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Exploring Web 2.0: The Impact of Digital Communications Technologies on Youth Relationships and Sociability

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Exploring Web 2.0:
The Impact of Digital Communications Technologies on Youth
Relationships and Sociability

Abstract

The recent and rapid increase of Internet culture and new communications technologies is one important facet of changes in contemporary social life. Understanding the multiple and complex nature of these changes is an important sociological question. This paper uses qualitative data gained through face-to-face interviews and technology-mediated interviews conducted with college-aged students to explore the ways in which Internet culture and digital socialization affect youth relationships and sociability. Previous research has suggested that the pervasive and intensive use of Internet in education, communication and entertainment may be leading to decreasing face-to-face interaction among youth. Other research focuses on how technology may also expand and transform sociability by allowing people to communicate with a wider and more diverse network of people. Due to the contradictory findings about the consequences of widespread use of Web 2.0 technology among youth, the goal of this research is to explore the depth of the effects that digital socialization has on youth relationships, sociability, connectivity, and identity formation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Communication, Interaction, and Social Media

Social life in the United States today is changing rapidly with the growing use of Web 2.0 technologies. Many realms of social life are being reorganized in different ways by the spread of computers, the Internet, cell and smart phones, Ipods, and similar communications and information technologies. More business is transacted by eCommerce and many jobs are being restructured by the centrality of computers and access to the Web. Many people participate in politics through the Internet, clicking to donate to political causes, sending letters to Congress via email, and mobilizing people for protests through list serves. Education ranging from K-12 to college is increasingly reliant on computers and access to information through the Web. Even personal life, ranging from family life to friendship to intimate relationships are being affected by these new technologies as all kinds of social interactions are mediated by technology.

Given both the pace and the depth of these changes it is important to examine how they are being experienced and their effects on social life and institutions. In this paper I explore how digital communication technologies are affecting young adults. I investigate how young adults use digital communication technologies and the ways that social relationships are shaped by these new technologies. My focus on youth also considers differences among youth—how gender, race, ethnicity and class affect access to and use of technology, and the impact of this use on social relationships. My focus on college-aged students can be justified as particularly important because they have been so thoroughly socialized in the context of the spread of these technologies. My goal was to

focus on the generation that came of age using these tools as they were developing and growing.

The question of how the Internet and other new technologies are affecting the social lives of youth is hotly debated. There are two main rival hypotheses: the first claims that Internet culture fosters more isolation and disconnection among youth, while the second claims that these new technologies create a hyper-connectivity that widens and will potentially revolutionize social interactions (Brignall 2005). The effects of technology-mediated relationships depend on multiple factors. The social context of these technologies matters, as with them, you can perhaps better sustain relationships that are difficult to sustain face-to-face. Therefore, it is the *social* uses of different technologies that are important to explore. Through my research I hoped to gain an idea of how youth use these technologies to stay connected and further explore whether digital socialization braided with face-to-face interaction has a positive effect on youth social relationships, or whether the simplicity and ease of digital communication undermines face-to-face, or “real” connections, thus negatively influencing relationships and sociability.

Understanding this phenomenon is important as Internet culture and digital technology continue to expand their role in society. As Brignall suggests (2005), face-to-face interaction among youth shrinks due to the fact that relationships are increasingly conducted via cell phones, text messaging, instant messaging, Internet social networking sites and blogs, therefore their ability to develop and maintain social skills and relationships are affected, and maybe weakened. Nonetheless, the evolution of the digital age and the social interactions that occur through these various technology forms have created wider networks and increased methods of connectivity. If it were not for this

rapid development in technology, this would be much more difficult. Further, if both of these are happening at the same time, the question of what the effects of these changes on social relationships and identities are becomes very complex. *I argue that online relationships are contextualized by offline relationships—that is, our face-to-face relationships are no longer independent of our digital relationships, but the two have become interrelated. While digitally and technologically mediated relationships may be limited in terms of intimacy and meaningfulness, they may also create wider networks and allow for preexisting relationships to grow.*

1.2. The Rise of Technology Based Communication

Web 2.0 is a term that refers to the second generation of advanced web tools, including social networking sites, wiki's, blogs, and the like. Web 2.0 has created a forum for sophisticated social interaction and collaboration online, and a complex Internet culture is emerging in which many young adults, including college students participate. They communicate with many people in their lives via the Internet and they often use the Internet at work and at school.

Some researchers have argued that new communications technologies help to facilitate communication and allow people to reach other people quickly and in multiple ways. However, it is an open question whether connections carried out through digital media including email, text messaging, instant messaging, and social networking sites are as intimate and satisfying as face-to-face interactions. It is important to note that these changes are not occurring in a linear way nor are they affecting all groups or institutions in the same ways. The question of the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on sociability, for example, needs to ask what kinds of sociability are being transformed in what ways for

which groups of people. The changes are so immense and complex that simple answers are unlikely to do much for our understanding. This paper addresses the effect Web 2.0 and other advanced communication technologies have on youth relationships specifically and whether the impact is positive or negative, or perhaps a combination of both.

1.3. Growing Computer and Internet Access and the History of Social Networking Sites

Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau confirms how widespread computer and Internet use are in this country. Reported computer access and Internet use is relatively high across all age groups other than those over 65, but it is highest for ages 15-24 (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). This recent data also show significant differences in computer use and access to the Internet by race, ethnicity, income and educational attainment. White non-Hispanics and Asian Americans have greater access to computers and to the Internet than both African Americans and Hispanics, according to census data. However, the most significant differences in computer and Internet use are by income and educational attainment, supporting concerns that have been raised about a growing “digital divide” in the U.S. A major research study, The Pew Internet and Social Life study, surveying all kinds of use of digital communications technologies—from computers to cell phones to social networking sites, concludes that these technologies “have become a central force that fuels the rhythm of daily life,” especially among teenagers and young adults (Lenhart, Hitland and Madden 2005).

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace are the most recent, and now one of the most popular forms of digital communications. In 2006, research done by the Pew Internet and American Life Project revealed that “of the 93 percent of U.S. teens

ages 12-17 it surveyed who had Internet access, 55 percent reported having a social network site profile when asked in front of their parents” (Boyd 2007:105). More recent data show that 75 percent of online adults 18 to 24 have a profile on a social networking site, significantly higher than the 57 percent of online adults 25 to 34 who do (Lenhart 2009).

While these sites have multiple uses, including professional use, researchers have found that the main use is for social purposes, especially to keep up with and make plans with friends (Lenhart 2009). Sites such as MySpace and Facebook allow youth to form and build relationships with nearby friends, far-away friends, and even complete strangers. “Pew found that 91 percent of the teens they interviewed in 2006 who use social network sites do so to stay in touch with friends they see every day, while 82 percent indicated they used the sites to connect with those they see on a less regular basis. They also found that 49 percent of teens use the site to make friends” (Boyd 2007:106). These online social networking sites allow youth to both preserve existing relationships and to form new connections.

The rise of social networking has been rapid. SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997, was the first identifiable social networking site that incorporated the features that social networking sites by definition have: the creation of profiles, the listing of friends, and the ability to browse through their friends list (Boyd 2007). That site soon closed, but “other online communities and social media tools began implementing social networking site features, arguably turning their online communities into social networks” (Boyd 2007:96).

Friendster was one of the first big hits in the social networking world. Launched in 2002, and “designed as an online dating site, Friendster wanted users to provide accurate information, connect only to people they knew and trusted, write formal testimonials on each other’s profiles, and engage with others in preconstructed ways” (Boyd 2007:97). Interestingly enough, “participants began collecting friends and competing to be most popular as measured by friend count” (Boyd 2007:98). People began to measure their worth in society, in terms of the number of friends they had on these sites. The creators and company behind Friendster were not pleased with the users’ social construction of the site and attempted to reconfigure them, which eventually resulted in a mass transition to MySpace.

MySpace drew many of its users out of Friendster after their rebellion against the site due to the company’s attempt to reconfigure and limit their activity (Boyd 2007). MySpace, which originally began as a form of social networking among bands, and music lovers, eventually turned into a sort of social phenomenon—“joining MySpace became a form of subcultural capital” (Boyd 2007:100). Youth began joining MySpace as a way to escape their parents or guardians—it was their way of escaping the constraints placed on them. “MySpace’s early popularity among teens was tightly entwined with its symbolic reference to maturity, status, and freedom in the manner espoused by urban late-night culture” (Boyd 2007:100).

