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# Maintaining Relationships: Facebook's Affect on Long-Distance Friendships

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# Maintaining Relationships: Facebook's Affect on Long-Distance Friendships

**Abstract**

Technological advancements in media have made it easier to maintain relationships over long distances. Social networking interfaces and websites such as Facebook have changed the way people communicate in geographically separated relationships. However, is this new technology improving or hindering communication and the maintenance of these relationships? In this exploratory study, self reports of Facebook users and nonusers are analyzed to examine the effect social networking technology has on relational maintenance and satisfaction. Participants reported their general use of Facebook and reported the quality of their relationships with long-distant acquaintances. This report provides new research opportunities in this growing field of study.

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MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS:  
FACEBOOK'S AFFECT ON LONG-DISTANCE FRIENDSHIPS

By

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## **Abstract**

Technological advancements in media have made it easier to maintain relationships over long distances. Social networking interfaces and websites such as Facebook have changed the way people communicate in geographically separated relationships. However, is this new technology improving or hindering communication and the maintenance of these relationships? In this exploratory study, self reports of Facebook users and nonusers are analyzed to examine the effect social networking technology has on relational maintenance and satisfaction. Participants reported their general use of Facebook and reported the quality of their relationships with long-distant acquaintances. This report provides new research opportunities in this growing field of study.

## Introduction

New communication methods have changed the way people interact with one another. Traditionally, various media methods have been utilized in maintaining relationships, supplementing face-to-face (FtF) interactions and bridging geographic boundaries. In today's societies, relationships are no longer restricted to people living in the same area (Utz, 2007). As the growing number of communication channels increase, the negative impact of geographic distance on relationships lessens. Today, written forms of communication such as email and audio-dependent forms like the mobile phone assist in maintaining relationships with geographically separated partners and friends. Back before the creation of the Internet, long-distance friends either kept in touch by telephone, or mail, or possibly just simply lost touch with each other altogether. However, today's communication is completely different with computers, the Internet, and mobile technology. Now it is easier to maintain a connection with long-distant friends because the connection is often times at the tip of our fingers.

Socializing has become one of the most popular applications of the Internet. Since its inception, the Internet continues to grow at a phenomenal rate bringing along with it various social interaction tools – email, instant messaging (IM), and blogging to name a few – all of which can be utilized through one platform: Facebook. IM for example, is a near-synchronous written medium that allows relational partners geographically separated the ability to engage in 'real-time' interaction (Broneck & Ramirez, 2007). In cases where 'real-time' interaction becomes complicated, other Internet mediums such as e-mail or Facebook's messaging platform are not bounded by synchronicity and allow partners to interact with each other without relying on each other to be present at exactly the same time.

In just the past decade, social networking mediums such as Facebook has exploded in popularity, changing the way people communicate in ways that have yet to be explored. Facebook allows interaction with anyone within the individual's social community, regardless of geographic proximity. Previous research has shown that the Internet can be interpreted to either support or refute the claim that the Internet is a solitary activity, harmful to social relations with others (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000). As a result, many questions continue to surface on the impact that this kind of technology has on interpersonal communication and its effect on human relationships. Regardless to how one views the degree the social implications; I intend to simply skim the surface of these questions by examining how Facebook use affects relational maintenance and satisfaction.

Since research in this area of interest is still in its infancy, the results should be of interest to scholars who question the impact modern technology has on human relationships and the communication discipline. The quality of long-distance relationships will be dependent on the type of interpersonal relationship reviewed. For instance, *romantic relationships* may be more intimate than *long-distance friendships*, while *work relationships* may be more task-oriented than the other two. In this study, I only research the quality of relationships between *long-distance friendships*. Also, the purpose of this project is not a study of relationship *creation* or *impression formation*; the goal is simply to seek the satisfaction of *maintaining* relationships.

I begin my exploratory analysis by studying the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) within the context of maintaining relationships with geographically distant friendships found within the **Previous Studies** section of this report. Under **Present Study**, I present a series of hypotheses and research questions examined through a study of self

reports provided by Facebook users and non-users. Under the **Method** section, I present how I approached participants and the means in which they reported their general use of Facebook followed by their relational satisfaction with their long-distant friends. The self reports provided were then qualitatively analyzed and listed under **Results**. Further analysis of data is presented under the **Discussion** portion of this report.



## Previous Studies

It is not uncommon in this day and age to have multiple long-distance acquaintances. In many instances, friends who were once close schoolmates, coworkers, or family friends have had to move away due to personal or professional reasons. Regardless of the geographical distance apart, often times these relationships seek to maintain some level of connection. The method in which individuals choose to utilize the Internet socially is influenced by their relationships, including the individuals' pre-existing sociability and geographic distance (Dimmick, 2000). When dealing with long-distance communication, Dimmick proposed that online social interaction fills a niche that is different from telephone interaction. Dimmick showed that email was superior to the telephone for people who lived far away and in different time-zones. Another theory which supports computer media as a positive relational influence is Social Information Processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 1992) which believes that computer-mediated communication (CMC) can foster positive relationships.

