

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

Human Communication and Theatre Faculty
Research

Human Communication and Theatre

Fall 2009

Relational Maintenance Strategies on Facebook

Erin M. Bryant

Trinity University, ebryant@trinity.edu

Jennifer Marmo

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/hct_faculty



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Bryant, E. M., & Marmo, J. (2009). Relational maintenance strategies on Facebook. *Kentucky Journal Of Communication*, 28(2), 129-150.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Human Communication and Theatre at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Communication and Theatre Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Relational Maintenance Strategies on Facebook

Erin M. Bryant and Jennifer Marmo

This study explored how college students utilize the social networking site Facebook to maintain relationships. Focus group data was analyzed to develop a list of 58 Facebook relational maintenance strategies. Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace's (1993) relational maintenance typology was used to organize Facebook relational maintenance strategies. A new category was created to represent a popular relational maintenance strategy on Facebook: surveillance. This study also examined how maintenance strategies vary in different Facebook relationships; close friends, casual friends, acquaintances, romantic partners, and outsiders (e.g. parents, bosses, teachers). Participants suggested Facebook is an adequate stand-alone tool to maintain casual or acquaintance relationships, yet cannot convey enough intimacy to maintain close relationships. Participants expected close friends and romantic partners to put forth extra effort to maintain relationships through additional communication media such as text messaging, phone calls, and face-to-face interaction.

Changing life circumstances impact relationship patterns throughout the entire lifespan, particularly in young adults. Many college students are physically separated from their family for the first time and must form a new social support network comprised primarily of friends. Thirty-six percent of college students report their most intimate relational partner is a friend (Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto, 1989), yet most struggle to maintain their high school friendships once in college (Milardo, Johnson, & Huston, 1983). With the opportunity to develop new social networks and more mature romantic relationships, high school friendships experience decreased satisfaction, commitment, rewards, and investments with increased costs and alternatives (Oswald & Clark, 2003). Many students regret the deterioration of high school friendships and wish they had exerted more effort to maintain these relationships (Rose, 1984).

The Internet's ability to aid in the maintenance of relationships is well-established (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2008; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield,

Erin M. Bryant and Jennifer Marmo are Ph.D. students in the Hugh Downs School of Communication at Arizona State University.

& Lampe, 2006; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become immensely popular Internet destinations. As of November 2009, Facebook possessed more than 300 million active users (Facebook.com) and was the Internet's second most trafficked website (Alexa.com). The site is particularly popular among young adults, with an 85% membership rate in U.S. colleges.

Facebook enables users to communicate with a large number of geographically dispersed friends, and likely plays an important role in young adults' relational communication. In fact, Walther and Ramirez (2009) assert, "the greatest utility of social networking systems has yet to be explored. These systems provide a dramatically new way to enact *relational maintenance*" (p. 302). In-depth research is necessary to determine how social networking sites are utilized to maintain various types of relationships. Hence, the present study explores how college students use Facebook for relational maintenance purposes. Additionally, it seeks to understand if college students use different maintenance strategies for various types of Facebook relationships.

Review of Literature

Importance of Relationships

Social relationships are a fundamental aspect of the human condition and serve many important functions. Friendships are the most prevalent type of relationship (Blieszner & Adams, 1992) and are imperative to healthy cognitive, emotional, and social development (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Friends help individuals develop new skills and provide a sense of support, care, companionship, emotional acceptance, connectedness, inclusion, affiliation, satisfaction, and belonging (Burleson & Samter, 1994). Friendships also provide both utilitarian benefits (helping each other achieve goals) and self-reverent benefits (affirmation of one's identity, uniqueness, and self-worth; Wright, 1984). Similarly, romantic relationships can lead to happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), mental and emotional well-being (Guerrero, 2000), and physical well-being (Floyd, Hesse, & Haynes, 2007). It is therefore tremendously beneficial for individuals to maintain a number of different relationship partners.

Types of Relationships

Individuals organize their social relationships in many different ways. Casual relationships exist between people who are in the early stages of relationship

development (Hays, 1989). Casual relationship partners limit their discussion to factual and superficial topics and do not typically share intimate information (Berger & Roloff, 1982). Despite their superficial and unstable nature, casual friendships can be very beneficial because they provide increased social capital and can be called upon when an individual needs help or advice (Boase et al., 2008).

