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Relationships between Electronic Communications and Interpersonal RelationshipsCindy Klimaszewski⁴

With technology use on the rise, interpersonal communication is changing. The following study was intended to assess the relationship between the amount of time people spend engaging in electronic communications versus the amount of time they spend in face-to-face interaction. It was hypothesized that the two are inversely related. However, results showed that there is no relationship, but there were several other interesting observations made that were supported by previous research. Future studies should be conducted on a larger scale for a more accurate assessment.

It is apparent as you walk through a store, a college campus or just down the street that technology use is on the rise. Originally intended to increase productivity and make life easier on those who are in the workforce or attending school, technology has now become the latest social medium as well. Young and old alike enjoy the ease of communication that technology affords. Now the question that everyone seems to be asking is, how is this change affecting our lives and in what direction?

In a study by Diamonduros, Jenkins, and Downs (2007), a group of undergraduate students were surveyed about their use of technology. It was found that the students were using technology to communicate about five and a half hours per day. This is no surprise

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considering that 98% of participants owned a cell phone and 84% owned a computer. Cell phone use, especially text messaging, was preferred for a quick message; however, face-to-face communication was still preferred over electronic communication if the topic was personal (Diamonduros, et al., 2007).

There are several concerns that go along with this increase in technology use. Editors at Psychology and Psychiatry Journal interviewed several researchers on this topic and while it is generally agreed that social networking sites (SNS) such as MySpace and Facebook can be useful for social development, they can also be tools used to fool others (Psychology & Psychiatry Journal, 2008). People often add hundreds or even thousands of people to their friend lists on these sites, but usually do not really know but a handful of these people. The concern is that this can lead to a disillusioned view of friendship, less face-to-face interactions, and false sense of self developed for the purpose of enticing new “friends” (Psychology & Psychiatry Journal, 2008).

In relation to presenting a false identity, many face the obstacle of trying to find legitimate romantic interests online. Without face-to-face interaction, it can be difficult to accurately assess another person. In a study conducted by Cornwell and Lundgren (2001), they assessed romantic relationships that existed either exclusively online or in person. They found that people that engaged in face-to-face relationships had more daily communications and felt more committed and serious about their romantic relationships than those that only communicated online (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). This could suggest that people do not take their online relationships as seriously as their real-life, face-to-face relationships.

Another concern researchers are raising is whether social divides that exist in real-life communications are crossing into the internet realm as well. For example, one researcher noted that there is an apparent income gap between users of Facebook and MySpace (Nielsen, as cited in CNN.com, 2009). Facebook users are typically more affluent, making substantially more money than MySpace users, but Twitter, the latest in SNS', has proven to have the most affluent members of all (Nielsen, as cited in CNN.com, 2009).

A recent study was conducted by Tufekci (2009) to determine if there is a relationship between amount of social support received and amount of time spent on Facebook. It was found that social support increased for women as frequency of Facebook usage increased, but not for men (Tufekci, 2009). This is likely because women were found to use the site more to connect with friends who they see regularly while men use it more to meet new people with similar interests, suggesting that close friendships are more important for social support. However, this benefit for women only increased to a point; as Facebook usage climbed higher for women participants, the less social support they received (Tufekci, 2009).

It appears that these electronic communications are more important to some than others. In another study by Orr, Sisic, Ross, Simmering, Arsenault, and Orr (2009), the relationship between shyness and Facebook usage was examined. As predicted, the researchers found a positive correlation between shyness and amount of time spent on Facebook. Furthermore, the more shy an individual, the fewer friends they had on their Facebook profiles. The researchers suggest that shy individuals gravitate to these social

networking sites because there is less social pressure and more anonymity than in face-to-face interaction (Orr, et. al., 2009).