However, contradictory studies found that the Internet was rated worse for relational maintenance (Cummings, 2002). Cummings proposed that the Internet fared better as a tool for getting schoolwork done and exchanging information, concluding that e-mail was inferior to the telephone or FtF interactions for relational communication. Traditionally, FtF communication has been the strongest and preferred method in which to maintain relationships, claiming that people, who do not see each other frequently, simply cannot be as close as people who do spend a lot of time together (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989, p. 794). This produces a significant problem for long-distant relationships since the opportunity for FtF communication decreases as geographic distance increases.

While some studies report positive effects between CMC and relationships and others reporting negatively, there are some reports which find no connection between the two variables. For instance, Guldner and Swensen (1995) found no significant difference in relational satisfaction between romantic couples who were long-distant versus those who were geographically close. Johnson (2001) also found no significant difference in relational satisfaction between geographically close and long-distant friendships. Many researchers have studied various CMC platforms such as email and IM, but Facebook is one medium which has yet to be fully explored. This study will help determine whether Facebook, as a form of CMC, improves or hinders long-distance relationships among platonic long-distance friendships.

### **Communication Theories**

Walther's (1992) SIP theory is a communication theory which suggests that relationships formed by CMC demonstrate the same relational qualities as those developed by FtF interaction. Further research has built upon CMC's effect on human relationships. For instance, text-only CMC lacks many of the physical qualities that interpersonal theories involving FtF draw upon to explain relational behavior (Baym, 2002). Communication theories such as social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1972) and uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) explain that proximal and visual cues are necessary for forming relationships. This, however, is strained when individuals are separated geographically limiting or extinguishing nonverbal cues and physical interaction. These theories also only provide information on the basis of forming and creating entirely new relationships excluding notes on the maintenance of existing relationships. Although relational maintenance may be less exotic a topic than creating new relationships, future research will have to devote more attention and provide a more balanced

understanding of interpersonal interactions through CMC as this becomes a more common dimension of online life (Baym, 2002).

### **Media Choice Model**

Each communication medium has its purpose. For many individuals, the mobile telephone makes communication readily accessible. Instant messages allow instantaneous communication, while electronic mail allows suspended communication much like the characteristics of regular mail, just electronically driven. Video chats and webcam communications allow face-to-face visual capabilities without being geographically close. Media choice models characterize media on the basis of objective criteria. One characteristic of communication media is *synchronicity*. Synchronous media, such as FtF interaction, telephone, or IM requires communication between individuals to occur at the same time. Although advantageous for the immediacy of sending and receiving messages, synchronous media becomes difficult when participants are unable to coordinate a schedule to effectively communicate with one another at the same time. Asynchronous media, however, is not dependent on time. For example, e-mails can either be read immediately or at some time later after it is sent. Facebook allows for its users to update their present status or report news or information that can be read immediately or at some later point in time as well. Although asynchronous media may lack the immediacy of responsive feedback that synchronous media carries, asynchronous media can connect geographically distant people across different time zones and schedules. In this aspect, asynchronous media should be favored over synchronous when connecting long-distance relationships where schedules are greatly different.

A second characteristic of communication media is *recordability* or the level in which communication can be transcribed or documented. For example, FtF and telephone communication are generally not recorded, therefore produce a low degree of recordability. Letter and e-mails, however, can be re-read and archived producing a high degree of recordability. Facebook statuses, posts, and information is all saved and maintained, thus also producing a high level of recordability. Since the communication contact may be limited in long-distance relationships, recordability may be an important factor in choosing a media method over another.

The *number of channels* used is another characteristic of communication media. FtF is generally perceived as the richest form of media since it transmits information over all channels: video, audio, and touch (Utz, 2007). The telephone filters out both touch and visual cues, while IM filters audio, touch, and non-verbal cues. Facebook allows its users to post pictures and videos, as well as update information, yet much IM, touch, audio and non-verbal cues are currently inexistent. Modern mediums such as webcams that allow for video chatting allow for both audio and visual cues to remain intact leaving touch as the only channel yet to be explored. The media choice model is important to keep in mind as it will have an influence on how people utilize Facebook over other preferred methods of communication with their long-distance partners.