As MySpace continued to receive recognition and praise among teenagers, another social networking site, Facebook, emerged and grew in popularity among college students. What started out as a Harvard-only social networking site grew into an Ivy League social networking site. As it increased in popularity it expanded into a top-tier

college social networking site, and eventually reached a mainstream college social networking site (Boyd 2007). “Created in 2004, by 2007 Facebook was reported to have more than 21 million registered members generating 1.6 billion page views each day (Ellison et al 2007). One communications scholar has noted that if Facebook were a country it would be the fourth largest country in the world—some indication of its widespread usage and excessive popularity (Gangadharbatla 2009). The initial limitations of Facebook that had represented it fundamentally as “an elite social network site” (Boyd 2007:103) were eventually diminished. In 2005 Facebook began to open up its arms to high school networks (Boyd 2007) and in 2006 Facebook allowed for commercial organization communities (Ellison et al 2007). “In 2006, Facebook was used at over 2,000 United States colleges and was the seventh most popular site on the World Wide Web with respect to total page views” (Ellison et al 2007:2).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Internet Culture and Digital Socialization

Current research and literature on Internet culture and digital socialization shows mixed results. In one study of 2,096 Americans, researchers found that the Internet has both a positive and a negative effect on people’s psychological well-being. According to Coget et al:

Internet use is associated with a lower level of loneliness independent of the influence it has on people’s social networks, however within the network of Internet users, spending a large amount of time socializing online is associated with an increased level of loneliness independent of the impact it has on people’s social networks (Coget et al 2002: 193).

Coget et al's research suggests that Internet use has no effect on people's social networks, it does however have a mildly positive effect by decreasing loneliness.

In an analysis of data from the 2000 General Social Survey, Alan Neustadtl and John P. Robinson (2002) argue that there is little evidence that as Internet use increases, face-to-face interaction decreases. In fact, Internet and electronic mail use is associated with a richer social life. In a follow up study of HomeNet publications that had previously found small, yet consistently negative effects of Internet use on social involvement and psychological well-being, researchers found that these small findings were no longer apparent. Newer studies found an overall positive effect of using the Internet for communication with family and friends, community involvement and psychological well-being. Researchers argue that extroverts, who had a large network of social support benefited from Internet use, while introverts who had smaller networks of social support did not benefit as much (Kiesler et al 2002). Their research finds that the Internet fosters greater communication and psychological well-being among users. The distinction they make is between how valuable it is, not whether it is beneficial or detrimental.

In another study, Barry Wellman, Jeffrey Boase and Wenhong Chen (2002) examine evidence from three studies done at the NetLab to conclude that Internet does not decrease or destroy community, but rather, that it transforms community. They find that heavy Internet users have become "glocalized"—involved in local and long-distance relationships. However, the paradox they found is that while these people are connecting globally, they are less aware of their immediate surroundings and nearby relationships. Thus, these scholars find validity in both hypotheses. Technology has transformed our

sociability by allowing us to communicate with a wider network of people through the use of the Internet. While this does influence our immediate relationships, it does not completely isolate or disconnect us.

Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield and Cliff Lampe's review of early research on online communities suggests that as "online and offline social networks overlapped, the directionality was *online to offline*—online connections resulted in face to face meetings" (Ellison et al 2007:2). This suggests the importance of exploring the relationships between on and off-line sociability. Their research suggests that the Internet helps people establish new connections and maintain 'weak ties'—"because online relationships may be supported by technologies like distribution lists, photo directories, and search capabilities, it is possible that new forms of social capital and relationship building will occur in online social network sites" (Ellison et al 2007:4).

Another important question is the impact the Internet can have for people who lack strong social skills in the first place. "The Internet might help individuals with low psychological well-being due to few ties to friends and neighbors. Some forms of computer-mediated communication can lower barriers to interaction and encourage more self disclosure" (Ellison et al 2007:5). For some people then, having a screen between you and the person you are communicating with fosters greater social confidence, which can then increase connectivity and the desire to socialize.

Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe also discuss the importance of social networking sites for maintaining relationships and social capital as people are able to stay connected across geographic distances, for example, when they move or go to college (Ellison et al 2007:6). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe conclude that, "online interactions do not

necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other” (Ellison et al 2007:24).

Other scholars however found that “Internet use at home has a strong negative impact on time spent with friends and family as well as time spent on social activities, but Internet use at work has no such effect. Additionally, Internet use on the weekend is related to decreased sociability” (Nie and Hillygus, 2002). Norman H. Nie and Lutz Erbring, found that the more time people spend using the Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment. Their data came from a national random sample of American adults and found this effect noticeable even with just 2–5 Internet hours per week. For those people spending more than 10 hours per week on the Internet there was a substantial rise in their loss of contact with their social environment (Nie and Erbring 2000).

Thomas Brignall has focused his research on “current cyber-youth”—those who have grown up with the Internet as an important part of their everyday life. Brignall finds that due to the pervasive use of the Internet in education, communication and entertainment, there has been a decrease in the face-to-face interaction among youth. He suggests that the decrease in the amount of time youth spend interacting face-to-face may have “significant consequences for their development of social skills and their presentation of self” (Brignall, 2005). Brignall recognizes some of the more positive aspects of Internet use on youth, but the weight of evidence has led him to emphasize negative consequences of extensive Internet use, including “dysfunctional behavior, a lack of community, less privacy, a weakened democracy, and social isolation” (Brignall,

2005). Brignall believes that this generation of cyber-youth may be developing new social skills that are relevant to online interaction, but wonders if face-to-face social interaction will decrease.

Many of these studies are based on survey research. However, because the issues being explored are extremely complicated, it is also important to explore other methods that might be better able to appreciate the complexity of what is going on in youth's lives. Danah Boyd for example, used ethnographic methods in a two-year study of youth and MySpace. She focused on how young people develop and portray social identities on social networking sites, paying attention to gender and race differences among youth experience and use of social networking. Boyd's research reveals, "teen participation in social network sites is driven by their desire to socialize with peers" (2007:3). She explores the idea of networked publics, which she defines as "publics that are restructured by networked technologies" (2007:15). It is within these networked publics that people are able to connect with others across both geographic and social divisions (Boyd 2007). Boyd concludes that since the Internet is not going away the question of whether its effects are more positive or negative is less important than learning about young people's experiences and using that information to better help them "navigate social structures that are quite unfamiliar to us because they will be faced with these publics as adult" (Boyd 2007:23).

Chapter 3: Methodology and Analysis

3.1. My Project

Due to the contradictory findings about the consequences of widespread use of Web 2.0 and other advanced communications technologies among youth, the goal of my

research was to further explore both the positive and negative effects of digital socialization on youth relationships, sociability, connectivity, and identity formation. I conducted 10 face-to-face interviews and 10 technology-mediated interviews through email. My interview subjects are all college-aged youth, and I strived for a sample that included some variety by gender, race, and class. This methodology allowed me to have some sense of the difference between face-to-face interactions versus technology-mediated interactions. I predicted that I would get richer data through my face-to-face interviews, so the second part of my empirical research involved analyzing the interviews and determining whether or not the answers or data were influenced through the method of transference or whether they showed no difference.

For my research I used a convenience sample, that is, people who were readily available to me. Generally a convenience sample is selected according to specific characteristics that matter to the researcher. In my case, I wanted to interview college-aged students and sought to interview as diverse a sample as I could. It is important to recognize that both the size of my sample as well as it being a convenience sample make it impossible for me to generalize. Therefore, I would define my study as a small-scale pilot research project that is exploratory in nature, rather than rigorous hypothesis testing.