In a study conducted by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008), researchers seem to be coming to the defense of electronic communications, suggesting young adults are using technology primarily to strengthen their already-existing relationships. They noted that most teens do not feel that SNS have a negative impact on their social lives. However, the researchers also acknowledged that the use of such technology is changing the way people approach relationships and could potentially lead to fewer face-to-face interactions, although this question has been largely remained unanswered (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

The present study intends to examine if there is in fact a relationship between the amount of time people spend engaging in electronic communications and the amount of time they spend in face-to-face interaction. Given the findings of previous research, it is predicted that there is an inverse relationship between the amount of time spent engaged in electronic communications and amount of time spent in face-to-face interaction.

Method

Participants

There were a total of 71 participants, ages 18 to 32, with an $SD=2.376$, pooled in the present study. The average age was 20.2 years, with freshman and sophomores making up more than 70% of the participants pooled. The sample consisted of 35 men and 36 women. Participants were recruited through the Lindenwood Participant Pool and were compensated with extra credit points in their eligible classes that they were enrolled in. The Lindenwood Participant Pool consists of several psychology, sociology,

anthropology, athletic training, and exercise science undergraduate classes that have the option to participate in research studies in exchange for extra credit.

Materials

Participants were asked to complete a survey with 20 questions regarding their internet and cell phone usage (Appendix A), as well as their socialization habits. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The questions in the survey were designed to assess the amount of electronic communications the participant engages in versus the amount of socializing they do in person. There were also questions regarding online gaming, online self-misrepresentation, and the participants' overall feelings about electronic communications. The participants were also given two informed consent forms (Appendix B), one to keep and one to return to the researcher, and a feedback letter (Appendix C) containing the researcher's contact information in case of any questions following the study. Receipts were given to participants to ensure they were rewarded with their extra credit points. Pens and pencils were available to those who needed them.

Procedure

Participants who signed up for the study met at the assigned room at their designated time and were asked to sign in on the sign-in sheet. Next, they were presented with two copies of the informed consent form which they were asked to read over and sign. One copy was for the participants to keep and the second copy was returned to the researcher for their records. The informed consent outlined the participant's rights, including their right to withdraw.

Once informed consent was obtained, the researcher administered the survey to the participant. The participant sat at a desk or table and quietly filled out the survey,

which took no longer than 10 minutes. Participants were surveyed in groups similar to a regular classroom setting. Upon completion of the survey, the participants were debriefed about the purpose and hypothesis of the study and given a feedback letter. This served as a chance to answer any questions the participants may have had and also give them contact information in case they found later that they still had unanswered questions or were interested in viewing the results of the study. Finally, participants were given a receipt acknowledging their participation in the study so they could claim their extra credit points.

Results

A Pearson's correlational analysis was conducted using SPSS to test the relationship between the amount of time spent on social networking sites and the amount of time spend socializing in person. The results did not show a relationship, with $r=-.048$.

Nearly 96% of participants were found to own cell phones. Of those participants, nearly 92% use their phones for text messaging and nearly 37% use them for internet usage. The average number of texts sent in a day was around 72 with an ($SD=78$) and the average number of texts received in a day was approximately 78 and an ($SD=83$).

Over 94% of participants were found to own a computer and almost 96% use social networking sites. Those that use SNS had an average of 502 friends listed on their profile and reported spending at least an hour and a half on SNS each day, but they still found time for socializing in person an average of 18 hours per week. Online gaming was reported as less popular, with only 32% of participants playing games online, and for only about a half hour per day.

Attitudes toward SNS were mostly positive, with nearly 80% of participants claiming that they lead to more social interactions at least sometimes. Still, More than half of participants admitted to using SNS at least sometimes to avoid face to face contact with others and approximately 13% reported using SNS to portray less-than-accurate information about themselves. When asked why they lied, the most common responses were to hide personal information, to avoid certain people, or just for fun. Those that reported being truthful cited reasons such as being an honest person and having no reason to lie. Overall, 52% of participants believe that SNS' do not hinder social relationships, with another 18% feeling unsure.