## Present Study

Common research studies suggest the consideration of gender and age should increase the understanding of how Facebook affects the maintenance of relationships. A study on IM's effect on relationship maintenance (Broneck & Ramirez, 2007) reported that females utilize Facebook for maintaining relationships more than males. Their research supported common studies on females who evaluated Internet and e-mail use more positively than males for maintaining relationships. One study conducted in 2000 by Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that more females used the Internet to maintain both close and distant friends and family than males. According to their reports, 73% of females who use email reported that they use the platform to communicate to friends who live far distances compared to only 65% of the reporting males. These women stated that they found email to be more efficient than all the other forms of communication when trying to maintain long-distance relationships. These reports often support theories which state that females are more inclined to maintain relationships more than males.

*Hypothesis 1:* Females will report greater utilization of Facebook for maintaining relationships than will males.

The same study by Broneck & Ramirez (2007) implied that younger users will report greater use of IM for maintaining relationships. The use of IM in the communication world is influenced by the age of the users as older adults may not be as technically savvy as their younger counterparts. A study by Pew Internet & American Life Project (2000) show that IM is more popular with teenagers rather than adults, a trend which teens have brought with them into

their college years. These reports support theories which believe age to be negatively associated with new uses of communicative technologies, such that younger users will take advantage of new technology more than older users.

*Hypothesis 2: As age increases, Facebook use will decrease.*

One of the goals of this study is to examine the role of Facebook as a communication tool on long-distance relationships, as which no study has examined this relationship as of this date. Two research questions have been fashioned to approach some level of connection between Facebook use and long-distance communication.

*Research Question 1: How do Facebook interactions compare to FtF interactions in terms of relationship maintenance and satisfaction?*

The first research question will try to find a connection between Facebook and relationship quality. Are long distant relationships different between Facebook users and non-users? What kind of impact does Facebook have on long-distant relationships? These are some of the questions that I will try to answer with the first research question.

*Research Question 2: How do Facebook interactions differ when the relationships are local versus long distance?*

The second research question attempts to look at how user interactions through Facebook differ when communicating with geographically close friends versus long distant friends. Will a Facebook user interact with geographically close friends differently than they would with long-distant friends when utilizing Facebook as a form of communication? Does time and/or distance apart affect the way a person is to use Facebook as a communication tool? These are the types of questions that I will attempt to answer with the second research question.

## Method

### Participants

In order to address the two hypotheses and two research questions, participants were divided into two groups: *Facebook users* (FBUs) and *non users* (NUs). Participants were recruited through my own personal network of friends and informed that the purpose of study, which involves research and data collecting methods, is to address the effect of Facebook on long-distance relational communication.

Participants who self-identified themselves as NUs were used as a comparison group in addressing the hypotheses and research questions. All participants (FBUs and NUs) completed the same consent form and survey. The survey was made available for one month. Participants were asked to indicate their age and gender.

The final sample consisted of 40 participants out of 48 individuals who attempted to complete the survey, in which 8 surveys were determined to be either unusable or incomplete. 40 participants self-identified themselves either as a FBU (defined as actively using Facebook at least once on a weekly basis) or NU. Out of the final sample, 22 (55%) were females and 18 (45%) were males, with half (50%) of the overall sample being either FBU or NU (20 FBU and 20 NU). The average age of participants was 40 years with a range of 25 years to 50 years old.

### Procedure

Individuals wishing to participate in the study completed a consent form which was then followed by a 20 question survey. SurveyMonkey.com was utilized to disseminate the consent form and survey. The survey was organized into two parts:



In *Part I*, participants were asked for their gender and age and then asked to think of one non-romantic long-distance friend. Participants were asked for their friend's gender and age and then asked for the quality of their relationship on a 5-point scale. I then compared the quality of relationships between FBUs and NUs. The data collected in Part I was mainly used to approach the two hypotheses. Other data collected in Part I consisted of the number of hours of Facebook use on a daily basis, length of time knowing the LD friend, methods of communication used for relational maintenance with the LD friend, and the extent of communication and significance of maintaining a relationship with the LD friend.

*Part II* required short answer open-ended entries allowing myself to qualitatively analyze the relationship of Facebook use to relational quality and satisfaction. The goal of this part of the survey was to gain specific information on the nature of relational interaction through the use of Facebook compared to that of NUs. The data collected in Part II was generally used to approach the two research questions. FBUs were asked how Facebook improves or hinders their LD relationship, while NUs were asked to explain the ease or difficulty in maintaining their LD relationship without the use of Facebook. FBUs were also asked how their Facebook interactions differed between GC and LD relationships, while NUs were asked to relate their GC relationships with their LD relationships and how satisfied they were with these relationships without the use of Facebook.

## **Materials**

The survey is included under **Appendix** in this report.