The ten people I interviewed were diverse in terms of gender, race and class. I interviewed five women and five men. All ten of my respondents were 21 years old and were seniors in college at the time of the interview. The group was predominantly white, with only one African American and one Mexican American. Three of the interview subjects identified as ethnically-mixed with one Egyptian/Italian, one Indian/White, and one Asian/White. In terms of class, my interview subjects described themselves as

follows: four members of the upper class, three members of the middle class, two members of the working class, and one who chose not to reveal their class status. Eight of my respondents identified as heterosexual, one identified as gay, and one chose not to reveal their sexual orientation. All ten of my respondents attend a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California. This sample allowed me to analyze my data both generally, and to consider differences among gender, class and race/ethnicity (See Table 1).

Table 1: Sample Characteristics of Face-to-Face Interviews (N=10)		
Characteristic		N
Gender	Female	5
	Male	5
Age	18-20	0
	20-22	10
Ethnicity	White	5
	African American	1
	Mexican American	1
	Mixed	3
Class	Working Class	2
	Middle Class	3
	Upper Class	4
	Not Specified	1
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	8
	Homosexual	1
	Not Specified	1
Currently in college	Yes	10
	No	0

The ten people I conducted email interviews with presented me with a less diverse distribution. Two of my respondents chose not to reveal personal information about themselves including their ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc. The remaining eight did however share with me key aspects of their background. I interviewed five females and five males. Three of my respondents were 22 years old and seven were 21 years old. My sample lacked diversity in terms of ethnicity, with seven of my respondents

identifiable as White, one who identified as African American, and two who chose not to reveal their ethnicity. Only five of my respondents chose to reveal their class status, with four members of the middle class and one member of the upper class. The eight respondents who chose to divulge information on their sexual orientation all identified as heterosexual, while the remaining two did not share this information. The respondents were all college students and attended a variety of colleges and universities throughout the country (See Table 2).

Table 2: Sample Characteristics of Email Interviews (N=10)		
Characteristic		N
Gender	Female	5
	Male	5
Age	18-20	0
	20-22	10
Ethnicity	White	7
	African American	1
	Mexican American	0
	Biracial	0
	Not Specified	2
Class	Working Class	0
	Middle Class	5
	Upper Class	1
	Not Specified	4
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	8
	Homosexual	0
	Not Specified	2
Currently in college	Yes	10
	No	0

3.2. My Interviews

The formal interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 60 minutes. For my face-to-face interviews I had a positive response rate of 100 percent. My email interviews however, presented me with a smaller response rate, and proved to be much more difficult to complete. Upon completion of my ten face-to-face interviews, I did partial transcription of each. I transcribed the direct answers to my questions and every word or sentence I

noted as important to my research. All that was left out were meandering tangents that had little to do with my direct research. I assured each of my 20 respondents confidentiality and explained that I would be assigning them pseudonyms to identify them in my article.

The questions I asked gave me information about how young people are connecting with others (friends, family, acquaintances), how much time they spend using various communications technologies, and how they feel about the role of these technologies in their social relationships (see appendix). This information helped me better understand, at least for this small sample, whether Internet culture is creating a disconnect among youth or a hyper-connectivity that is somewhat superficial, or both. The research aided in my examination of Web 2.0 and how technology mediated communication has become so much a part of youth lives and how it relates to face-to-face communication.

The goal of my empirical research was to contribute to the debate between the contradicting hypotheses, one of which claims that Internet culture fosters isolation and disconnection among youth, while the other claims that the onslaught of technology and social ability through the web creates a hyper-connectivity that will revolutionize social interactions, and potentially close the gap in some small way. My objective was to demonstrate that the best answers recognize the complexity and diversity of youth social relationships, the use of new communications technologies and their relationships to Web 2.0 culture. My interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

3.3. Research Findings: Forms and Meanings of Methods of Connection

The interviews began with me asking respondents to explain how they stay connected to different groups of people in their lives. I asked the respondents to differentiate between family members, college friends, friends from home, people who lived nearby, people who lived far away, etc. It became clear that the relationships we have with people, especially our level of comfort with them, has a great influence over the way we choose to communicate with them. All 20 respondents said that phone conversations were reserved largely for their family members and good friends. Phone calls were considered a more personal way of communicating when the preferred method of connection for everyone—face-to-face interaction—was not an option. The respondents noted that for a meaningful phone conversation, you need to allot a certain amount of time that works for both parties, which could be one of the underlying reasons why phone conversations tend to be utilized with only close friends and family. Moreover, respondents explained that they were more inclined to take the time out of their schedules to engage in a somewhat personal conversation with people whom they have a deeper relationship.

For example, Emma Johnson, a 21-year-old White female who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California discussed the difference between people she would feel comfortable having an extended phone conversation with and people who she would not feel comfortable doing so with. She said:

In terms of communicating with my parents, it's always on the phone. The same goes for my sister. It's different with friends. I feel like there are different levels of friendship, and so with my really close friends, I am comfortable talking on the phone, but with other friends who I am not as close with I prefer to talk to

them online or through text messaging. I would just feel weird calling them. It would be awkward (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009).

On the other hand, Sarah Smith, a 21-year-old White female who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California, lives outside of the U.S. While Sarah agreed with most other respondents who used phone calls to talk with family and close friends, her capacity to engage in phone conversation with her family was more limited because they live outside of the country. Her ability to connect with her family was reduced to online connections and the occasional phone call because of the cost, not because it was her choice.

Each of the 20 respondents has a Facebook account that they actively use. A common theme in the respondents' discussions of Facebook was that it was both a tool they used to maintain close friendships and relationships, but also to communicate with acquaintances, colleagues, and friends who aren't considered "inner circle," (people abroad, family, etc.) David Williams, a 21-year-old African American male who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California explained that having Facebook was almost a necessity given its pervasive use among his network of friends. David, who didn't get his Facebook until he got to college said, "I got Facebook because my roommate freshman year told me I was weird for not having one. Now I use it all the time" (Interview with David Williams, October 28th, 2009). David was labeled as "weird" before he joined Facebook because it was presumed that everyone joined. Andrew Garrison, a 22-year-old White male who attends a public university in Oregon, justified his extensive use of Facebook, claiming that it is the main way to communicate with people who are his age. In other words, Facebook is a taken-for-granted necessity among college students, at least those in my sample.

Out of my 20 interview subjects, only two currently use MySpace as a form of communication and connection. Both of them are musicians, and both use it as a way to connect with other musicians and publicize their music. Juan Lopez, a 21 year old Mexican American who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California is the only person I interviewed face-to-face who uses MySpace almost as much as Facebook. Juan, who is a member of a traditional Mexican Banda, uses MySpace to promote and advertise his band. He also uses it to communicate with his Spanish-speaking friends and his friends from Mexico. This suggests that there may be an ethnic divide in use of various social networking sites. Juan stated:

My Facebook is like my college life and I use it to communicate with my white friends, whereas my MySpace is where I communicate with people I don't go to school with. Most of my MySpace friends are Mexican (Interview with Juan Lopez, October 25th, 2009).

Juan made separate his two identities, and used different social networking sites to maintain these identities. His explanation of why he did this led me to wonder if Facebook has an elite status to it, perhaps linked to its original Ivy League exclusivity. Juan explained that MySpace has a more diverse feel to it, and that most of his Spanish Speaking friends either have not made the switch from MySpace to Facebook, or if they have, tend to utilize their MySpace more. Sociologist Eszter Hargittai discusses this in her work stating, "we continue to see ethnic and racial differences as well as different usage by parental education (a proxy for socioeconomic status). Students of Hispanic origin are more likely to use MySpace than others and less likely to use Facebook than others" (Hargittai 2009).

Jacob Wright, a 22-year-old White male who attends a public university in Florida differentiated between his use of Facebook and Myspace explaining, “I use Facebook for socializing and MySpace for music. I use my Facebook 20 times more than I use my MySpace. It is just a good way for me to promote my band” (Interview with Jacob Wright, November 2nd, 2009).

Another form of communication used by all the respondents is text messaging. Text messaging, like Facebook, is used to connect with people who they may not be as close with. However, text messaging was also classified as an easy way to communicate with friends and certain family members, for example for a quick question, or just to say hello.

