Facebook and Family Communication

Family communication is a field that includes a wide variety of research. A growing area of study that hasn’t necessarily been explored to its fullest potential is the computer-mediated communication (CMC) aspect of family communication. Social networking sites have grown vastly within the past five years, and those such as Facebook, that continue to grow in popularity, are gaining new members every day. Because of this growth, the concept of CMC within the family is an area with enormous potential that is in need of further exploration. Research studies have been conducted helping to dissect CMC, interviews with a family have been conducted to find real life examples of CMC in practice, and together the research and interviews provide knowledge and applications for current and future CMC use.

Review of Literature

The research that has been conducted on computer-mediated communication, though little has been looked at in the terms of family communication, can easily be applied to a family context. There are three important aspects in need further clarification in looking at CMC in regards to family communication. These areas of interest are the reasons for communicating using CMC as opposed to other forms of communication, the type of information being communicated through CMC in comparison to other forms of communication, and what effects CMC has on other forms of communication.

In regards to computer-mediated communication, it is important to first look at the reasons people use it. Coyle and Vaughn (2008) note that the primary use of social networking sites by individuals is to keep in touch with individuals important to them. Research seems to support that the purpose of social networking sites has nothing to do with meeting new people, but rather maintaining relationships already formed (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). In fact, not one
single respondent in the study claimed to use social networking to meet new people (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). This research is interesting given the larger number of people that can be reached at one time through CMC as opposed to face-to-face communication. One would assume that just in numbers, more communication would take place between strangers in CMC, but that is not the case. Lee (2009) notes that, “Users of social networking sites such as Facebook also have more motives for keeping in touch with old friends and checking out someone they met offline than for meeting new people or strangers” (p. 526). It seems social networking provides a simple way to maintain connections with familiar people in an asynchronous and convenient environment, but is not ideal for meeting new people or forming unfamiliar relationships.

Facebook is a great platform for simply keeping in touch; however, it can be taken one step further, as it is also useful in improving existing relationships. Lee (2009) examined CMC in households and found that adolescents often use online communication to enhance the quality of their friendships (Lee, 2009). Basically, those who communicated more online as well as in face-to-face communication were able to form closer relationships than those who did not participate in CMC. This shows that not only can social networking be important in simply keeping in touch, but it can also provide a universal medium for helping relationships to grow stronger.

Blogs are another example of a CMC medium that can serve a relationship maintenance function, allowing blog-writers to become closer to those they share with online through their blogging (Stefanone & Jang, 2008). This study supports the fact that blogging as a medium serves the purpose of strengthening relationships as well as other forms of CMC.

In addition to keeping in touch and building stronger relationships, Facebook also serves as a great medium when geographical distance is an issue. Different forms of communication are often used mostly to keep in touch with those whom cannot frequently meet in person yet are
still important relationships to maintain (Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2007). This finding makes sense as those who are unable to be together physically are able to stay connected in a way that could not be done with any other communication type. Stefanone and Jang (2008) indicate that, “As distance increases, so does the appeal to use CMC” (p. 135-136). CMC is a technology that can nearly eliminate the proximity differences between those communicating. People who are 1,000 miles apart can communicate exactly the same via Facebook as people who live on the same street. Computer-mediated communication can be used to keep in touch, enhance relationships, and close proximity gaps, but the type of information communicated can be significantly different than the type of information communicated through other media.