Individuals also maintain a small number of close relationship partners including family members, romantic partners, and close friends. Close relationships involve frequent voluntary interaction and high levels of self-disclosure, intimacy, involvement, and interdependence (Boase et al., 2008; Sillars & Scott, 1983). Close relationship partners are placed in a position of esteem and significantly impact each other's lives (Kelley et al., 1983). For example, romantic partners often exhibit high levels of both emotional and sexual intimacy and usually work hard to maintain their relationship (Dainton, Zelle, & Langan, 2003; Fehr, 1996; Canary et al., 1993). Similarly, close friends report more interaction and provide more emotional and informational benefits than causal friends (Boase et al., 2008; Hays, 1989). Close friends also report being more affectionate and engaging in more maintenance behaviors than casual friends (Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004; Rose & Serafica, 1986).

Confusion can occur because some people consider their casual relationships to be friends, whereas others reserve the term friend for close relationships. The lack of clear relational boundaries can be difficult for people attempting to negotiate a social world organized around different relationships, particularly in an online setting such as Facebook. Accordingly, there is a need to explore how people describe various relationship partners on Facebook. This is especially important because the strategies used to maintain relationships should differ depending on the type and nature of the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Relational Maintenance

Interpersonal communication scholars have developed numerous conceptualizations of relational maintenance. Approaches differ in their exact focus; however, basic commonalities exist, particularly the notion that relational maintenance is a dynamic process that requires persistent communication between relational partners (Dindia, 2003). The relational maintenance process involves performing symbolic behaviors that communicate a person's desire to continue a relationship, with the symbolic behaviors performed with the goal of maintaining relationships commonly referred to as maintenance strategies.

Stafford and Canary's (1991) frequently cited study describes five maintenance strategies in romantic relationships: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks. In an attempt to inductively discover which maintenance strategies were salient across other forms of relationships, Canary et al., (1993) asked college students to describe how they maintain three different personal relationships. This study concludes a list of ten strategies: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, shared tasks, joint activities, cards, letters, and calls, avoidance, antisocial behavior, and humor. Positivity involves attempts to make interactions pleasant, such as being cheerful and nice or doing favors. Openness involves self-disclosure, direct discussion of conflict, and meta-relational communication. Assurances provide covert and overt declarations of supportiveness, comfort, need, satisfaction, and overt expressions of affection. Relying on friends and family are social networks. Attempts at performing routine tasks together are shared tasks, whereas choosing to spend leisure time together is joint activities. The cards, letters, and calls strategy addresses mediated channels through which communication is preserved. Avoidance strategies include evasion of a partner or topic, and antisocial strategies refer to committing unfriendly behaviors (both generally preventing the escalation of a relationship). Finally, humor involves using jokes and sarcasm to maintain a relationship. These ten strategies provide a typology of relational maintenance strategies performed in everyday interaction.

Research has sought to understand how relational maintenance strategies apply to online communication. For example, instant messenger (IM) is used to maintain geographically close relationships (Schianno et al., 2002) and long-distance relationships (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). College students report that emailing and IMing with friends helps preserve feelings of intimacy and closeness (Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006). In fact, the use of online communication is positively correlated to the closeness of friendship (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Despite the use of online communication, many young adults struggle to maintain their high school best friends upon starting college. High school best friends who survive the transition to college report engaging in more maintenance behaviors—positivity, supportiveness, self-disclosure, and interaction—than those that do not survive (Oswald & Clark, 2003).

Although research exists regarding Internet relational maintenance strategies, the Internet's second most popular site, Facebook, remains under-explored. Accordingly, a need exists to examine how young adults perform relationship maintenance strategies on Facebook.

Facebook: A Social Networking Site

One of the most groundbreaking communication trends to emerge in recent years is the widespread use of social networking sites. SNSs are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison, 2007). The most popular SNS, Facebook, allows members to build profiles featuring their interests, activities, jobs, relationship status, and favorite entertainment. In addition, members can display their social connections by joining online networks and designating other users as “friends.” Users can then post pictures and communicate with their “friends” by leaving messages on each other’s profiles.