Text messaging might also be a way to initiate connection to a new acquaintance or friend, as it can be classified as lower risk or low-pressure initial contact. For example David described text messaging as a good way to connect with girls whom he might be interested in but doesn’t know very well. David describes himself as a shy guy, so he is able to convey more over technology-mediated conversation—“I text people a lot. If I meet a girl and I kind of start to like her I will get her number so I can text her” (Interview with David Williams, October 28th, 2009). David uses these less intimate forms of connection to gain confidence and establish the relationship before he moves on to more intimate forms of connecting such as hanging out in person.

Margaret Lee, a 21-year-old ethnically mixed (Asian/White) female who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California discussed her view of text messaging, concluding that text messaging was a way for her to stay connected to people with whom she is close—“people who I am really well connected with I will

usually text message. I think of it as a more informal way of communicating” (Interview with Margaret Lee, October 26th, 2009). Will Jackson, a 22-year-old African American male who attends a large university in Oregon explained that communication through his cell phone, both texting and calling, were just easier for him because he always has his phone with him. However he did maintain that texting was reserved for people who he talks to on a regular basis saying, “for people who I fall out of touch with, I would rather call than text just because it is more respectful to call them and have a decent conversation. I find it quite rude to text someone who you haven’t talked to in awhile” (Interview with Will Jackson, November 16th, 2009). Chris Anderson, a 21-year-old White male who attends a public university in Washington D.C. discussed how he prefers to call close friends and family but due to his busy schedule he often does not have the time, therefore he maintains a running text conversation with them until he finds the time to call.

Another pervasive form of communicating and staying connected among all 20 of the respondents is email. However, only five of the 20 classified email as a way of staying connected in a more meaningful manner. These five discussed email as a way of staying connected to family members, especially more distant family members. The remaining 15 respondents viewed it more as an academic form of connecting. The respondents began using email as a regular form of staying connected only when they came to college. Eleven of the 20 respondents have had an email account since middle school or high school but didn’t begin to use it on a day-to-day basis until freshman year of college. Jeremy Reed, a 21-year-old ethnically-mixed (Italian/Egyptian) male who

attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California discussed email as a way to stay connected with professors:

College is when I really started using email. I didn't use it much in high school because I was at home where I was comfortable. It wasn't a necessity in high school. There were just less deadlines then. In college email is your way of contacting professors. Nowadays, professors send assignments, updates, cancellations, etc. It is the new law of the land (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

Ironically, the respondents I interviewed through email paid much less attention to email in their answers, with only three of the ten discussing daily usage of email.

Elizabeth White, a 21-year-old White female who attends a private liberal arts college in New York stated, "I check my email about ten times a day. However, it has more to do with school responsibilities than social networking I believe" (Interview with Elizabeth White, November 5th, 2009). Jacob Wright had similar conclusions claiming that, "email is just more professional. I definitely prefer email when communicating with family and professors because sites like Facebook are so revealing and personal" (Interview with Jacob Wright, November 2nd, 2009). Email, for him, may be an online method of connecting, but it affords more privacy than Facebook, for example.

A pattern in the face-to-face respondents' discussion of email was that it is an easy form of mass communication. In other words, email is an easy and convenient way to communicate with a large number of people. Emma stated, "my email is almost never closed. If I am on my computer, which is all the time, it is always open. I am involved in a lot of different clubs and organizations on campus so I end up having to email about a lot of different things" (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009). However,

Margaret had a more negative view of email. She said, “email is a mass way of staying connected. I hate it. Everytime you check it you are flooded with email after email. It is usually work or school related. I don’t know, I have a negative connotation with email” (Interview with Margaret Lee, October 26th, 2009). The argument about email as a form of “mass communication” suggests the possibility of disconnection and a lack of intimacy in our email-mediated relationships. Our ability to communicate with so many people at once has the potential to strip the meaning and intimacy from our email conversations.

Ironically fewer than half (eight) of the 20 respondents mentioned face-to-face interaction as one of the ways they “stay connected with people” despite the fact that later in the interviews everyone said it was the most important way they experienced sociability. Perhaps because of the way the question was phrased they didn’t associate the word “connection” with face-to-face connection. It may be because this generation has been socialized to associate the word connection with electronic technologies.

One finding that became very clear in analyzing the data is that convenience is a major factor in the decisions people make about how they decide what method of connection to use in their everyday lives. Out of the 20 respondents, 15 of them concluded that in choosing which method of connection to use, convenience was the determining factor:

It is all about convenience. It is so convenient to go on Facebook and see all your friends and be reminded of whom you might want to check up on. It takes less effort. If it is someone who you don’t want to get in a really long conversation with or you feel awkward talking to on the phone it is just so easy to send him or her a Facebook message or something. I am still showing them I care, it just takes less time (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009).

Katy Wilson, a 21-year-old White female who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California agreed that ultimately ease and convenience were important, and that as more different kinds of people in her life have begun to use multiple methods of communicating, choosing the medium for communication came down to convenience:

I think that the way I choose to stay connected to people happens pretty organically. With my friends it is just easier and more casual to use Facebook and text messaging. With my parents it used to be mostly phone and email but ever since Facebook got bigger, they have started using it and we communicate through it a lot now. It is pretty much whatever happens to be easiest for both parties (Interview with Katie Wilson, October 23rd, 2009).

Her use of the term “organically” suggests that these decisions may be less a result of discussion among people about who prefers what method of communicating and more a result of new habits of use developing and spreading among different groups of people in her life.

Aside from convenience, respondents agreed that the choice of which form of communication to use is also influenced by how close they are with the person. Daniel Brown, a 21-year-old White male stated, “I guess I see certain technologies as more personal, like a phone call (or a personal email). I would choose to use those things with close friends and family. For people I am not as close with I will use Facebook or text messaging” (Interview with Daniel Brown, October 30th, 2009). Jeremy concluded that it really depends on the person:

A lot of my friends nowadays prefer texting. I always prefer calling people, it is what I grew up with. If it is urgent or serious I will give them a call but if it is more informal and casual, like ‘hey want to play tennis tonight?’ I will just send them a text. It largely depends on what I have received. If someone texts me I will text them back and assume that that is how they prefer to contact me. I usually give them the benefit of the doubt and will call them, but if really depends on how they contact me (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

Elizabeth White said something similar, stating, “with people I am closest to (i.e. my family), there’s more to say, therefore the phone is the most efficient means of this. With those who I am less close to, contact is more casual, and therefore email suffices” (Interview with Elizabeth White, November 5th, 2009). The word suffice led me to conclude that the online connections were less important to Elizabeth, therefore these distant methods of staying in touch were adequate for those people who didn’t matter as much to her.

I also asked about respondents’ preferences about methods of staying in touch with people. These answers were more diverse. Of the 20 respondents, six preferred phone calls, four preferred face-to-face interaction, five preferred Facebook, one preferred texting, one preferred email and letters, and three didn’t have much of a preference. Again, I think that because of the way the question was framed, only some people interpreted face-to-face interaction as an appropriate response. I think had I framed it differently, most or all would say that face-to-face interaction was their preferred method of staying connected. However, because this word “connection” is largely associated with these technology-mediated forms of communicating, a number of the respondents didn’t even think to include face-to-face interaction.

Jeremy, who preferred phone calls over all other technology-mediated forms of communication defined email, text messaging and Facebook as more “detached,” impersonal ways of communicating that even “perpetuate...selfishness and isolation:”

I definitely prefer phone calls. Email has become a much more accepted form of communication because it is so common now. You can plan out exactly what you want to say, and respond appropriately. Text messages and Facebook are too impersonal. You become detached from people. You can't understand innuendos and sarcasm through these forms of communicating, and it is hard to sense the person's mood. The worst is breaking up over text messaging or email. This new technology is just a means of avoiding confrontation. It has perpetuated a sense of selfishness and isolation so I definitely try to engage people and reach out (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

Michael Clark, a 21-year-old ethnically-mixed (Indian/White) male who attends a private liberal arts college in a large metropolitan city in California also prefers the phone but he appreciates the multiple ways of communicating that help to sustain connections in different ways:

I don't really dislike anything because it all helps the same cause. I think that sometimes a phone call is definitely necessary and I would prefer to use the phone more, but I wouldn't say I dislike Facebook just because it is less personal. It is nice that you can send a quick hello to a lot of different people without getting into a big long conversation. Each way of staying connected has its purpose, so really they are all important (Interview with Michael Clark, October 25th, 2009).