## Results

### Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 predicted that females will report greater utilization of Facebook for maintaining relationships than will males. Addressing the first hypothesis, my results support females reporting greater use of Facebook. This finding also supports Broneck & Ramirez's (2007) study done on the affect of instant messaging on relational maintenance. Out of the 20 FBUs, 14 were female (70%) and reported an average of 3.1 hours a day on Facebook for relational maintenance. Males (30%) only averaged 2.5 hours a day. Participants were asked to indicate their level of communication using Facebook with their LD friend in Part I of the survey. The responses were coded on a 5-point scale (1 = None to 5 = Heavy). Consistent with the first hypothesis, females reported a higher level of Facebook use ( $M = 3.8$ ) than did males ( $M = 3.25$ ). The median level of communication for all participants was 3.6.

### Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 predicted as age increases, Facebook use will decrease. Broneck & Ramirez's 2007 study on IM use found that as age increased, IM use decreased. However, I found no significant connection between age and Facebook use. From the data pool, the oldest NU was 36 years old, while the older FBUs' ages ranged from 40 to 50. The median age of FBUs was reported at 31.3 years, while the median age of NUs was 31.5 years. Without a significant difference between the two medians, I can find no substantial relationship between age and Facebook use.

According to Facebook's statistics, Facebook claims that their fastest growing demographic is women age 55 and older. Those whose ages ranged from 45 to 54 and 35 to 45 came in second and third respectively. In other words, I rationalize that more and more people are using Facebook regardless of age. I've concluded that unlike IM use, such that from Broneck & Ramirez' study (2007), Facebook has applications which cross all age ranges.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 questions how Facebook interactions compare to FtF interactions in terms of relationship maintenance and satisfaction. I address this research question by organizing the results of the survey into three categories: those who believed Facebook's impact on their LD relationship was *Negative*, offered *No Change*, and *Positive*.

Under *Negative* impact, some FBUs found that Facebook hindered the personal quality that one would receive if they received a phone call or physical letter instead. In these cases, Facebook served as a substitute for personal forms of communication; thus personal interaction was then lost. Privacy issues is also another factor in which Facebook may hinder a relationship. One respondent stated:

I don't like that people tend to write things for an audience when using social networking. I don't see any reason to put my friendships/personal information on public display. The people that I want to keep in touch with are available via telephone or mail or face-to-face contact.

3 FBUs (15%) stated that Facebook hindered their long-distant relationship in some form or another. One respondent who felt Facebook intruded on their LD relationship summed it up quite nicely stating “my true friends remember my birthday without the aid of social networking reminders.”

FBUs were asked to imagine living in a world without social media platforms. Participants were asked to report their level of communication with their LD friend in a world without Facebook, coded with the same 5-point scale (1 = *None* to 5 = *Heavy*) as the level of communication using Facebook. Those under the Negative impact category reported improved levels compared to their Facebook level of communication. These respondents believed that their communication levels would improve by 1 level in a world without Facebook. For instance, one respondent reported *minimal* (2) Facebook communication then reported *occasional* (3) communication in a world without Facebook with their LD friend. Again, these respondents believe that Facebook interferes with the personal quality that other forms of communication contain (phone calls, physical mail, etc.).

Those under *No Change* believed that Facebook had neither a positive or negative impact on their long distant relationship stating that maintenance is more about a person’s effort and initiative to keep a connection rather than the methods that they use. One respondent stated “Facebook does not improve relationships.... It’s between two people who are both willing to make an effort to keep in touch via phone, email, text, etc.” 4 FBUs (20%) believed that Facebook had minimal impact on their long distant relationship. In the world without Facebook scenario, the respondents’ communication levels remained the same. For example, a respondent who reported *heavy* (5) Facebook communication reported *heavy* (5) communication in a world without Facebook with their LD friend. These respondents believe that regardless of the

channels available, maintenance is up to the individual and that the type of channel used has no direct effect to the relationship. Therefore, if Facebook did not exist, these respondents would utilize some other method of communication in their effort to maintain their relationship with their LD friend.

The majority of FBU participants (13 FBUs, 65%) agreed that Facebook had a positive impact on their LD relationship. Many believed that the additional modes of communication that Facebook offers enhanced their relationship making it easier to keep in touch. The ability to update personal news and upload pictures helped to keep friends up-to-date on each other's lives. Under this category, *convenience* ranked as the top characteristic in positive impact. Facebook presented opportunities for casual friendships to blossom and expand faster than any other form of communication could in a long-distant relationship. One participant stated:

Facebook definitely shines a light into the room. It has introduced me to my friend's friends and has made the grand picture a bigger one. [Facebook] invites people into each others' lives and shines a light on things we would miss by solely living in our world alone.

In the world without Facebook scenario, these respondent's communication levels dropped on average of 1.44 levels. A few respondents (15% of FBUs) believed that their level of communication with their LD friend would drop at least 3 levels if Facebook did not exist. One respondent went from reporting *heavy* (5) Facebook communication to *minimal* (2) communication in a world without Facebook with their LD friend. Another respondent went from *moderate* (4) Facebook communication to no communication (1 = *None*) at all with their

LD friend if Facebook did not exist. These respondents regard Facebook as an essential communication tool in their efforts to maintain their relationship with their LD friend.

