion of this topic.) As stated by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008), this is another example of how certain relationship issues have migrated to the online world.

While much of the current research about cyberbullying focuses on younger students (typically high school age or younger) it is worthwhile to explore the possible occurrences of cyberbullying within the college-aged population as well.
Purpose of Study

The available research provides a wealth of information on the topics of relationship development, identity construction, and self-esteem. It also provides insight on the potential impacts of social network usage. When combining past research with theoretical foundation and the philosophical assumptions that women use communication to connect with others, and also that technological advances can both help and hinder interpersonal communication, this is clearly an important topic to explore further. Female college students face many issues related to identity development, self-esteem, relationship development, and relationship maintenance. Exploring how these issues are impacted by and through Facebook usage is an important topic to research. The main objective of this thesis is to determine the following:

RQ1: How prevalent is Facebook usage among female college students?

RQ2: How does the use of Facebook affect interpersonal friendships of female college students?

RQ3: How does the public nature of Facebook interactions impact users?

RQ4: Are female college students exposed to negative feedback through Facebook?

RQ5: Do female college students engage in sending negative feedback through Facebook?

Based on the theoretical and philosophical foundations, as well as the research available within the realm of CMC and social media, it is hypothesized that this research will find Facebook usage has both a positive and negative effect within interpersonal friendships of female college students. Some relationships may be strengthened by the use of Facebook, while
there may also be newfound complications and/or tensions within other aspects of these friendships.
Chapter 3. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope

There are several possible areas of research within the realm of CMC and social networking. This research was initially precipitated through anecdotal observations of how social media usage impacted personal friendships. When attempting to hone in on an appropriate scope for this research, it was necessary to specify what aspects of Facebook would be studied (such as status updates, relationship statuses, messaging functions, etc.), what populations would be surveyed (all users regardless of age or gender, male users, female users, specific age populations), and what types of relationships would be researched (romantic or platonic, or both). The scope was effectively narrowed to include interpersonal friendships and Facebook usage of female college students.

Methodology

Design

For this thesis, the quantitative method of survey questionnaires was used for data collection. Neuman (2006) defines this method as one in which the researcher gathers the data from the participants without manipulating the situation to suit a particular direction of the research. Since the goal of this thesis was to learn how female college students think or believe Facebook impacts their existing relationships, it was important to be an unbiased researcher whose goal was to collect the data and proceed with interpretation.

Sample
The survey participants were selected through purposive sampling. This is defined as “a nonrandom sample in which the researcher uses a wide range of methods to locate all possible cases of a highly specific…population,” (Neuman, p. 222). The target population was female college students who are active Facebook users. Due to financial and geographic constraints, it was not possible to procure a truly random sample, nor was it possible to locate “all possible cases” of the sample. In an effort to garner the most data possible with the means available, a total of 50 female college students were surveyed for this study, and were selected from an undergraduate population at a private liberal arts university in Minnesota.

**Instrumentation**

As explained by Rubin (2010), “survey research can be used to measure attitudes, opinions, and reported behaviors or behavioral intentions,” (p. 219). Participants completed a twenty-one question survey created by the researcher. (The complete survey can be found in the appendix.) The survey included statements regarding Facebook usage rates and feelings towards Facebook. Participants were asked to rank their agreement with these statements. The survey avoided posing strictly “agree/disagree” statements in order to prevent what Neuman referred to as a “response set bias” (p. 291), in which respondents do not necessarily agree or disagree with a statement, but are compelled to answer one way or the other. The questions were laid out in a matrix question format in an effort to simplify the survey’s appearance and structure for the participants. Statements did not include jargon and were short in length. The possible responses were structured on a Likert scale and asked respondents to “Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.” A self-administered survey was given to potential participants, and they were invited to complete the paper survey at the beginning of class.
Ethical Considerations and Procedure

There were three main ethical considerations within this study. The first was the issue of privacy. It was important for the survey participants to be comfortable sharing their beliefs and feelings about this topic. For this reason, survey responses were anonymous and the participants were informed that their identities would not be disclosed. The second ethical issue had two parts: voluntary participation and permission for participation. It was important to ensure that consent was procured from the participants before embarking on the research. Once this research topic had been introduced to the students, they were advised that their participation was completely voluntary. They were also advised that their decision would have no impact on their academic standing at the university.