Emma finds phone conversations more satisfying because they give her access to more of what is really happening with the person she is talking to, but she acknowledged that she is not comfortable talking with everyone on the phone:

I would prefer to be able to talk to everyone on the phone but I just don't, and I don't feel comfortable. I prefer the phone because I think that the way I connect with people is really related to their voice and their mannerisms. If I can hear their voice I have a better picture of what they are doing. It provides me with a visual of what they look and sound like (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009).

Speed of response matters to her as well, because she mentioned that she did not like hand written letters because of how much time it takes to get a response.

Although the respondents varied in their particular preferences for different methods of staying connected with people, it is clear that most respondents use multiple methods of communication and value having access to different methods depending on the situation, the nature of the relationship (how personal it is, for example), the purpose of the interaction (a quick hello versus a difficult but necessary conversation), and how quickly they need/want a response.

In order to attempt to quantify the use of different technologies I asked my interview subjects to indicate approximately how many hours a day they used different methods. The following table displays this data. Because of inconsistencies in responses the number of respondents varies depending on the form of technology and the ways they quantified "use" sometimes differed. However, as the chart makes clear, this sample of respondents are heavy users of digital technologies.

Table 3: Use of Various Communication Technologies

Method of Connection	Mean Hours/Day	Median Hours/Day
In Person (N=19)	5.9	4.5
Telephone (land line)	0	0
Cell Phone (N=19)	1.1	1
Text Messaging (By # Messages N=6)	41.6	35
Text Messaging (By Hours N=12)	2.3	1
Facebook (N=19)	2	1.9
Email (N=18)	0.75	0.5
Myspace (N=2)	0.132	0

To understand the important role these technologies play in day-to-day life, I asked my interview subjects how they thought their life would change if they no longer had access to the technologies they currently use to stay connected. All 20 recognized that life would change a great deal, with most believing the changes would be more negative than positive. Michael believes “life would be hard. I would completely lose touch with everybody from home. I can’t even imagine life without these technologies. What would we do?” (Interview with Michael Clark, October 25th, 2009). Jacob’s description of life without these technologies was easily summed up in one word—chaos.

On the other hand Emma thought that while she would have fewer connections, the ones she did have would be more meaningful:

I would have much less, but better quality relationships. With my close friends who I live with and see everyday and with my family, I think it would be the same. But with other people who I don’t see on an everyday basis there would have to be much more effort put in to see them, which in the end could facilitate a better relationship with them. But you only have so many hours in a day. I

would have to be much more selective of with who and how I spent my time (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009).

Alice had a somewhat similar response:

I think life would be better. Even though I said that sometimes these social networking sites make me happier, it is all about convenience. While I am keeping in touch with people to an extent, it isn't a strong relationship. I think that if I wasn't spending three hours a day on Facebook I would be more productive. These technologies can also hinder the face-to-face relationships you have, like when people are texting while you are out to dinner. I think because we have these technologies, we are constantly somewhere else. Because we have these options we disconnect, because it is easier (Interview with Alice Walker, October 26th, 2009).

Rachel was the only respondent who even mentioned the possibility of deleting her Facebook, claiming that she only keeps it to maintain contact with far-away friends:

I've deleted my Facebook before, and I probably will again. Like I've said before I have other ways of contacting those I really care about. The only thing that has stopped me from deleting my Facebook is that a lot of my friends live on other continents and I like having quick access to them (Interview with Rachel Adams, November 19th, 2009).

3.4 Research Findings: The Impact of Communications Technologies on Social Life

Everyone I interviewed agreed that Internet culture and new communications technologies influenced their relationships and connections with other people. However, my sample overwhelmingly believed that the effects are both positive and negative. On the one hand, most respondents are aware (and some are concerned) that Web 2.0 communications can negatively influence relationships and connections because it can

produce relationships that are more superficial, less personal and less emotionally intense than relationships that are not technology mediated or sustained. At the same time, they tended to agree that the networks they are creating are larger and probably more diverse, and that these technologies can actually help sustain offline relationships in some important ways.

For example, Daniel stated, “Facebook has changed the way that I interact with my circle of friends. My range of connection is wider but it isn’t as deep or focused on personal relationships as it used to be” (Interview with Daniel Brown, October 30th, 2009). Jeremy had a similar response:

I think it is all really positive in the sense of expanding our knowledge and culture and keeping people connected. But the question is, what is that connection based on? It is impersonal and weak. People write ‘I love you’ but they are just empty words. You need real life interaction to see that. I don’t think you can ever really replace the benefits of being with a person and seeing them and sitting with them and just learning about them. We are disconnected. Naturally and instinctively we are bound to other people. We are supposed to have these attachments, but they are turning into digital connections (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

Jeremy spoke for a number of other respondents in recognizing the irony in kinds of connection that feel “disconnected.” He has a view of human nature as inherently social, with attachments being necessary, but he is concerned about what is happening when these attachments are transformed into digital connections.

On the other hand, David had a more positive outlook on Internet culture, but he attributed this to his being extremely shy. He stated, “for me, it is positive, but that is because I am a very quiet person. Internet culture and these technologies make it so I

don't have to seek someone out and talk to them in order to see what is going on in their life" (Interview with David Williams, October 28th, 2009). David's self-awareness of the fact that his shyness is related to his positive outlook on technology-mediated communication raises a point that has not been adequately explored in the research I have seen on this topic, that the impact of digital communications on sociability may be different for people with different kinds of personalities. Personality probably has a lot to do with sociability. Introverts and extroverts, for example, seem to need different levels of sociability, and gregariousness and shyness play a role in how willing and able different people are to start and maintain social relationships.

While many respondents saw Facebook as a much less personal form of communicating Emily Davis, a 21-year-old White female had an interesting response that qualifies this view of Facebook. Even though Facebook was regarded by most of my respondents as the most superficial form of staying connected, it can also be a "source of drama," revealing a great deal about intimate details of other peoples' lives:

Facebook has absolutely influenced my relationships and connections with other people. It is a fun way to stay in contact but also a source of drama. People can find out things they may not want to know really easily through Facebook (Interview with Emily Davis, November 6th, 2009).

Will focused on the positive effects of these technologies first, explaining how they make it easy to stay in touch with people and even meet new people online. But he also wondered if they could be substituted for more "real life" kinds of interactions:

I can keep in touch with people who I may not have talked to in a long time, but also I am able to meet new friends and stay in touch with them. The only

negative notation is that it may limit the two parties from meeting in real life and experiencing human connection in reality (Interview with Will Jackson, November 16th, 200).

The distinction between “real life” and online life is a theme that came up often in other interviews, and I will return to it later.

Another pattern I found in my respondents’ answers was that without Internet culture they would not be in touch with as many people as they are currently able to be in contact with. Michael thinks he is able to have more conversations than he would otherwise in the absence of Internet communication, but he also seems to suggest that some kinds of interaction end up being easier to avoid than would be the case with more personal forms of communication:

Without Internet culture I wouldn’t have a lot of the conversations I have, or a lot of the communication I am able to have just because I wouldn’t have the time. I can send something really quick and get an instantaneous response. But then again, certain conversations are probably avoided because you can do it so much more simply by sending a quick Facebook message instead of calling someone. With the Internet I get to do more of what I want and communicate exactly how I want to instead of being forced to do something in person or on the phone (Interview with Michael Clark, October 25th, 2009).

Emma responded similarly saying:

There are a lot of people who I just wouldn’t talk to if there weren’t these primary Internet ways such as email, Facebook, Instant Messenger, etc. I wouldn’t really think to stay in touch with them because there wouldn’t be the constant reminder of them that Facebook provides. I think that with people who you already have a relationship and a connection with, it is positive as it allows you to stay in touch. But with people you aren’t as close with, it kind of creates

a barrier and isolates you from ever forming a close relationship (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009).

Emma's point is important. She thinks that technology might have a different effect on relationships that are strong, separate from the way they are carried on through technology-mediated forms of communication and those that are not strong off-line. She raises the question of whether barriers are created that might actually interfere with the development of off-line relationships.