Since its creation in 2004, Facebook has found groundbreaking usage patterns among college students. Although Facebook cites its membership at 85%, studies have shown undergraduate participation levels to be 95.5% (Lampe et al., 2006), 94% (Ellison et. al., 2006), 90% (Bryant, 2008; Stutzman, 2006). In addition to maintaining astronomically high membership rates among college students, Facebook also appears to be a regular component in college students’ day-to-day lives (Bryant, 2008). Clearly, a need exists to understand the intricacies of relational maintenance strategies on Facebook. With this in mind, the current study will explore the following questions:

RQ1: What relational maintenance behaviors are performed on Facebook?

RQ2: What relationship types comprise college students’ Facebook “friends” list?

RQ3: How do relational maintenance strategies on Facebook differ across various relationship forms?

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited from lower division communication courses at a large Southwest university. The sample consisted of 44 students (23 men and 21 women) ranging from 19 to 24 years of age ($M = 20.2$ years). Participants described themselves as Caucasian ($n = 34$), Asian/Pacific Islander ($n = 3$), Hispanic ($n = 1$), Native American ($n = 1$), and “other” ($n = 5$). On average, participants reported

spending 38.4 minutes per day on Facebook and possessed more than 200 Facebook friends. All study procedures received approval from the university's Office of Research Integrity and Assurance to ensure the protection of participants.

Data was collected via six focus groups (two all-male, two all-female, and two mixed-sex groups) and provided theoretical saturation in which no new substantive material surfaced in the final group. The composition of groups was manipulated to provide multiple environments that might impact participants' willingness to express their feelings regarding Facebook. This was an important precaution because focus groups are known to produce a *cascading effect* in which each comment stimulates further ideas and directs group discussion (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Same-sex and mixed-sex groups did not, however, demonstrate any noticeable differences. Focus groups were conducted at an on-campus location and lasted 45-60 minutes. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety by the researchers to produce 83 pages of single-spaced data.

A semi-structured protocol was used to ensure focus groups discussed a similar set of questions, yet provide flexibility for participants to spontaneously direct the flow of conversation based on their unique experiences and group synergy (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Discussion prompts included, "Why do you use Facebook?", "Who are you 'friends' with on Facebook?", "How do you use Facebook to maintain your relationships?", and "Do you use Facebook differently when communicating with different friends?" Follow-up questions were used as necessary to probe answers and direct discussion.

Data Analysis

Relational Maintenance Strategies on Facebook

RQ1 asked how college students perform relational maintenance behaviors on Facebook. To examine this question, focus group data was concurrently coded to produce an exhaustive list of 98 Facebook uses that emerged in focus groups. Uses that did not deal with relational maintenance were then removed from this list (e.g. boredom, procrastination, relationship formation, and relationship termination). The resulting list of 58 relational maintenance Facebook uses (See Table 1) heavily reflected the traditional categories of relational maintenance behaviors and was therefore coded using Canary et al.'s (1993) typology of relational maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, shared tasks, joint activities, cards, letters and calls, avoidance, antisocial, and humor).

*Table 1: Relational Maintenance Strategies on Facebook***Positivity**

- Posting on a friend's wall to make him/her feel special
- Sending cheerful messages as a fun way to say you are thinking of a friend
- Sending motivational comments to friends that are preparing for important events
- Using Facebook's birthday reminders so you remember to wish a friend happy birthday
- Responding to friends' messages in a timely manner even if you never initiate contact
- Using Facebook as non-stressful way to flirt with romantic interests

Openness

- Self-Disclosure
 - Using your profile to share good or bad news with friends
 - Updating your status and profile so friends stay up-to-date on your life
 - Sharing poetry or personal notes you wrote
- Maintaining Non-Intimate Communication
 - Keeping in touch with friends that live far away by messaging each other
 - Looking at a friend's profile to find contact information such as their phone number
 - Making a group to obtain friends' phone numbers when you lose or break your phone

Assurance Strategies

- Providing Assurances
 - Congratulating friends when they post exciting news
 - Offering support when a friend posts that something bad has happened
 - Listing your best friends as "top friends" so they know they are special
 - Posting "I love you" or similar remarks on your romantic partner's wall
 - Using your relationship status to communicate commitment to your romantic partner
- Seeking Assurances
 - Updating your status to provoke friends into talking to you
 - Posting emotional information (e.g. that you are sad or worried) to seek social support