### **Non-Users and Facebook**

In this study, NUs was utilized as a comparison group to FBUs. NUs found it unnecessary to use Facebook to maintain connection with friends and associates. One respondent stated “It is very easy to use the telephone for phone calls or texts and emails to maintain communication between friends. It is also nice to use standard mail for holidays and birthdays.” The majority of NUs were weary of losing the personal touch other forms of communication has when interacting with LD friends if they were to use Facebook as a method of relational maintenance. One respondent stated that they would prefer a “call or text from cell phone rather than simply messaging the person on Facebook, commenting on his/her status updates, etc.” NUs reported that they did not enjoy the impersonal form of communication that Facebook employs and that the most important people which require relational maintenance can just as easily be reached through other means of communication (telephone, mail, etc.).

In comparison to FBUs, NUs were asked to report their level of communication with their LD friend. Without using Facebook, the highest level reported from NUs (25%) was *occasional* (coded 3 on the 5-point scale). This is comparably different from FBUs in which over half (60%) of their group reported levels higher than *occasional* communication with their LD friends. This means that the majority of NUs (75%) reported less than *occasional* communication with LD friends. One respondent found maintaining LD relationships to be hard stating that his relationship was “pretty difficult to maintain since phone calls and visits are rare” with their LD friend.

Due to these statistics, I conclude that although it is not a suitable replacement for FtF interactions, Facebook does indeed have a positive effect on communication levels. Facebook enhances an individual's ability to maintain some form of connection with LD friends. If Facebook did not exist, many respondents (65%) believed that their levels of communication with their LD friends would drop. Also, 85% of FBU respondents reported that Facebook did not hinder their LD relationship. While people still believe that FtF interaction is the best way to improve a relationship, I conclude that Facebook is an adequate tool for relational *maintenance*.

## **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asks how Facebook interactions differ when the relationships are local versus long distance. In order to address the second research question, I again organized data into three categories: *Inversely proportional* where participants believed that the greater the distance or time apart, Facebook was used less; *no change*; and *Proportional* in which participants agreed that the greater the distance or time spent apart, the more Facebook was utilized to maintain the relationship.

Under *inversely proportional*, more people used Facebook to communicate with GC friends rather than LD ones. One respondent stated to have more interaction through Facebook with the people who were geographically close and those who were further away were interacted with through telephone communications. Participants under this category also rationalized that using Facebook was more fun and interactive with GC friends where Facebook was used to plan activities or create social events in which they could then interact FtF at a later time. At the same time, Facebook for LD communication was considered more serious, rather than fun, since its

main purpose with LD friends is for maintaining a connection which participants considered a serious and more important characteristic of the medium.

Under no change, respondents felt that their Facebook interactions were the same with both GC and LD friends. Time and distance apart had no or very minimal effect on the way they interacted with their friends on Facebook.

Under proportional, respondents felt that the greater the time and distance apart from their LD friend, Facebook use increased. Under this category, the increased use of Facebook for LD relationships has led to LD friends knowing more about each other than GC friends. Many respondents felt that using Facebook to communicate with GC friends was more superficial since the ability for other forms of communication like FtF would better serve their relationship.

The majority of participants agreed that although there is no clear substitute for FtF interaction, in cases where FtF communication cannot be achieved such long distance relationships, Facebook offered the opportunity to maintain some form of connection regardless of distance. One respondent concluded that “nothing compares to face-to-face interactions, but when it is not available, a phone call or email or text can get the job done as well, especially in between face-to-face contact.” The ability of Facebook to remain connected to a LD relationship in between FtF interactions greatly helps to maintain the relationship.

### **Relational Satisfaction**

Overall, when comparing FBUs to NUs, the quality and satisfaction of LD relationships was found to be higher with FBUs than that with NUs. Also, the level of communication with FBUs was much higher than that of NUs. FBUs reported on average *heavy* (5 on the 5-point



scale) interaction through Facebook while NU reported only on average *occasional* (3 on the 5-point scale) interaction with LD relationships.

The majority of NUs reported a negative shift in quality when the relationship moved from GC to LD. Out of the 20 NUs, 10 (50%) reported a negative shift in quality while only 5 (25%) felt improvement in quality when the relationship moved from GC to LD. 5 NUs (25%) reported no change in quality.

In comparison, the majority of FBU reported no change in quality (maintained quality) when the relationship shifted from GC to LD. Out of the 20 FBUs, 10 (50%) reported no change in relational quality when their GC relationship transitioned to LD. 8 FBUs (40%) reported a negative shift in quality, while only 2 (10%) felt an improvement in quality when the relationship moved from GC to LD. While FBUs showed an increase in maintained quality, improvement in quality was reported to be less than that of NUs (10% FBUs compared to 25% NUs).