Studies show that Facebook is utilized more frequently for brief exchanges and trivial information, and is not often chosen for the communication of emotional content (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). It seems that people are using social networking to stay close in terms of relationships; however the content of the communication taking place via social networking is not as personal as the content that comes across in face-to-face communication or communication over the telephone. One reason for this may be that social networking reaches so many people at one time. This is much different than one-on-one interaction in which people may feel more comfortable sharing intimate information. Stefanone and Jang (2008) do point out that in blogging, the tendency to self-disclose is more evident when the blogger has stronger ties with those reading the blog. However, they also point out that in one study, “More than 35% of bloggers reported getting into some kind of trouble as a result of their posts” (Stefanone & Jang 2008, p. 137). These findings point to the emergence of self-censoring to keep out of trouble on social networking sites, such as Facebook, especially when family is involved.
After knowing why CMC is used and what information is communicated, the next important aspect to look at is what it does to other forms of communication. One would think that more time spent on CMC would lead to less time spent communicating in other ways; however, the research does not seem to support this fully. One study did find that for adolescents, time spent communicating with friends online was negatively correlated with time spent interacting with parents, but that the quality of the parent-child relationship was not strengthened or weakened any as a result (Lee, 2009). Also, interesting to point out is the fact that the time lost interacting with parents that was found was very minimal while face-to-face time spent with friends was neither increased nor decreased (Lee, 2009).

The negative correlation in time spent with parents can be explained by the fact that adolescents usually communicate online with friends at home, during the same time they would normally be spending with family. In other words, if the children were grown up, and moved out of the house, this negative correlation would likely not exist. The study by Kim et al. (2007) found that five different media used to facilitate relational communication (face-to-face, email, telephone, instant messaging, and CMC) are not interchangeable, and each exist to serve a different function. This means that one medium cannot simply replace another, but that they all work in their own unique ways to enhance communication overall. Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004) even go a step further in their findings to say that frequent conversations via electronic instant messaging actually encourage the desire to meet more face-to-face. This supports the research indicating that CMC works with other forms of communication rather than in place of other forms of communication, further evolving communication practices.

Experience-Based Perspectives
Through interviewing three generations of the same family, I hoped to discover what types of effects the use of Facebook has on family communication in particular. I chose to interview a family in which all three generations are in fact Facebook users, and who use Facebook on an ongoing basis. I asked the family members questions about how they use Facebook to communicate with each other, and what it means in context to their other forms of communication. I was interested in discovering how real life family impressions compared and contrasted to the research done on CMC. After all three interviews, some major themes developed quite clearly. The interview questions that I asked of each family member can be found in the appendix.

The three family members that I chose to interview included a male in his early twenties, a female in her late forties and a female in her late sixties. The two females, who are a mother and daughter, are both located in the same area. The male, son and grandson to the two females, is in the Navy, and after an accident that nearly took off his arm, he is constantly back and forth between his hometown and Bethesda, Maryland having corrective surgeries done. His mom is sometimes able to accompany him in Maryland, but more often than not, she is home with the rest of her family.

The interviews revealed first that Facebook brings families closer together. For the oldest generation, this theme wasn’t as prominent (more for the pure fact that she wasn’t as familiar with all the facets of Facebook), but for the younger two generations, this theme emerged at full force. One piece that all three generations agreed upon is that Facebook is absolutely helpful to feel close to family members when they geographically cannot be close. Neither family member admitted to Facebook “replacing” other forms of communication (such as phone or face-to-face), but instead each stated that it simply adds another dimension to their communication. It was also
mentioned that through the use of pictures on Facebook, it is easy to feel a sense of connection to family members who are not physically close. The pictures along with daily status updates, allow them to feel like they are together rather than hundreds of miles apart.

The second theme that emerged from my interviews is that Facebook does increase communication, but the type of communication that results vastly differs from other types of communication. Each family member concluded that they communicate more by using Facebook, and that their other forms of communication are not really affected. However, the way they communicate on Facebook is not the way they communicate over the phone or in person. They all admitted to using Facebook for superficial, every day interactions, but important in-depth conversations require at least a telephone. The oldest generation claimed that she doesn’t say much on Facebook because it is easier for her to talk on the phone than to figure out how to chat or post a comment on someone’s wall. She stated “I am definitely less communicative on Facebook, not because I am monitoring what I say, but because I can’t figure out how to use it.” All three generations agreed that Facebook is great to see what people are up to and give a quick hello, but the truly important communication requires other outlets.