Social Networks Strategies

- Adding the friends of a new romantic partner to strengthen your shared network
 - Looking up a friend's romantic interest to learn more about them
 - Looking up people that share mutual friends
 - Using Facebook to negotiate a new social network
-

Shared Tasks Strategies

- Conducting group projects over Facebook chat or messages
 - Coordinating meetings for class events, study groups, or group presentations for work
-

Joint Activities Strategies

- Commenting on friends' pictures to reflect on your shared memory of the event
 - Posting pictures so your friends can share your experiences even if they were not there
 - Participating in message threads so a group of friends can have a joint conversation
 - Using Facebook to organize and invite friends to parties and other large social events
 - Using Facebook to arrange real life encounters with your friends
-

Cards, Letters, and Calls (Communication Channel) Strategies

- Using chat to have full conversations in real time
 - Using a private message to send sensitive information you do not want everyone to see
 - Using public messages like the wall or status when you want your comment to be public
 - Using Facebook to avoid having to text message or call a friend
-

Avoidance Strategies

- Using Facebook to avoid giving out personal information to acquaintances
 - Purposely not responding to message or comment you are sent
 - Logging off when someone you do not want to talk to sends a chat request
 - Adding someone under a limited profile setting so they cannot see your full profile
-

Antisocial Strategies

- Making fun of the profiles of people you do not like on Facebook
 - Posting picture or comments that you know will start drama or cause problems
 - Using Facebook to seek revenge on someone who you are mad at
 - Posting a fake relationship to dissuade undesired romantic attention
 - Noticing it is someone's birthday and choosing not to post a happy birthday comment
-

- Responding to long or intimate message in an inequitably short or non-intimate manner
- Posting annoying or offensive comments and pictures

Humor

- Using applications to play games and joke with friends (sending them a drink, etc)
- Posting a funny status to make your friends laugh
- Poking or Superpoking your friends (i.e. throwing a sheep at them)
- Posting funny videos or news articles to share with your friends
- Making up a humorous fake story about how you know a friend (e.g. we hooked up in 1957)
- Listing yourself as in a romantic relationship with a friend as a joke

Surveillance

- Scrolling through the Newsfeed to look at new updates
- Tracking your friends' profiles to see who they are talking to and about what
- Using Facebook because if you don't you will be left out of the information loop
- Facebook stalking- reading the profiles of friends and non-friends in your network
- Looking at your acquaintances' profiles without commenting or talking to them
- Parents or authorities using Facebook to monitor their children
- Using Facebook to screen potential dates and background check new social contacts

Participants also reported using Facebook to “keep track of friends,” “Facebook stalk people,” and “monitor changes to other people’s pictures and walls.” These surveillance uses were said to serve a relational maintenance function by allowing participants to “see what people are doing without talking to them.” One participant explained, “most of the time I don’t actually talk to people on Facebook. But I can just keep track of what everyone is doing, so I feel like I’m more connected with people and know when important things are happening with them.” In fact, another participant joined Facebook because she was “tired of feeling out of the loop” because she didn’t know about the life updates friends conveyed through Facebook. Hence, the *surveillance* maintenance strategy was created to describe how monitoring friends’ Facebook profiles maintains a sense of connection and knowledge about life events.

A Breakdown of Facebook “Friendship”: Relationship Types on Facebook

Research Question 2 asked what forms of relationships exist on Facebook. Analysis revealed that Facebook “friend” lists are comprised of five distinct relationship categories: close friends, casual friends, acquaintances, romantic partners and interests, and outsiders (see Table 2).

Research Question 3 explored how Facebook relational maintenance strategies differ across relationship forms. Participants clearly indicated that “not all Facebook friends are equal.” One participant pointed out “you have your really close friends and your acquaintance friends, and they still have that position whether there are categories on Facebook or not.” Facebook interaction was said to be contingent on relationship type.