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the role of Facebook as a communication tool to long-distance relationships. My results support the fact that females use Facebook more than males to maintain relationships. This result also supports previous studies which find that women are heavier users of CMC than males in relational maintenance (e.g. Broneck, 2007, Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000). One study performed by Boneva (2001) found that females used e-mail more extensively than males in their long-distant relationships. The research found that without CMC, some people would not be able to further develop and satisfy their relationships with long-distance friends and that women, in particular, used email not only as a mode of communication, but were taking advantage of the platform in order to revive lost connections and stay in touch with people with whom they would otherwise lose connection with due to the geographic distance away from each other. A national survey by Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000) found that women use email to maintain connections with family and friends more than men. This report on gender use of Facebook further suggests that there are different values, role obligations, and reasons behind using CMC as a method of relational maintenance between males and females that may account for their differences in Facebook use.

Although a connection between Facebook use and females was found, I did not find a significant connection between age and Facebook use. Although previous studies performed on various CMC platforms suggest that email and IM is more popular with teenagers than with adults (e.g. Broneck, 2007; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2000), Facebook statistics claim that with well over 500 million active users that their platform remains unaffected by age differences. I have also kept in mind that the results found within this study may have also been

particularly influenced and affected by limitations (see *Limitations*). Regardless, I still believe that the growing nature of social media and computer technology is slowly transcending across the demographics of age.

The majority of participants in this study found that Facebook had a positive impact on their long-distant relationship. One previous study performed by Utz (2007), reported that email use was significantly higher than phone use in long-distance friendships. However, the same study found that closeness of friendship and email had a negative correlation, while closeness and phone-use had a positive correlation. This suggests that email may be less suitable for relational maintenance between best friends rather than mere acquaintances. Since this study did not approach a method to determine the correlation between the levels of closeness in friendship and Facebook use, this could serve as a subject for future research.

This study also found that the overall quality of long-distant relationships was stronger with FBUs than NUs. There have been numerous studies performed by researchers to determine the nature of CMC interaction. The earliest theories negatively depicted CMC as an impersonal method of communication especially when compared to FtF interaction. One of the common problems associated with CMC is the inability to read and determine nonverbal communication. One respondent stated:

Facebook interactions differ when you're geographically close versus long-distant by certain mannerisms that you can only do face-to-face. Your friends are able to catch that by the tone of your voice when they hear instead of reading it. If you're joking with them and you put in on Facebook, sometimes when they read it, they misconstrue what you really mean and take offense to it.

Nonetheless, newer studies like SIP theory (Walther, 1992) report that online communication is capable of developing positive relationships. Despite the inability of formulating nonverbal cues with CMC, people have developed new ways to interpret “individuating” information (e.g. emoticons). I believe that both CMC and people are finding new ways to replicate or work around the absence of nonverbal cues. The ability to post pictures and videos, the immediacy of responses, and found within the scope of Facebook’s platform allows communicators to determine emotion without the need for nonverbal cues. What once was an impersonal method of communication is now becoming a staple of everyday life and routine. While some respondents referred to Facebook as *impersonal*, I feel that they may have been more influence by the old theories and ideologies on CMC rather than how Facebook is conveyed today. I believe Facebook is a *very personal* platform. This heightened *personal* factor of Facebook is why privacy controls is highly important and why the information made public through Facebook can be so controversial. By combining multiple communication models and personal constructs within a single platform makes Facebook a useful tool in relational maintenance. One respondent supported the multi-communication model that Facebook employs stating:

It makes communicating a lot easier. Sending messages and showing them new photos of yourself without having to send them in different batches through email....posting videos and chat all in one website makes Facebook and other social networks popular nowadays.

Not only does it allow individuals to communicate at a personal level, but more so than one would achieve through previous CMC methods. One respondent agreed that this was one of Facebook's strengths stating that Facebook "enhances the relationship where previous methods were only available by snail mail and word of mouth."

The exponential growth of the Internet and its social media tools and platforms has changed the way people communicate with one another. Since Facebook encompasses numerous methods of CMC (messages, chat, wall posts, etc.), further research could include individualizing each Facebook method and its effectiveness in relational maintenance. The breakdown would then be compared to the Media Richness Theory developed by Daft & Lengel (1984) which identify specific criteria that dictate which communication channel and individual chooses. The theory states that the different communication methods differ in terms of immediacy, form, and other distinguishable factors and that these factors influence how an individual picks one method over the other. Also, the significance or importance of the message also influences how an individual chooses their communication method. For instance, an individual may choose to use the chat feature of Facebook to maintain a connection with LD friends while only using the wall feature for GC friends. In this case, the individual would believe that the chat feature is better suited to maintain the relationship with the LD friend due to the immediate nature of interaction of chat. However, important and confidential messages such as a message dealing with financial matter may be more suitable for the telephone rather than Facebook interaction.