Rachel Adams, a 21-year-old White female who attends a public university in Oregon acknowledged the potential artificiality of relationships conducted over the Internet but maintained that without it she might not be able to stay connected to certain people at all without it due to geographic distance:

The Internet gives me quick access to people who I can't call either because of time differences or cost. For example, I have good friends in Germany and South Africa that I primarily keep in touch with via Facebook (chat and messaging). On the other hand, I recognize the artificiality of it. They're not showing "me" their pictures, they're showing everyone they know, and we're not talking about them necessarily, I'm just consuming, or observing them in a way. Facebook seems to create the pretense of closeness without requiring the same level of interaction (Interview with Rachel Adams, November 19th, 2009).

In this quote Rachel distinguishes between an experience in which a friend might share pictures with *her* and someone posting pictures for their many friends to "consume." She concludes that Facebook might foster a "pretense of closeness" that does not match the reality of a close relationship. Although she made this point more graphically than some

of the others I interviewed, the distinction she made between what real friendship feels like and what Facebook friendship feels like was made by many others.

The meaning of friendship is an interesting concept when it comes to Internet culture. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace allow you to have “friends.” The mean number of friends my respondents said they had on Facebook was 639 (N=19), and the mean percentage of Facebook friends they stayed in touch with on a regular basis was 17.72% (N=18). The median number of Facebook friends was 600 (N=19), and the median percentage of Facebook friends they stayed in touch with on a regular basis was 13.5% (N=18). You can see a stark difference between the number of friends my respondents have on Facebook and the percentage of those friends they actually stay in contact with.

In response to a question that asked my interview subjects to compare their actual number of friends, however they defined that term, to the number of friends they had on their Facebook or any other social networking sites, the difference between these types of friendships became clear. Nineteen out of my 20 respondents said that their actual number of friends was a much smaller number than the number of friends they had on Facebook, MySpace or Twitter. Although respondents differed in how many actual friends they had (these numbers varied depending on whether they meant close friends or other circles of friendship) the numbers were much smaller than the number they gave for Facebook friends. Most people talked about having 5-10 close friends and a second circle of real friends that was maybe two or three times that large. This number is, of course, much smaller than their number of Facebook friends.

Michael's response to this question summed up what many others said: "I guess a better term for 'Facebook friends' would be 'Facebook acquaintances' because that's really what it is" (Interview with Michael Clark, October 25th, 2009). Part of the explanation for the numbers of Facebook friendships is the process of accumulating friends, which is that someone gets a request to accept a new "friend" and has to decide to accept or decline that friendship. Daniel admitted that he used to just accept anyone as a Facebook friend, but in recent months he has become more particular about who he is friends with on Facebook:

My group of friends in real life is much smaller than the number of friends I have on my Facebook. Facebook is like my periphery of friends. I don't use it as a primary means of friendship. I use it to see what is going on with people and to send them a quick message or share something I think is funny. I use it to maintain friendship but it is not my only way of interacting (Interview with Daniel Brown, October 30th, 2009).

The one exception to the pattern was Will Jackson, an African American male who I interviewed through email, who said, "I have around 395 friends on Facebook and I would say I stay in touch with around 89% of them, and almost everyday. I talk to my Facebook friends almost everyday so I consider them my actual friends (Interview with Will Jackson, November 16th, 2009).

To further understand the concept of online friends I asked my interview subjects to describe how they decide to accept a "friend request" on these social networking sites. Nineteen respondents said that in order to accept someone's friend request on Facebook they either needed to have met at least once or had some sort of personal interaction with

that person. Sometimes they also looked to see how many mutual friends they shared with the requestor. One respondent accepts all friend requests on Facebook.

The three respondents who still utilize MySpace both said that while they filter out their friend requests on Facebook, they are less particular on MySpace. Juan, who is a member of a Mexican Banda accepts almost all friend requests on MySpace because he hopes to promote his Banda. He stated, “on MySpace I don’t even filter who I am friends with because I am advertising my music. The more friends, the better. My Facebook has much more personal information on it that I don’t want to share with people I don’t know” (Interview with Juan Lopez, October 25th, 2009). Jacob, who also uses MySpace to promote his music, had a similar response, maintaining that Facebook is reserved for personal socializing, whereas MySpace is about gaining exposure, therefore friends on MySpace don’t need to be personal.

Because interviews do not always result in having equivalent answers to all questions I decided to ask all respondents a series of questions about their social networks and experiences of social networks (See Table 4).

Table 4: Opinions and Experiences of Digital Technology Use and Relationships		
Question	Yes	No
“Most of the people I spend time with in-person are very similar to me (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, where we are from	13	7
“Most of the relationships I have that are mainly conducted online are very similar to me (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, where we are from).”	6	14
“Social networking sites have expanded the diversity of my social networks (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, where we are from).”	18	2
“Having an active social networking ‘life’ makes me feel less lonely than I think I would be otherwise.”	11	9
“Spending lots of time communicating via technology, rather than in person, has made my relationships feel less rewarding.”	9	11

These data suggest two important points about how digital communications might be affecting social relationships. The first is that at least for this group of college students, online relationships are more diverse than off-line relationships. While 13 of 20 respondents said that the people they spend the most time with in-person are very similar to them, the reverse is true of the question about online relationships. To that question, 14 of 20 respondents disagreed that most of the people they related to online are very similar to them. Emma put it this way, “my online friends are more diverse. I think this is because the people who I have actual access to spend time with are mostly white. I interact more online with people of difference races or ethnicities” (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009). Part of the explanation for this is that the networks of online friendships are much larger (as was discussed above), and the nature of the friendships is much less intimate. Although interracial friendships are slowly increasing in the U.S., it may be that it is easier for some people to cross racial and ethnic lines in ways that demand less intimacy, such as through social network sites (US Census Bureau 2009). However, this is an important potential trend and deserves more research.

The second finding that emerges from the forced choice questions above concerns the quality of technology-mediated relationships or the impact they have on a persons overall feeling of social connection. Here the sample was almost evenly split, with about half believing that they are less lonely because they have an active social networking life and about half believing that their relationships might be less rewarding because they spend lots of time on social networking sites. Jeremy expanded on his answer by explaining the difference between the “immediate satisfaction” one gets from a Facebook

connection, and the way the “weakness” of these kinds of ties ultimately means they are not very satisfying:

I think you can get an immediate satisfaction with Facebook and email, but you will still feel lonely, you are missing something that you can only get from physical interaction. This culture promotes loneliness, which makes it hard to find somebody who doesn't give in to the mainstream, who cannot disconnect from his or her cell phone temporarily. The connections we have through these technologies are weak. They are a good substitute, but they won't satisfy you in the end (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

David maintained that being able to look at what people are doing on a day-to-day basis and what they are doing on the weekends through their pictures and their status updates makes you feel more involved than you actually are.

The superior value of in person social connections and experiences came out repeatedly in the interviews. Respondents were unanimous in their belief that in-person relationships are both stronger and more meaningful. Jeremy explained:

Face-to-face interaction is a better way of connecting to someone as opposed to the superficial connection you have online or through texting where you can think about what you want to say and re-edit it. I think you see a more genuine side of a person when you are face-to-face. Technology is just another mask we wear (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

But the distinction between on and off-line friendships can be misleading. Many of the most important online relationships were with people my respondents also spent time with in person. In those cases digital forms of communication served as a “bridge” in between times spent in person, “Most of the people I keep in touch with online I have an

in-person relationship or foundation with already, so communicating online helps to bridge the gap until the next time I see them” (Interview with Michael Clark, October 25th, 2009).