Once these issues were addressed, it was possible to proceed with research. Participants were selected based on their gender (female) and academic standing (college student). Participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymous. The students were provided a twenty-one question survey for their completion. Student consent forms were also distributed along with the paper survey.

The survey topics ranged from levels of Facebook usage to potential impacts on existing relationships. The survey was presented in statement format, and asked the participants to rate their level of agreement on a Likert scale (ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement.) A small number of survey items were not on a Likert scale, but were instead positioned as direct questions or gave the participants the option to select items as they apply. (Examples include: “How many times per day do you usually log on to Facebook?” and “Please check the Facebook functions that you use: status updates, updating profile information
[relationship status, “About Me,” etc.], share photos, send messages, use Instant Messaging, comment on friends’ photos, comment on friends’ statuses.”) There was also space at the end of the survey where participants were invited to leave additional comments.

Once the data had been gathered through the surveys, the next step was reviewing the data, analyzing the information through use of a codebook, and interpreting the results. Through the codebook, the researcher assigned numeric values to each of the possible responses. For example, if a respondent selected “strongly agree” to any of the statements, that response was coded with a “5.” If a respondent chose “strongly disagree,” that response was coded with a “1.” This codebook was based on resources provided by Neuman (2006) and Leahy (2004). Results were compiled in order to determine what percentage of respondents agreed or disagreed with the statements. From there the researcher explored trends based on the participants’ responses and comments.

**Strengths and Limitations**

One strength of this research is that the results provide a statistical foundation on this topic. By pursuing a quantitative method, the results produced data that could be analyzed for trends and researched further through future projects.

Another strength of this research is that it is researching a relatively new frontier of interpersonal communication. While it is clear from the literature review that there is a good deal of research available on this topic, it is still relatively new territory, which must continue to be explored in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of social media’s impact on interpersonal relationships. This study attempts to further the research available on this topic.
Primary limitations of this study include geographic and financial constraints. Due to this, it was not possible to obtain a purely random sample. While the information garnered is enlightening in the realm of Facebook usage and its impact on relationships, the results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to represent the larger population, due to the lack of a truly random sample. Also, while choosing a survey as the research instrument allowed for more participants to be reached and for statistical data to be generated, the opportunity to ask participants follow-up questions was lost due to the quantitative nature of the research design.

**Implications**

If social media use has an effect on interpersonal friendships, it is important to learn about those impacts. It is also important to learn appropriate communication strategies that users can adopt in these online realms, in order to ensure that they are engaging in effective communication. Future research should pursue a random sample and also incorporate more variables into the study. This can be done by surveying women from different geographic regions as well as highlighting any possible distinctions among different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, to determine whether those distinctions impact the results.

For the purposes of this study, fifty college-aged women completed the self-administered survey. Results of the survey will be reviewed in-depth in the following chapter.
Chapter 4. THE STUDY

Introduction

Research for this thesis was conducted through surveys which were presented to the study population in their classrooms. (A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.) The rationale behind this approach was that this method would hopefully garner more responses than an online survey. The survey was presented to four class sections at the university, and a total of 50 surveys were completed and returned.

Selection criteria for the study participants included gender (female) and academic standing (college student). Students who did not meet these criteria were not provided a survey. After the research topic was explained, as well as the details of the survey (including appropriate ethical information regarding the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study), the surveys were distributed and completed by the participants. Upon completion, the participants were provided a copy of the consent form and study information to keep for their records (Appendix B).

Within the survey, participants were asked to rank their agreement to a list of statements regarding Facebook usage and potential impacts of that usage. Possible responses to the statements were “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “no opinion,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” They were also asked to include which functions of Facebook they use, how often they visit the site daily, and whether they consider themselves to be shy, outgoing, or neither. At the end of the survey was a blank space in which they were invited to include any comments they had regarding their Facebook usage and how they think it may impact their interpersonal friendships.

Data Analysis
A content analysis was done on the survey responses and the comments provided by the participants. Four main themes emerged from the survey responses. These include the prevalence and convenience of Facebook, the overall impact of Facebook usage on interpersonal relationships, issues related to the public nature of Facebook, and negative feedback received through Facebook.

**Results of the Study**

**Prevalence and Convenience of Facebook**

The first theme is the prevalence and convenience of Facebook. As stated in chapter two, Facebook usage is very common, particularly among college populations.