Participants differed, however, in their opinions of how Facebook should be used to maintain various relationships. One student explained he uses Facebook, “for people I want to get in touch with. Like my closer friends instead of having to call them... if you’re planning on calling them anyway all you have to do is just chat with them or wall post.” Another student responded, “I’m just the opposite. I write to people that I haven’t talked to in a while because most likely I’m not going to call them. With my close friends, I’m probably texting them or calling them at some point during the day.” Another participant summarized:

I think it makes it easy to maintain a lot of different relationships. It’s really easy and attainable. But on the flip side I think it can be kinda used as a crutch in relationships... You can have a lot more shallow relationships... but it can also take away from growing deeper in relationships with certain people.

Therefore different roles emerged regarding the ways Facebook users maintain different forms of relationships on the site.

Close Friends

Participants explained that most of their offline close friends are also their Facebook friends; however, this category accounts for only a small portion of their Facebook friends. Nearly all participants agreed that Facebook is a useful tool to maintain long-distance close friendships. One participant explained, "It's almost like a tool for me to keep the relationship up, whether I have time to hang out with them or make a phone call or not. It's easy to show someone you care on your own time, and they can just get back to you when they want."

Another added that her close friends live far away, but "if a friend gets a boyfriend, I want to know about it and see what he looks like... I want to call but it's challenging with time zones." Although Facebook was said to help maintain long-distance close friendships, many participants indicated this relationship type also requires interaction outside of Facebook. One participant explained that with her close friends, "I don't look at their profiles as much as I do with people that are acquaintances. Because with my close friends I see them all the time and I hang out with them on the weekends and I know what they are doing so I don't have to go to their Facebook."

In fact, a common sentiment was that close friends should make the extra effort to call each other on the phone or meet in person. Participants also strongly agreed that close friends should call or text message each other on their birthdays. One participant noted, "If it's someone I know at least pretty well I could write 'Happy Birthday' on their wall, or if I didn't know them very well I wouldn't say anything. Otherwise my good friends I should call or text." Similarly, participants expected their close friends to share important news in person or on the phone before posting it on Facebook for the general public to see. In sum, Facebook was said to help maintain everyday communication between close friends, "but if it's something important, I'm not going to talk to them on Facebook about it." Facebook therefore aided in the maintenance of close friendships, but only when used in conjunction with more intimate modes of communication.

Casual Friends

Casual friends were described as the network of individuals a person interacts with offline. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that Facebook is an invaluable tool to maintain casual friendships, and is a primary channel to communicate information

Table 2: *Types of Relationships Encompassed as Facebook “Friends”*

	Example Relationship Forms	Exemplary Quotes
Close Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Best friends• Friends you interact with regularly• Close friends that are now long-distance• Siblings and cousins you consider friends	<p>“I have a best friend who went to NAU and I talk to her all the time on Facebook because I don’t get to see her”</p> <p>“With my closer friends... if you’re planning on calling them anyway all you have to do is just chat with them or wall post.”</p>
Casual Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Friends that you interact with on occasion• Friends from high school (not close ones)• Coworkers your age you know well• Class/dorm mates with whom you interact• Friends with whom you had lost contact	<p>“A legitimate friend you probably see all the time.”</p> <p>“With my high school almost everybody I friends with each other if you knew each other in any remote sense. It’s like almost out of obligation like oh I know them and we were on okay terms so I have to add them.”</p>
Acquaintances	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People you met once socially• Classmates with whom you do not interact• Online course classmates• People living in your dorm or community with whom you do not interact• People know through a mutual friend.	<p>“An acquaintance you meet at a party and the next thing you know you’re like Facebook friends with them even though you’ve only seen them once or friends you’ve had a class with but you didn’t really hang out with them after.”</p> <p>“There are people you add because they’re in your dorm or part of whatever you’re involved in but you don’t really know them.”</p>

Table 2: *Types of Relationships Encompassed as Facebook "Friends"*

Romantic Partners and Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current romantic partners • Potential romantic interests • Ex-romantic partners 	<p>"You might get a girlfriend so you change your relationship status. Girls get mad if the boyfriend doesn't the next day put that they're in a relationship because they want the public to know and oh god all hell breaks loose."</p>
Outsiders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superiors (teachers, bosses, advisors, etc) • Cross-generation family (e.g. parents, aunts) • People you know but do not like • Current romantic partners' ex partners • Random people you have never met 	<p>"There are people from high school who maybe you didn't get along with and you'll get a friend request from them and you're like why do you want to look at it, you weren't my friend."</p> <p>"My grandpa sent me a friend request on Facebook and I had to add him but I don't want him to see stuff I say on there. Like I keep it grandparent-oriented when I talk to him about college so I don't want him to see Facebook pictures with me drinking."</p>

about offline social events. One participant explained Facebook is “good for more like casual friends. I mean I like talk to my real, good friends in person... but people I probably won’t hear from otherwise, you can just kind of see what they are doing and what’s up with them.”