These two metaphors—of digital communications as a mask and as a bridge—have much to offer an in-depth understanding of my basic research question. The first metaphor describes technology as a kind of mask that we can wear in our digital communication. This metaphor summarizes the many respondents who talked about online relationships as less real than off-line or in-person relationships. This unreality is represented by the metaphor of a mask, a symbol of artificiality, or what Rachel Adams cited earlier called the “pretense” of some online relationships. Juan believes that many relationships conducted mainly online and via the phone/texting are not only superficial, but they can actually be false. For example more than one person talked about passing Facebook friends on campus who did not acknowledge them in person. Jeremy was talking about the awkwardness he feels about people who request his friendship on Facebook, but then “he sees them on campus and they don’t even say hi to me” (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009). The idea that relationships that are conducted mainly or exclusively online feel unreal or even false is most apparent in the ability of people to create profiles on Facebook that may or may not reflect who they really are. Compare the image of the mask with Emma’s description of real friendship as based on real knowledge of another person that comes from shared meaningful experiences, “I think that you have to connect on an emotional level to actually be friends with someone, then it builds from there and you begin to respect and trust one another” (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009). In comparing the difference

between relationships carried out mainly in person versus those carried out mainly online/phone/texting Emma said:

You can read people when you are with them. You can tell if something is wrong when you see them. You don't get that online. They could be hiding things from you. They might need your help but don't want to come out and ask for it. The quality is much stronger in-person (Interview with Emma Johnson, October 23rd, 2009).

Emma's description complements this metaphor of the mask, as it is easier for people to "hide" online than when you are with them in person,

The second metaphor, the one offered by Michael, described technology-mediated communication as a bridge. This is a very different image than the image of the mask. His reference is to how technology allows us to stay connected but from a distance—it bridges certain gaps that may exist. It can also serve as a bridge to new relationships, and, perhaps, based on the data reported earlier, possibly a bridge across racial, ethnic or class divides. This might be truest for introverts, or very shy people who use technology as a way to build confidence and social comfort. For example, David, who describes himself as extremely shy, uses these various technologies to bridge the gap that is created by his withdrawn personality. He characterized himself as a "freerider," using sites like Facebook to participate in the lives of his friends. He stated, "I had a girlfriend who didn't go to the same school as me for awhile so I spent most of my time with her and was really uninvolved on campus. But Facebook allowed me to still feel involved" (Interview with David Williams, October 28th, 2009). David used Facebook to bridge the gap that was created due to his lack of participation in the social scene at his school.

Technology is also a bridge that connects people to other people who may be very different from them. It creates a more diverse network. Daniel described his online relationships as extremely diverse due to the fact that they are from all the spectrums of his life. Jeremy formed similar conclusions stating, “sites like Facebook keep me connected to a lot more people from different times in my life. I am informed about cultural events, things I normally would not have attended. I expose myself to things outside of my comfort zone. It has expanded my diversity” (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

This study provides strong evidence that the impact of digital communications and Web 2.0 culture on our social relationships is not a black and white, good versus bad issue. As sociologists who have studied the impact of other technologies on society have argued, it is not the technology itself but how humans use these technologies that is most significant. For the most part this is how my respondents summed up the impact of these technologies on their social relationships. While most of the people I interviewed believed or worried that Internet culture might produce greater isolation or hinder them from forming intimate and meaningful relationships, they also saw the value of the wider networks and the ways email, text messaging, Facebook and other digital technologies allowed them to sustain and then build more constant and meaningful relationships with people about whom they care a great deal. As Michael stated, the impact of the technologies depends on how they are used, and if they end up serving as a bridge to other forms of sociability:

“It largely depends on how you use it. Some people like to separate themselves from society and their friends and use it to block people out, while others use it as a starting point to build more meaningful relationships. If I meet somebody, it

gives me a basis for a future relationship that you couldn't have without these social networking sites. However, you can't rely on it for long. You do have to supplement it with spending actual time together in person" (Interview with Michael Clark, October 25th, 2009).

Daniel recognized that if he was using Internet culture as his exclusive form of connecting and socializing, than it would indeed isolate him, but that is not how he uses it. Jacob was another person who saw the effects as dependent on how the technologies are used:

There is the possibility of both. By and large, I think it fosters intimate relationships rather than inhibiting them. Yes, it can be argued that there are less "dates" and more Facebook chatting, but it allows people to be in contact more and meet up and get to know one another better. Ultimately, we still have the desire for personal face-to-face contact, and social technologies allow for us to do that with more ease (Interview with Jacob Wright, November 2nd, 2009).

Elizabeth explained that the Internet does allow her to form more relationships and maintain preexisting relationships, however the intimacy might be somewhat absent:

I believe in select instances—like when I was studying abroad in Paris and it was far too expensive to phone my family, so we talked over Skype—it allowed me to keep these connections. For some of the people who I initially met in Paris, this is also true—it will be easier for me to stay in contact with them if I ever wish to go back. I don't feel that it isolates me from forming meaningful relationships because without it I just wouldn't be in contact with as many people. But that contact, except for the examples I provided above, is usually a fairly unmeaningful contact (Interview with Elizabeth White, November 5th, 2009).

It is not surprising that these respondents have a complicated relationship with these digital communications technologies. By focusing on this age group I have been examining the very group that came of age at the same times as Internet culture came of age. Young adults of this age cohort literally became social adults in the context of these new communications technologies.

3.5. Comparative Analysis of Face-to-Face Interviews and Email Interviews

In designing this research I had hypothesized that technology-mediated communications would be less rich than in person forms of socializing. As I have discussed, this hypothesis was borne out. In this section I want to examine a related hypothesis: that the data I would get from the technology-mediated interviews would also be less rich than what I would learn from the in-person interviews. This also turned out to be true. Not only did I have much more difficulty getting people to follow through and complete the interviews, but the data itself was very different from the data in the interviews I conducted in person. In addition, my inability to communicate face-to-face with them is what I believe caused the poorer response rate and a terseness and lack of nuance in the answers. Because participants had to answer the questions without any clarification from me, their interpretations of certain questions differed from the interpretations made by my face-to-face interviewees.

It is not the case that the basic content of what I learned from my face-to-face interviews and my email interviews differ very much. The differences were more in how much detail they provided, how transparent their thinking about the answers was, and how connected I felt to these respondents. Many of the quotes I have used throughout this paper came from the face-to-face interviews because they were far richer. The face-to-

face interviews had more of a conversation feel to them, while the online interviews were more like a question and answer session. I think I was able to establish more rapport with people in person, and that might have led them to feel more comfortable, and therefore, to be more expansive in their answers.

Moreover, because the in person interviews were more like a conversation and they responded without much time to think, they were more likely to think out loud and formulate their answers along the way. This revealed more of their thought process and allowed me to probe more than was possible with the online interviews. For example respondents might say one thing, and then contradict themselves as they thought about what they had said. This gave their answers multiple layers.

The email interviews were more structured and straightforward. The respondents had time to think of their answer and then write them out in a clear and concise manner. While the content was similar, it lacked the emotion and nuance of the other interviews. When you type out an answer to a question you will likely summarize the important points, so that it doesn't take as long. This may well be similar to the difference between a text message, an email message or a post on someone's Facebook wall and an in person, or even a telephone conversation. Moreover, the emotion that can often be part of an oral answer is much harder to express or discern from short, typed answers to specific questions.

To exemplify this point I compare below the difference between the responses I got to similar questions in the face-to-face and the online interviews. I posed the question "does the growing centrality of Internet culture influence your relationships and your connections with other people? If you answered yes, in what positive way(s) does this

happen? In what negative ways? Please explain.” Jeremy, one of my face-to-face interviewees responded as follows:

It has enabled us to talk about more things because it is an infinite supply of information and news. There are YouTube clips that get popular in one day and then everyone has seen them. Positively you are exposed to a lot more. You can see things you wouldn't normally have access to. Everything is there. In terms of expanding your sense of being cultured or becoming more worldly, you can read about news in a different country, you are exposed to all these different media sources and you are put in a position where there is such easy access that you can choose which ones you like, and you can see the biases of others more clearly than if you were just sitting at the television and you have to sit through 20 minutes of a newscast to see it all. I think it is all really positive in the sense of expanding our knowledge and culture and keeping people connected. But the question is, what is that connection based on? It is impersonal and weak. People write 'I love you' but they are just empty words. You need real life interaction to see that. I don't think you can ever really replace the benefits of being with a person and seeing them and sitting with them and just learning about them. We are disconnected. Naturally and instinctively we are bound to other people. We are supposed to have these attachments, but they are turning into digital connections. There is an expression "no man's an island..." we all have our pods, we talk over Facebook but we are disconnected in real life. Facebook creates this perfect image of yourself and you just plug into it and disconnect with humanity (Interview with Jeremy Reed, October 23rd, 2009).