Discussion

The hypothesis for the present study was not supported by the results of the data; however, some interesting observations were made regarding technological usage. It is not a total surprise that the analysis revealed such results considering that previous researchers have found that SNS use can strengthen pre-existing relationships and also lead to more social interactions. As Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) noted, technology is changing the way we interact with one another.

Some possible limitations of the study include the small sample size and a biased sample. While measures were taken to obtain a random sample through the Lindenwood Participant Pool, a significantly larger group of freshmen and sophomores signed up for the study as compared to juniors and seniors. Also, undergraduate students are not the most representative sample of SNS users in general. Being that SNS are open to everyone, it would be interesting to conduct an internet-based survey open to all users of SNS. This would target a broader population and thus result in a vastly different sample.

Another limitation was the design of the survey. Many participants did not write in specific numbers in the blank spots given for questions such as “How many friends do you have listed on your profile?” and instead gave ranges, which was unhelpful in data analysis. In a revised version of the survey, perhaps choices of specific intervals should be given instead, as in a multiple choice test.

One area for possible future research would be to examine sex differences in technology usage. Despite the stereotype that men are more technologically inclined than women, it seemed that in the present study, females were spending more time texting and socializing online than males. Perhaps this is due to women being more socially inclined than men.

Overall, it can be seen that there is an increasing trend in technology usage. People are using SNS to keep in touch with family and friends that live out of town as well as make plans with those that live on campus. Cell phones are useful to keep in touch and send quick messages throughout the day, and with cell phone companies making data plans more affordable, it appears that people are using them to log onto the internet more frequently as well. Perhaps this study has suggested that technology is having more of a positive impact on our social lives than a negative one.

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Appendix A

- 1) Sex: Male or Female (circle one)
- 2) Age: _____
- 3) Are you a: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior (circle one)
- 4) Do you own a cell phone? Yes No (circle one-if no, skip to question 9)
- 5) Do you use your cell phone for text messaging? Yes No (circle one)
- 6) Do you use your cell phone for internet usage? Yes No (circle one)
- 7) On average, how many text messages do you send in a day? _____ per day
- 8) On average, how many text messages do you receive in a day? _____ per day
- 9) Do you own a computer (desktop or laptop)? Yes No (circle one)
- 10) Do you go on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and MySpace?
Yes No (circle one)
- 11) If you have an SNS account, how many friends do you have listed on your profile?

- 12) On average, how long do you spend on social networking sites per day? ____ per day
- 13) Do you use the internet to play interactive games? Yes No (circle one)
- 14) On average, how long do you spend playing games online per day? _____ per day
- 15) On average, how many hours per week do you spend socializing in person (face-to-face conversation) outside of organized activities like work and school? ____ per week
- 16) Do you ever use the anonymity of social networking sites to portray something about yourself that is less than accurate (this could be anything from lying about your current mood to giving a false name)?
Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always (circle one)

17) In reference to #16, why or why not? _____

18) Do you ever use text messaging or social networking sites as a way to avoid face-to-face communication with someone?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always (circle one)

19) In general, do you feel that your electronic communications lead to more socializing face-to-face?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always (circle one)

20) In general, do you feel that your electronic communications hinder your social relationships?

Yes No Unsure (circle one)

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete a short questionnaire asking about my text messaging and social networking site usage. I understand if I feel sensitive toward any of the material presented, I am able to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 15 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher(s) involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent or that I am under the age of 18 but have on file with the HSP office, a completed parental consent form that allows me to give consent as a minor.

(Signature of participant)

Date: _____

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

Date: _____

Student Researchers' Names and Numbers:
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Appendix C

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in my study. The questionnaire was used in order to determine if there is a relationship between the usage of electronic messaging and the frequency of interpersonal contact in our relationships. As the primary investigator, I hypothesize that with electronic communications on the rise, there is a negative correlation between our usage of electronic messaging and the frequency of our interpersonal contact in our relationships. This information could be useful in the development of future technology and possibly lead to future research on the effects of technology on our relationships.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the results of a large group of consumers, of which you are now a part of. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact me and I will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

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