Facebook relational maintenance strategies were commonly reported between casual friends because individuals knew each other well enough to post messages, pictures and/or comments on the other’s wall without appearing to be strange or intrusive. One participant noted, “I kind of like it when people write on my wall, it kind of makes me feel special... so I write on peoples’ wall when they did something awesome.” Others explained that sending Facebook gifts or poking someone is “a different way to let them know you’re thinking about them and keep connected instead of always sending huge messages.” Similar strategies were suggested to sufficiently maintain casual friendships because intimate conversations were not expected.

Facebook also allowed participants to “keep in touch with old friends you would lose touch with otherwise.” Many participants said they maintain their casual high school friendships entirely via Facebook. Such friendships were even referred to as “obligations” by participants who thought Facebook was great for “talking to people that I just don’t really want to talk to in person, but who I feel like I need to talk to still.”

Acquaintances

Unlike casual friends who share offline interaction, acquaintances may have met each other only once or twice before becoming Facebook friends. Acquaintance relationships were extremely common on Facebook because many participants became Facebook friends with anyone they recognized from a social function or class. One participant explained, “It’s easy to network. Like say you meet someone and they add you. Then it’s like okay, well at least we’ll stay in some contact. So your acquaintances go way up with Facebook.”

Facebook was typically the sole channel of communication between acquaintances; however, participants reported engaging in very few relational maintenance behaviors with these individuals. Acquaintances were instead described as relying on surveillance strategies and “Facebook stalking.” One participant explained “with your close friends you’ll probably write on their walls, but with acquaintances you just look at their updates and pictures without saying anything.” Another added that they read updates about acquaintances, “But I won’t like go up and start commenting on them and write on their pictures if I don’t

know them that well. That would be weird.” In fact, posting on the wall of an acquaintance was said to be “creepy” and “stalkerish” because acquaintances lack the intimacy levels necessary to intrude on each other’s personal space (i.e. their Facebook profile). The only exception to this rule was that Facebook was “the only way I have to get in touch with a lot of like acquaintance-type people because I don’t know their number or email.” Hence, acquaintances should not really interact on Facebook, but, “It’s kind of nice because you know that if you ever wanted to talk to them you could.”

Romantic Partners and Interests

Romantic relationship partners described Facebook behaviors similar to close friends: it is an additional means of communication. Romantic partners said they regularly performed maintenance strategies on Facebook by commenting on their partner’s updates and making public displays of affections (i.e. posting “I love you” or wishing their partner luck on an important test). Facebook was also described as a useful way to monitor a romantic partner’s fidelity. For instance, one participant shared, “My roommate would get mad because her boyfriend was hanging all over girls in pictures or whatever.” Thus, romantic partners should enact relational maintenance by making sure their Facebook profiles reflect their commitment as a couple. Declaring couple status on Facebook was said to be a particularly important romantic maintenance strategy. Participants noted that “listing yourself as in a relationship with someone is a sign of commitment” and, “You know it’s serious when they post it on Facebook. Facebook makes it official.” Facebook relationship status was listed as important because “it’s a big announcement that goes out on everyone’s homepage and everyone sees it and comments and everything.” Still, romantic partners were expected to make an extra effort to interact and maintain their relationship in an offline capacity while also performing Facebook maintenance strategies.

Facebook was also said to be useful in pursuing future romantic interests. Romantic interests included acquaintances or casual friends that a person hopes will develop into a romantic relationship. Participants explained that adding this type of person as a Facebook friend is “a starting point” and a “kind of a subtle, let’s be friends, except not really” strategy. One female participant noted, “It’s scary to give people you don’t know your phone number. Facebook is a little more personal than an email, but not as personal as a phone call.” Facebook could therefore maintain acquaintanceship or casual friendship until a person is ready to pursue a romantic relationship – and flirting such as “poking” may enhance this pursuit.