Here is a response from one of my email interviewees to the same question: "Internet culture allows me to connect with people with a lot of ease. This is really nice because otherwise talking to multiple people would take a long time. The Internet really makes life, social life especially, easier" (Interview with Alex Young, November 16th, 2009).

I chose relatively typical answers from the two types of interviews. What did I get from the interview with Jeremy that was lacking in the interview with Alex? Both Jeremy and Alex appreciate the breath and ease of the connections they are able to make through the Internet, but Alex keeps his answer terse, focusing on how easy connections are and the time savings the Internet affords for social life. Jeremy gives concrete examples, but as he talks he begins to question the depth of connection and exemplifies that point with the ways people throw around phrases such as “I love you.” He also gets philosophical, expressing his opinion that humans are, by nature, very social, but that their sociability is being transformed in negative ways.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

My research findings confirm neither the most positive nor the most negative conclusions in the literature on the impact of digital communications on sociability. Based on the data I gathered it is not accurate to say that these youth are so glued to their screens that they avoid, don't take time for, or don't value personal, face-to-face, “deep” relationships with friends, family and others. It is however accurate to assert that my respondents use a wide variety of digital technologies, mainly to sustain relationships, especially those that matter most, but also to build a wide network of “friends” that range from people they barely know to their most intimate connections. They still value face-to-face connection, which is perceived as more intimate, personal, and “real,” as they find these connections more satisfying and meaningful. However, they also see value in the less intimate, impersonal forms of connection for particular purposes.

My respondents sometimes use digital technologies for quick, routine communication. Although it might seem superficial, they see it more as a substitute for

no communication rather than substituting for deeper communication when geographic distance or being busy would otherwise mean no contact at all. These technologies make it much easier to maintain connections across geographic distance, and are convenient and easy. Furthermore, the respondents associate different technologies with different kinds of connections and sometimes with different kinds of people in their lives, therefore, having multiple options of ways to contact and be in touch with people is, in their opinion, mainly good.

I also found that my respondents were not oblivious to the superficiality of much communication through text messages, instant messages, or posting on Facebook walls. They realize both the artificiality and the superficiality that is often part of these ways of communicating. But in the case of people who matter most these are just one part of the ways they maintain relationships, and even brief, superficial ways of connecting can sustain these relationships when they are part of an overall relationship that includes spending “quality time” together. The fact that they use these technologies does not necessarily mean that they don’t value or participate in much deeper, more personal and intimate forms of connection.

My respondents believe that the impact of technology mediated communications technologies on relationships is complex and multidimensional—It is not black and white, good or bad, right or wrong—It is much more complicated. The most positive features of digital-mediated relationships, especially when they combine on and off-line forms of sociability, are found in the metaphor of the bridge. Bridges make connections happen across time and space. The most negative features are illustrated in the metaphor of the mask, which has to do both with friendships that are not “real” (the huge networks

of Facebook “friends”) and the superficiality and artificiality of much of what gets communicated in the quick, abbreviated text messages or public posts on Facebook walls.

My research provides further confirmation of what sociologists often argue: that context and circumstance matter. Online connections vary from those that are only online to those that are just one aspect of a relationship that is also carried out in person. The choices people make about how to create and maintain connections are determined by geographic distance, expense, how much time someone has or thinks another person has, personality, how they respond to the method of contact used to get in touch with them, peer pressure, and the kind of relationship they have with that person. My sample of respondents spend a lot of time using these various technologies—confirming the widespread perception of this demographic as highly ‘wired.’ However, whether or not so much use of the more superficial methods of communication actually undermines their capacity for deeper, more meaningful connections was not demonstrated by this study, and probably needs to be further examined.

My research had some limitations due to the small sample size. While my sample of 20 college students included some diversity by class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender it was still limited by the homogeneity of the sample and did not display concrete differences across these diversities. It is important to speak to what social scientists call "self report" data. Self-reports are valuable because they speak to our individual experiences, but they may present certain biases and distortions because they are often highly subjective. Research that did time diaries of use of technologies would be more objective, as it might provide a more accurate illustration of how long people use these technologies over a day or over a week. The best research would follow people over

longer period of time, observe them using these technologies, and gain a sense of how their usage changes over time. Asking other people in the respondents' lives about the quality of their relationships would also give another angle of vision. The point is, a real understanding of this complicated issue requires multiple kinds of methodologies and probably a more longitudinal study.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What are the various ways that you stay connected to different groups of people in your life? Do these ways differ for different groups of people? (For example, family members and friends? Close friends and friends you are not as close to? Other groups of people you stay connected to? People who live in the same town/city and those that live elsewhere?)
2. How do you decide which method of staying in touch you will use with people you stay connected to regularly? How about with people you are in contact with less often but who still matter to you quite a bit?
3. Do you prefer one method of staying connected over others? If so, why? Is there a method of staying in touch you don't like? Why?
4. Please indicate if you use any of the following methods of being in touch with others, estimate about how long you spend using that method of communication each day [if less than each day just estimate how often you use it] and, if you use that method, for about how many years you have used that method of communication?

<u>Method Of Connection</u>	<u>Hours Per Day</u>	<u>Number Of Years</u>
-----------------------------	----------------------	------------------------

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spend time in person | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone (land line) | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cell phone calls | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Text messaging | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Email | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facebook | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> MySpace | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LinkedIn | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Twitter | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blogs | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letters (the mail) | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> (Other—please give name) | | |
5. Does the growing centrality of Internet culture influence your relationships and your connections with other people? If you answered yes, in what positive way(s) does this happen? In what negative ways? Please explain.
 6. If you are a member of one or more social networking sites how did you decide which site to join? If you are a member of more than one, which do you utilize the most? Why?
 7. If you are a member of a social networking site, about how many “friends” do you have? Approximately what percentage of them do you stay in touch often? Is having lots of friends important to you? Can you explain why? Or why not?
 8. How would you compare your actual number of friends (however you define that term in your own life) to the number of friends you have on Facebook, MySpace, etc? What is the difference between these kinds of friends?
 9. Which of the following statements accurately describes your social networks or your experience of your social networks? Check as many as you think are true for you.

- ❑ Most of the people I spend in-person time with are very similar to me (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, where we are from).
 - ❑ Most of the relationships I have that are mainly conducted on line are very similar to me (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, where we are from).
 - ❑ Social networking sites have expanded the diversity of my social networks (in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, age, where we are from).
 - ❑ Having an active social networking “life” makes me feel less lonely than I think I would be otherwise.
 - ❑ Spending lots of time communicating via technology, rather than in person, has made my relationships feel less rewarding.
10. How would you compare the quality of the relationships you have that are carried out mainly in person versus those that are carried out mainly online or via the phone/texting?
 11. How often do you check or update your email and/or these social networking websites? Do you rely on status updates to inform others of what you are doing on a day-to-day basis and vice versa?
 12. Do you ever get requests to “friend” someone on a social networking site that you decide not to “friend?” How do you decide whether to friend someone or not?
 13. Do you ever get requests from markets/advertisers/companies to join a site/blog or become a fan of their product? How do you decide whether to join or not?
 14. How much attention do you pay to the ads that pop up when you are on your social networking site (if you are on one)? What do you think draws you to ads if and when you do pay attention to them? Do you pay more or less attention to these ads than to television, radio or newspaper ads?
 15. Do you have any concerns about the fact that social marketers are tracking aspects of your life online? If so, why? If not, why not?
 16. Has the dollar costs of buying or using any of these technologies ever been a financial hardship for you? Is it now? Do you worry that it will be?
 17. Have you ever felt pressure to purchase an expensive (for you) phone, computer, or other device for any reason that has to do with your social networks? If so, what did you do and why?
 18. Would you say that staying connected to people is very important to you, somewhat important, not important, or not at all important?
 19. How do you think your life would change if you no longer had access to the technologies that you currently use to stay connected?
 20. Overall, do you feel that Internet culture isolates you from forming intimate and meaningful relationships or rather allows you to form these connections?
 21. Please share with me key aspects of your background for use in analyzing your answers. Include: gender, race, ethnicity, class background, age, year in college, sexual orientation, college/university affiliation, and anything else you would like to add.)