![Most of my friends are on Facebook](image)

![I login to Facebook at least once a day](image)
When specifically asked how often they log in each day, 82% stated they log in at least three times, while 46% said it is sometimes as often as five times per day. (A small number of respondents said that, due to Facebook being installed on their mobile phone, they are technically always logged into the site.)
Many comments provided on the survey related to the convenience and prevalence of Facebook. Many respondents stated that Facebook is a great way to stay connected with others, but a few discussed their concerns over using it as a primary means for interpersonal communication. One respondent stated that, “Though it is a good way to stay connected, in some ways I think it's harmful because it takes away from more effective communication such as face to face or phone calls.” Another referenced her concern over the quality of communication she has due to Facebook, stating “I think Facebook can sometimes make me lazy when it comes to keeping in contact with and having good conversation with friends I don't see on a daily basis.”

Related to that statement, participants were also asked to rank their agreement to the statement “I prefer talking to my friends on Facebook instead of talking to them face to face or on the phone.”
There was also significant disagreement with the statement “using Facebook allows me to talk to my friends about personal issues that I wouldn’t want to talk about in person.”

Impact of Facebook on Relationships

Arguably the most important theme that emerged is how Facebook usage impacts participants. There were a variety of statements included in the survey that related to this topic, ranging from how users feel they should act on their friends’ Facebook pages, to how they feel if their friends do not post on their walls, or if there are activities advertised on Facebook in which they were not included.

In regard to how participants feel they should engage on their friends’ Facebook pages, the results were mixed.
Regarding how participants feel about receiving feedback on their own Facebook pages, results were again mixed.
Some comments provided on this topic give additional insight. One participant said that, even if she was invited to a particular gathering, but was unable to go, she experiences jealousy because she wishes she could have been a part of the get-together. Another user stated that “you see what your friends are doing and you feel bad if you aren’t having as much fun as they are. It is hard not to compare.”

A small majority of participants (52%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Using Facebook strengthens my existing friendships.” Many of the comments reiterate this feeling, particularly related to long-distance friendships (such as those from the
respondents’ high school or hometown) or friendships outside of one’s regular circle (friends from a study-abroad trip, dance team, etc.). More than half of the comments provided on the survey were related to using Facebook as a means to maintain contact with friends who are physically far away. One participant said that Facebook greatly helped her transition from high school to college, because it allowed her to maintain close ties with friends back home. Another participant specifically said that Facebook allows her to keep in touch with groups of friends that she otherwise would have likely lost touch with. Another said that, while Facebook is helpful in maintaining long distance friendships and acquaintanceships, it is not particularly helpful when it comes to close friendships, insinuating that she relies on other forms of communication in those relationships.

Jealousy is another topic that was covered on the survey. While one of the survey statements did not specifically address jealousy (it read “It bothers me if I see pictures on Facebook of a party or get-together that I was not invited to”), some participants referenced jealousy issues within the comments section. One participant stated “Facebook causes lots of jealousy issues [and] judging [of] others. Just like texting, things can be taken out of context and [there is] more sensitivity over Facebook because there's more at risk when others can see.” Another participant wrote about a friend from home who becomes upset when she sees the participant commenting on other people’s walls, and not hers. The participant voiced her frustration about this issue, saying that if her friend is worried about their friendship, then her friend should call her to talk, and not base their closeness on Facebook interactions.

**Public Nature of Facebook Interactions**
Since many of the interactions on Facebook occur in a relatively public forum, it is not surprising that this can lead to some users feeling uncomfortable with personal conversations being on display. Similar to the previous section, responses from participants were mixed on this topic.

One participant commented on this issue specifically, stating that using Facebook can “cause drama because some people post too much personal info.” Another participant said that “people get jealous; Facebook creates issues when they are not issues,” while another stated that it “creates a lot of drama [based on] assumptions [and] rumors.”
Negative Feedback

Overall, the majority of respondents reported that they have not experienced negative feedback through Facebook, neither as a recipient nor as a sender of negative communication. However, 16% of respondents stated that they have received negative feedback through Facebook (such as rude or mocking comments) and 12% stated that they have given negative feedback through the site.

A few questions on the survey also referenced the issue of cyberbullying, but none of the comments made by participants referenced bullying experiences.
Discussion

A few key themes emerged from the data of this study. One component of this communication medium that cannot be denied is that of convenience. While, based on this research, female college students still prefer to communicate either face to face or over the phone, the easy access to Facebook cannot be ignored. The use of Facebook within interpersonal relationships appears to be standard at this point.