## **Limitations**

This study has numerous limitations. The most obvious limitation of this study was that the participants were pooled from my own personal network, many of which live in and around the Southeast Michigan area, and not randomly selected from the overall population. This limitation was due to time constraints and complexities involved in pooling unfamiliar participants which may be viewed as a more suitable representation of the population at large. Another limitation would involve the participation pool to be generally biased towards a generation which is more technologically savvy and more inclined to use Internet based communication methods than the population at large. The method of survey dissemination was also a limitation. The questionnaire was created through SurveyMonkey.com, a web-based survey application, and was delivered via link through email. Thus, all participants were general users of some form of computer mediated communication. Due the nature of survey dissemination and how the participants were pooled, experienced and heavy Internet and CMC users were most likely overrepresented. In order to improve on this study, one should employ a random sample of the population rather than personal network and utilize an improved method of survey, one which does not rely on Internet-based communication.

The age range of respondents limited the ability to produce a viable response to the second hypothesis. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 50 which found no significant relationship between age and Facebook use. The possibility of significant shifts of Facebook use in the ages 25 and younger and 50 and older exists. Again, in order to improve on this study, one should employ a greater sample which represents the population at large.

Another limitation deals with the hypothetical scenario approached in one of the survey questions dealing with the world without Facebook. The question asked FBUs to rate their level

of communication with their LD friend if Facebook or any other social networking platform did not exist. This question was used to compare levels of communication with LD friends with and without Facebook use. This hypothetical approach may not accurately depict how an individual would truly act in a world without social media. In order to improve on this study, one would have to approach individuals who have maintained LD relationships before and after the advent of Facebook and the social networking medium or analyze FBUs using Facebook for a set period of time followed by an analysis of the FBUs not using Facebook for a set period of time.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, social media is effecting communication in some fashion. New communication platforms and channels have changed the way people interact with one another. Overall, I believe that through this study that social media is affecting communication in a positive way where increased communication channels alleviate the difficulties of distance on friendships. Although social media can be an effective method of relational maintenance, I do not think that Facebook is at a point where it can suitably replace FtF interactions. Although the growing number of communication channels is increasing, there is no substitution yet to the benefits of FtF communication.

Facebook has significantly grown in popularity over the past ten years. Facebook is changing the way people communicate allowing interaction with anyone within the individual's personal network, regardless of geographic location. There are still several questions regarding the type of impact that this kind of technology has on human relationships and interpersonal communication. Since research on social media is still in its beginning stages, the results of this study will build on the impact social networking technology has on the communication

discipline. Today, it seems that some form of long-distant communication is inevitable. Individuals will continue to maintain relationships regardless of geographic distance. By this study, I conclude that Facebook is an appropriate and suitable communication method to maintain a long-distance relationship; however, one should always strive to seek FtF interaction if he or she believes the relationship is extremely valuable to maintain.



## **Appendix**

### **A. CONSENT FORM**

**Purpose of study:** The purpose of this study, which involves research and data collecting methods, is to address the effect of Facebook on long-distance relational communication. Your participation in this study and an explanation of the analysis will be contained in this consent document.

**Duration of participation:** Approx. 15-20 min. This survey consists of 20 questions.

**Expectation of participant:** You will be asked to complete an anonymous online survey using the Survey Monkey system. No names or identifiable information will be requested in this survey. Surveys will be completed and submitted online through the link included at the end of this document.

**Use of results and data:** Data will be compiled and analyzed in order to answer two hypotheses and two research questions and disseminated publicly in the form of a comprehensive research paper which will be published by Eastern Michigan University's Honors College in April 2011. This study will also be presented at Eastern Michigan University's Undergraduate Research Symposium on March 25, 2011. A copy of the final research paper will be available to all participants upon request.

**Anticipated risks to participants:** There are no risks associated with participating in the study. Your identity will remain anonymous and you are free to withdraw your participation at anytime without consequence.

**Benefits of study:** The benefits of this study involve the enhancement of scholarly research on the effect of social networks in the communication discipline, specifically its impact on relational communication.

**Extent of participant anonymity:** The surveys will not request or store names or information that will identify any respondent. In addition, all data collected will be stored electronically and can only be accessed by the principle researcher. The results of the survey will not contain names or information that can identify any respondent; therefore, confidentiality will be maintained in public dissemination.

**Contact information:** Any questions regarding the study can be routed to [slapid@emich.edu](mailto:slapid@emich.edu).

**Accepting terms of consent:** By continuing on to the next page you agree to the terms of this consent document. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse your participation in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Thank you for your participation.