Outsiders

Participants also reported being Facebook friends with people on a non-voluntary basis. For example, most participants had parents, uncles, grandparents, teachers, and bosses on their list of Facebook friends. Some participants claimed to willingly and openly interact with these individuals on Facebook; however, the majority described them as “outsiders” that “don’t belong on Facebook and don’t belong to be updated on what I am doing all the time like my friends.” One participant explained, “Some psychology teacher friended me after the class. It was really creepy but I didn’t think I could reject him.” Hence, participants felt they had no choice but to accept friend requests from some individuals.

Facebook interaction with “outsiders” came with a special set of rules. One participant explained that outsiders should not use many Facebook features, “Like if a teacher poked me on Facebook, I would definitely be alarmed.” Participants described rarely interacting with outsiders on Facebook, even in intimate relationships such as with parents. Others explained they did “a Facebook make-over” and “deleted bad pictures and cuss words” when their parents or boss became a Facebook friend. Many participants claimed it was necessary to put these relationships on a “limited profile” to ensure they did not have access to pictures and other profile components a college student would not want their family or other authority figures to see. Thus, participants did feel like Facebook was a useful tool to maintain relationships with outsiders; and the limited use of maintenance strategies were aimed as making sure outsiders did not obtain information that would result in a loss of respect.

Discussion

This study provided insight regarding relational maintenance on Facebook. Participants reported interacting with close friends, casual friends, acquaintances, romantic partners, and outsiders (e.g. parents, bosses, teachers). Therefore, the basic “close versus casual” friend dichotomy (e.g. Berger & Roloff, 1982; Hays, 1989) does not adequately describe the diverse number of relationships represented in a person’s list of Facebook friends.

Participants also reported maintaining relationships on Facebook using eleven strategies: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, shared tasks, joint activities, cards, letters and calls, avoidance, antisocial behavior, humor, and surveillance. The addition of the *surveillance* strategy to Canary et al.’s (1993) relational maintenance typology was an important contribution of the present study. Participants jokingly referred to surveillance as “Facebook stalking,” however

this term downplays the fact that Facebook users broadcast information with the intention of being monitored (Westlake, 2008) and thus would not be considered stalking in most scholarly contexts. Existing research described surveillance as a prominent Facebook use (Bryant, 2008; Lampe et al., 2006) yet viewed it as an information-seeking strategy (rather than a maintenance one). Maintaining relationships without one-on-one communication has implications for relational maintenance research because it questions the assumption that communication behaviors are aimed at a particular individual. Perhaps surveillance behaviors on social networking sites enable a unique form of computer-mediated mass relational maintenance.

Facebook users also reported using the site differently depending on the type of relationship. Although contradictions emerged, participants suggested Facebook was a sufficient tool to maintain a large number of acquaintances and casual relationships via surveillance and perhaps an occasional comment. Conversely, participants reported that Facebook was simply one tool they employed to maintain close friendships and romantic relationships. Close relationships also required frequent interaction via phone calls, text messages, and face-to-face communication. These findings lend support to Chan & Cheng's (2004) claim that online relationships are maintained via similar frequency and interaction as offline relationships.

The most basic definition of relational maintenance assumes that a relationship can only exist to the extent that there is communication between partners (Dindia, 2003). With this understanding, new communication technologies such as social networking sites should allow users to maintain larger and more complex social networks (Boase et al., 2006; Donath & boyd, 2004). Individuals can also use technology to avoid falling out of contact with old friends. For example, the term dormant friendship has been used in reference to friends who value their joint history yet have essentially lost contact (Rawlins, 1994). Dormant friendships are not entirely dead, however. They exist primarily in memories rather than continued communication. The present study suggests that Facebook makes it easy to maintain a large number of relationships via the dissemination and surveillance of mass Facebook posts concerning each other's lives. The mere act of designating someone as a Facebook friend maintains a relationship to the extent that communication lines remain open, and might therefore prevent a relationship from falling into the dormant category. An important question becomes whether a relationship maintained entirely via mass posting and surveillance on Facebook can actually be considered maintained.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Additional research is necessary to further test the reliability of the relational maintenance strategies presented in this study. The addition of *surveillance* as a potential online relational maintenance strategy is particularly worthy of study in the context of social networking sites and other forms of computer-mediated communication. Questions should be asked such as: Do individuals consider surveillance a means of maintaining relationships? Can surveillance adequately maintain relationships without direct communication between partners? Would a Facebook friend maintained entirely through surveillance actually be willing to provide social support if called upon?