Related to this is the concern that, due to the prevalence of Facebook usage, users could potentially depend more and more on CMC, and use it to replace other forms of interpersonal communication that require more effort. College students are busy juggling school, work, family relationships, friendships at college and friendships back home. It takes time and effort to schedule a face to face meeting or even a time to talk on the phone. Facebook offers an easy way to quickly say hello without missing a beat in one’s day-to-day life. While that can be a positive aspect of the social network, some people are concerned that this results in them not putting forth extra effort within their friendships.

One theme that emerged from the data is the sense of obligation one feels related to Facebook interactions. Some users clearly feel a sense of responsibility to participate on their friends’ walls, while others conversely think that their friends should feel that responsibility as well. While it may not be a large enough issue to upset someone, there is clearly something about Facebook that makes some users feel they should actively participate. Perhaps it is the public, “in your face” nature of Facebook postings, which could make users feel a sense of obligation to respond to Facebook comments. Since Facebook is so common, perhaps ignoring a friend’s comment is likened to ignoring a friend’s phone call or voice message.
Another issue related to the public nature of Facebook is the reality that it can make others feel like they are excluded or missing out on good times. When faced with status updates or new photo albums related to a get-together, it is not surprising that some users feel that their happiness or social standing pales in comparison to their other Facebook friends. As one participant stated in her comments, it is difficult not to compare yourself to what you are seeing on Facebook, because it is right in front of you.

This can potentially lead to jealousy, which was another issue that emerged from the data. It is clear from the survey responses and comments that, when users use Facebook interactions as a litmus test of their friendships, it can lead to misconceptions and hurt feelings.

Positive aspects of Facebook interactions also cannot be ignored. It cannot be denied that, due to its convenience and prevalence, Facebook aids users in maintaining connections with friends regardless of physical proximity. This was one of the most positive aspects of Facebook according to the survey participants.

The final issue that emerged from the data is the incidence of sending and receiving negative feedback. The majority of participants reported that they did not send or receive negative feedback within Facebook. The majority also reported that they have not been involved in cyberbullying on Facebook, as neither bully nor victim. However, it is important to acknowledge those who did report their experience in these realms, no matter how small the minority population may be. Since Facebook is such a common forum, and since it is clear that at least some users in a small sample have generated or received negative messages, education is necessary on how to best use Facebook as a medium for interpersonal communication.
Chapter 5. SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Study

This study includes both financial and operational limitations. Since this study was unfunded, it was not possible to procure a truly random sample. Instead, the researcher was limited to a university within close physical distance. Also, time constraints did not allow for multiple days in the field; rather only four sections of university classes could be surveyed in person, which resulted in a smaller than ideal sample.

Limitations of the research instrument were also discovered after the research was complete. One of the survey questions referenced participants’ comfort level related to discussing personal issues on Facebook. Upon reviewing the results, it became clear that a more detailed definition of “personal issues” would have further clarified the results. It is possible that college-aged students have a different perspective on what constitutes a “personal issue” and defining that would have provided a more thorough understanding.

It would have also been beneficial to arrange follow-up interviews with the participants. Some of the comments provided by participants warranted further discussion and clarification, and further insight could have been gained by engaging in interviews after-the-fact.

Further Study and Recommendations

As stated above, adjustments to the research instrument should be made to account for participants opinions of what constitutes a “personal issue.” Larger sample sizes should also be surveyed, and it is also worth exploring how different geographical, sociological, and economic factors potentially impact results.
On a grander scale, it is important to learn more about how Facebook usage impacts users and relationships among other age groups. With the Internet and social networking sites becoming more commonplace, younger users have been or will be exposed to these online worlds. It is important to both learn how this impacts their lives, and also create education on how to effectively use these new communication mediums.

**Conclusions**

Through this research, the five posited research questions were answered. First, it is clear from the data that Facebook usage is prevalent among female college students. The use of Facebook is standard, with many students logging onto the social networking website multiple times each day. However, it was also discovered that overall, the research participants still prefer to communicate with their friends face to face or over the phone. While Facebook is a common way to communicate, it is not always the first choice of users, particularly when the nature of the topics are more personal and private.

Regarding how the use of Facebook affects interpersonal friendships of female college students, it appears to have both positive and negative effects, as predicted. One of the most highly touted positive aspects of Facebook is the fact that it allows users to maintain contact and sustain friendships with those who are physically far away. Conversely, it is also clear that Facebook usage introduces new issues and complications within friendships. Facebook usage can lead to feelings of jealousy among friends, as well as users potentially questioning their social standing based on friends’ Facebook activity.