The third theme that emerged from my interviews is that impression management is important when using Facebook to communicate with family. The youngest family member admitted to posting outrageous posts in the past along with crazy pictures from wild drunken nights, but that his family’s recent presence on Facebook has changed that. “I guess I haven’t changed my entire Facebook personality, but I have definitely toned it down.” I found this to be the case with the middle generation as well, although she was more reluctant to admit it. She mentioned that Facebook has helped her come across very old friends from high school and college, and that when communicating with them, she does not act like the person they once
knew, and that if she met up with them one night at a bar, her communication would be completely different. “I guess part of that may be because my kids can see things that I say, and so I communicate as the person I am today rather than the person I was back in college.” The older generation didn’t have as much to say on this topic, but she said that if she had more of a Facebook identity, she would probably use her impression management in the same way as her daughter. This shows that the personalities people portray on Facebook may not be a true representation of who they are.

The final theme that emerged from my interviews is that Facebook allows different generations to all be active in the technology age. All three generations like being on Facebook, even the oldest, who sometimes has a harder time using it. For the youngest generation, Facebook is something that feels natural, and is just a part of everyday life. It is newer to the older generations, but they are able to use it, and in doing so they don’t feel left out. They had mentioned that they used to hear all of the younger generations in their family talk about Facebook, and know things about each other because they saw it on Facebook. In these conversations, they just didn’t have a clue, and felt completely excluded. They both admitted to being somewhat lost when they first got on Facebook, but then becoming more familiar with it in time. It seems that in joining everyone else, they were able to learn something new, and feel like a real part of the technology age.

**Discussion, Implications, and Applications**

The research studies seem to match the information that I was able to find through conducting my interviews exactly. Both present the same basic themes, and although the research isn’t fully focused on family communication, the findings apply just the same. The motives, information communicated, and the implications on other communication through CMC
seem to match up perfectly. The one extra theme that emerged from the interviews was the sense of unity and technological advancement that Facebook is able to bring to the generations.

First, the reasons why people use computer-mediated communication that emerged in the research were backed up in the interviews. Studies show that maintaining relationships, building stronger relationships, and overcoming geographical distances are main reasons for CMC use. The interviews support this in the fact that all three family members admitted to Facebook bringing them closer together, and also practically eliminating the proximity between them. This greatly benefits families, especially those in the military. Even when a mother cannot be right there with her son, she can see his status updates as soon as they happen, while also seeing any pictures he posts. This allows her to feel a sense of connection with her child despite the distance. It also allows these family members to keep in touch with everyone at once, as opposed to a phone call, which can only reach connect two at a time. Hu et al. (2004), after the findings of their study on instant messaging among college students, recommend that parents learn the new technology in order to maintain close relationships with their children once they are away in college. The fact that Facebook is so accessible and readily available to anyone really makes it a great asset when loved ones cannot be close geographically.

Second, the type of information communicated through CMC is very different than that found in other types of communication. The interviews also back up the research fully in this category. The studies found that social networking is used to communicate less private information, and all three generations admitted to the same thing. The interviews were able to provide me with a deeper understanding of this concept, showing me that impression management is central. Perceptions and judgments come into play, and with so many people having access to see the information on Facebook, it is important to be careful with what is put
out there in the cyber world. It seems that Facebook is a great medium to use to grow closer to others; however, the information being communicated through the medium is not the most intimate information.

Lastly, the implications that CMC has on other forms of communication came as a bit of a surprise to me, as the research and interviews both revealed the same findings. Even as time using Facebook increases, and the number of users increase, there is not a huge affect on other means of communication. Coyle and Vaughn (2008) note that “Social networking may be convenient for retaining contact when time and distance are issues, but it does not replace voice calls and face-to-face communication” (p. 15). Thus, Facebook is used to simply fill in the gaps in communication without replacing it in any other form. The interviews supported these findings, stating that Facebook is nice for superficial conversations, and seeing what people are up to, but that it is not a substitute for all types of relational communication.

It is interesting that the interviews of three generations provided the same information as the research suggests. I assumed that some contradictions would surface through real-life examples, but that was not the case. The interviews did provide the opportunity to dive deeper into actual family communication issues, and provide real-life explanations, but none of the information offered differed any from the research. This information, I feel, could be of the most use to families who are facing geographical constraints.