## B. YOUR INFORMATION

1. Age (years)

2. Gender



Male



Female

3. Are you an **\*active\*** Facebook User?

**\*active\*** defined as actively using Facebook at least once on a weekly basis.  
Further questions will refer to you as either a "Facebook-User" or "Non-User"



Yes, I am an active Facebook User



No, I am NOT an active Facebook User

4. How many hours do you use Facebook on a daily basis?  
(Non-users must answer "0" for zero)

Hours (average)

### **C. YOUR LONG-DISTANCE FRIEND'S INFORMATION**

Think of a platonic (non-romantic, non-related) friend in which you met and developed a friendly relationship face-to-face, but now both of you consider your relationship as long-distance due to one individual moving geographically away. Refer to this person when answering the following questions.

#### **1. Your friend's age (years)**

#### **2. Your friend's gender**

- Male
- Female

#### **3. How long have you known your friend?**

"Geographically-Close" refers to the distance in which face-to-face interaction can be achieved with relative convenience. "Long-Distant" refers to the distance in which face-to-face interaction cannot be achieved with relative convenience. Generally, friends within the same state are geographically close and friends that live in different states are considered long-distant. Total Years must equal the sum of years known geographically close and long distant.

# Total Years, # Geographically Close, # Long-Distant

#### **4. What methods of communication is used to maintain your relationship when your friend is long-distant? (Choose all that apply)**

- Face-to-face interaction (personal visits)
- Phone
- Text (via cell phone)
- E-mail
- Instant Messages

┌ Web chat

┌ Facebook

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**D. QUALITY OF RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

**1. Rate the quality of your relationship between you and your friend when geographically-close and when long-distant.**

GC: very poor, poor, average, good excellent; LD: very poor, poor, average, good excellent

**2. What is the level of communication used through Facebook?**

Guide to levels: No Facebook Method = no friendship on Facebook; None = acceptance of friendship only, no communication; Minimal = interaction once a year or every few months; Occasional = interaction on a monthly basis; Moderate = much interaction on weekly basis; Heavy = routine/multiple interactions on a daily basis. \*interaction is defined by the various methods of communication through Facebook to include but not limited to wall posts, chats, messages, "likes," comments, "pokes," etc.

No Facebook Method      None                  Minimal                  Occasional                  Moderate                  Heavy

**3. Imagine if Facebook or any other social media websites (Myspace, Friendster, etc.) did not exist. What would your level of communication be with your long-distant friend?**

Guide to levels: Relative to your level of communication from the previous question, do you believe that your level of communication would improve, stay the same, or decrease.

None                  Minimal                  Occasional                  Moderate                  Heavy

**4. Facebook Users: Describe the quality of your Facebook communication between you and your long-distant friend. Non-Users: Describe the quality of communication between you and your long-distant friend.**

Format of question: The left end of the scale refers to the first descriptive term while the right end of the scale refers to the second term. The middle is a balance between the two descriptions.

Relax \_\_\_\_\_ Strained; Impersonal \_\_\_\_\_ Personal; Formal \_\_\_\_\_ Informal;  
In-depth \_\_\_\_\_ Superficial; Smooth \_\_\_\_\_ Difficult; Guarded \_\_\_\_\_ Open  
Understanding \_\_\_\_\_ Misunderstanding; Interesting \_\_\_\_\_ Boring

**5. What is the level of your satisfaction of your relationship with your long-distant friend?**

Extremely Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_ Not Satisfied At All

**6. How valuable is this relationship to be maintained?**

Extremely Important \_\_\_\_\_ Not Important At All

**E. ESSAY & INTERVIEW**

The following questions regard your opinion on maintaining relationships overall. You do not necessarily have to refer to the long-distant friend referred to in previous questions.

**1. Facebook-Users: Explain how Facebook improves or hinders your ability to maintain relationships with your long-distant friends.**

**Non-Users: Explain the ease or difficulty in maintaining a relationship with your long distant friends without the use of Facebook.**

**2. What are the strengths of using Facebook as a method of communication to maintain relationships with long-distant friends? (Non-users must write "N/A" for this question)**

**3. What are the weaknesses of using Facebook as a method of communication to maintain relationships with long-distant friends? (Non-users must write "N/A" for this question)**

**4. Non-users: What are your reasons for not using Facebook as a method of communication? (Facebook-users must write "N/A" for this question)**

#### **F. GENERAL QUESTIONS**

The following questions regard your opinion on maintaining relationships overall. You do not necessarily have to refer to the long-distant friend referred to in previous questions.

**1. In your opinion, how do Facebook interactions compare to Face-to-Face interactions in terms of maintaining relationships and your level of satisfaction with your relationships?**

**Guide for non-users: Compare face-to-face interactions to other methods of communication (phone, email, etc.) in terms of maintaining relationships and level of satisfaction.**