This also reinforces the philosophical components of this research: women tend to use communication as a way to discuss personal issues and create a sense of community, and
technological advancements can both help and hinder interpersonal communication. This also supports the theoretical foundations offered by both Walther (1992) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996); CMC can be used for relationship development, and interpersonal relationships may encounter tension caused by conflicting desires to be open and share information versus maintaining privacy.

Related to negative feedback and cyberbullying, the majority of respondents did not report exposure to this type of communication. However, a small number of respondents within the sample did report being involved with negative communication, either as the sender or recipient. This would mean that female college students are exposed to negative communication within this medium. As stated earlier, further research should be done in this realm in order to extrapolate these findings.

Facebook has gradually become a constant in the world of interpersonal communication. As technology advances and becomes more engrained in daily life, it will become more and more important that users are made aware of the possible impacts of these mediums, and use them to perpetuate constructive interpersonal communication.
References


Wilson, K., Fornasier, S., & White, K. M., (2010). Psychological predictors of young adults’ use

APPENDIX

COLLEGE OF ST. BENEDICT/ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

Friends on Facebook: The Impact of Facebook on Interpersonal Friendships of Female College Students

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to be in a research study about Facebook usage and its impact on interpersonal friendships. This study is being conducted by Katy Schultz, a graduate student at Gonzaga University, who is conducting research for her Master’s Thesis. You were selected as a possible participant because of your age, student status, and gender. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

BACKGROUND and PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study is to determine if Facebook usage has an impact on interpersonal friendships of female college students. If you agree to participate in this study, we would ask you to complete this short questionnaire, which should take approximately 3-5 minutes. If you do not wish to participate, simply discard the questionnaire. Responses will be completely anonymous; your name will not appear anywhere on the survey.

RISKS/BENEFITS

This study has no known risks.

The benefits of participation include the fact that you will become more aware of possible impacts that Facebook usage has on your relationships. It may encourage you to discuss this concept with your friends and loved ones.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that may be published, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the College of Saint Benedict or Saint John’s University.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

The researcher conducting this study is Katy Schultz. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact her at 612.247.2873. You may also reach out to Erin Szabo, Faculty Advisor, at eszabo@csbsju.edu, or Julie Strelow, CSB/SJU Institutional Review Board Chair, at jstrelow@csbsju.edu.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the research.

Completing and returning the questionnaire constitutes your consent to participate.
Please rank your agreement or disagreement to the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of Agreement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most of my friends are on Facebook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook is a convenient way to talk to my friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer talking to my friends on Facebook instead of talking to them face to face or on the phone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Facebook allows me to talk to my friends about personal issues that I wouldn’t want to talk about in person.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I login to Facebook at least once a day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating through Facebook is more convenient than communicating on the phone or in person</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable discussing personal issues on Facebook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to me that my friends comment on my wall, status, or photos</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I should comment on friends’ walls, statuses or photos.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Scale of Agreement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it would bother my friends if I didn’t comment on their Facebook content</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It bothers me if someone I know does not accept my friend request</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It bothers me if I see pictures on Facebook of a party or get-together that I was not invited to</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have received negative feedback on information or photos that I have shared on Facebook. (Examples include mean or rude comments, comments that mock me, etc.)</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have given negative feedback on friends’ information or photos</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I am uncomfortable with my conversations being on Facebook for other people to see</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been bullied through Facebook</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have bullied someone through Facebook</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I am just as likely to communicate with friends through Facebook as I am likely to text them or call them on the phone

Using Facebook strengthens my existing friendships

How many times per day do you usually log on the Facebook?

Do you consider yourself to be shy, outgoing, or neither?

Please make a check next to the Facebook functions that you use

☐ Status updates
☐ Updating profile information (relationship status, “About Me,” etc.)
☐ Share photos
☐ Send messages
☐ Use Instant Messaging
☐ Comment on friends’ photos
☐ Comment on friends’ statuses

Please include any comments you have about Facebook use and its impact on your friendships:
MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for ____Kathryn Schultz_____, who is completing the requirements for her/his Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student’s work but rather meet with them as a “young colleague.” If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for him/her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for ____Kathryn Schultz____ as she/he completes her/his thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student’s thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature ______________________________

Title __Assistant Professor__

Email and telephone number davise@gonzaga.edu; direct: 313-3947

Date __9/13/2011___