Whether a child has just gone off to college, or three sisters are spread out over three different states, distance is a factor that impacts many families. The previous findings are useful for these families because they provide an understanding of the importance of Facebook as well as how Facebook is used. Families should know that Facebook is a great medium to use to feel a closer connection to family members. They should also know that Facebook is simply a
supplemental form of communication, and should not replace any other type of communication that typically takes place. The final piece of information that families should keep in mind about communication via Facebook is that they shouldn’t expect it to be a medium to communicate ultra personal or intimate information, and that self-monitoring is a factor. If parents are expecting to use Facebook to get to know their child better by what is posted on Facebook, they may not be getting the true impression of their child. It is important that families use Facebook properly to keep in touch, and not for other reasons that may negatively impact relationships.

It is also fascinating to see that Facebook allows all generations to feel included and involved. Three generations, with such large gaps in age, having something in common allows them to connect deeper, and strengthen their relationships with each other. Not only is everyone brought closer together, but learning something new is also a positive aspect. Learning a new skill can help with confidence, and abilities. Facebook spanning over three generations is absolutely an encouraging thing to see, and it is great for increased communication amongst the family. It is a common link bringing everyone together.

The only negative aspect that I found emerge is the concept of self-monitoring. The youngest generation had been using Facebook the longest, and recently had changed the way he represents himself. It makes me curious as to whether younger generations will look towards other means of social networking after Facebook is flooded with their older generations of family. If someone cannot truly be themselves through it, how will it last? It also surprised me a little bit to find this theme (of course, not a prevalent, but still existent) come from the older generations. Hearing the explanation, it completely made sense to me. A mother doesn’t want her son to hear about her crazy days in college, she wants to be known as the mother she is now.
This just brings about limitations of the use of Facebook for people, and by not being themselves; they may seek a different medium to use where they can in fact be themselves.

Overall, this research has provided me with a deeper understanding of social networking in family relationships, and I will apply what I have found in my own family communication. I now realize that my family can get to know me better, and feel a greater sense of closeness to me just by being my friend on Facebook. This is an impressive finding for me as I am usually very busy, and have little time to meet up with or schedule a phone call with my extended family. Knowing that I can keep in touch in an asynchronous way that is easy and convenient, and is also healthy for my family relationships is a huge relief. It is also good to know that Facebook should never replace other types of communication, and that I should not ever solely rely on Facebook to be the only communication measure with my family. Through this research, I have learned what Facebook means in communication, and what benefits it is able to provide. I will take this information with me, and apply it to my own life from here on out.

**Conclusion**

Technology is continually expanding family communication. The influence of CMC on families cannot be denied. Computers can be found nearly everywhere these days, in homes, business, and schools. CMC is not going away, and exploring it uses, functions, and meanings in the family with other forms of communication may proffer a greater understanding of family relationships. Every family should be fully aware of the findings that Facebook is available as a medium to help build closer relationships, and also be aware that Facebook communicates different information than other media, but does not take the place of other media. This information expands the knowledge of Facebook’s potential and provides deeper understanding to family communication practices and the influence of new communication technologies.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions

1. How does using Facebook affect your communication with your family? Do you communicate more with those on Facebook than those who are not on Facebook?

2. What differences came about when you started communicating with family through Facebook? Did you notice less face-to-face interaction, more face-to-face interaction, or the same amount? Have the changes been positive or negative?

3. How does the presence of family on Facebook affect your communication on Facebook? Do you monitor what you say more? Are you truly able to be yourself?

4. How do you control your impression management while communicating on Facebook in regards to your family? Do they play a role in your impression management or are they unimportant?

5. What are the differences in the way you communicate with your family on Facebook as opposed to the way you communicate with them through other means (phone, face-to-face, etc.)? Which is your preferred method of communication?

6. How has the use of Facebook influenced the closeness between you and your family members? Does Facebook bring you closer together or does it interfere with your other communication?