Future research might also examine Facebook from a downward communication perspective. Several students discussed how “outsiders” such as organization advisors, employers, and sports coaches required them to have Facebook accounts as a means of communication and monitoring their non-school activities. As a potentially unique form of surveillance, the idea of downward surveillance should be examined.

Conclusions

Walther and Ramirez (2009) asserted “the role of technologies in the preservation, strengthening, reestablishing, or loosening of established bonds will occupy a growing focus in research on CMC and relationships in the near future” (p. 302). The present study expanded on the preservation of relationship by shedding light on the ways traditional relational maintenance strategies are being augmented to maintain relationships in the online setting of Facebook. Such endeavors are important given the need to understand how relational communication is enacted using new communication technology. Much can be gained by continuing to explore the numerous technological advancements that might impact relational communication strategies.

An earlier version of this manuscript was accepted for presentation at the Interpersonal Communication Division of the 2009 National Communication Association Annual Convention in Chicago, IL. The authors would like to thank Dr. Daniel J. Canary for his insight regarding earlier drafts of this paper.

The Kentucky Journal of Communication, Volume 28, No. 2, Fall 2009

References

- Alexa.com. The top 500 sites on the web. Retrieved on November 1, 2009, from: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 497-529.
- Berger, C. R., & Roloff, M. E. (1982). Thinking about friends and lovers. In M. E. Roloff & C. R. Berger (Eds.), *Social cognition and communication* (pp. 151-192). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Berscheid, E., Snyder, M., & Omoto, A. (1989). The relationship closeness inventory: Assessing the closeness of interpersonal relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 792-807.
- Blieszer, R., & Adams, R. G. (1992). *Adult Friendship*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Boase, J., Horrigan, J. B., Wellman, D., Rainie, L. (January 2006). *The strength of Internet ties*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- boyd, d. m. (2004). Friendster and publicly articulated social networking. Paper presented at CHI 2004. Vienna, Austria. April 24-29.
- boyd, d., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210-230.
- Bryant, E. M. (2008). Uses and gratifications of Facebook: An exploration of Facebook use by college students. Paper presented at the 2008 NCA annual convention in San Diego, CA, November 20-24.
- Burleson, B. R., & Samter, W. (1994). A social skills approach to relationship maintenance. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (pp. 61-90). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Canary, D. J., Stafford, L., Hause, K. S., & Wallace, L. A. (1993). An inductive analysis of relational maintenance strategies: Comparisons among lovers, relatives, friends, and others. *Communication Research Reports*, 10, 5-14.
- Chan, D. K. S., & Cheng, G. H. L. (2004). A comparison of offline and online friendship qualities at different stages of relationship development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 305-320.
- Cummings, J. M., Lee, J. B., & Kraut, R. E. (2006). Communication technology and friendship during the transition from high school to college. In R. E. Kraut, M. Brynin, & S. Kiesler (Eds.) *Computers, phones, and the Internet: Domesticating information technology* (pp. 265-278). N.Y.: Oxford Press.

- Dainton, M., Zelle, E., & Langan, E. (2003). Maintaining friendships throughout the lifespan. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication* (pp. 79–102). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dindia, K. (2003). Definitions and perspectives on relational maintenance communication. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton, M. (Eds). *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 1-28). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Donath, J. & boyd, d. (2004). Public displays of connection. *BT Technology Journal*, 22, 71-82.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook “friends:” Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, 1143-1168.
- Facebook.com. *About Facebook: Press Room*. Retrieved Novmber 2009, from: <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
- Fehr, B. (1996). *Friendships processes*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Floyd, K., Hesse, C., Haynes, M. T. (2007). Human affection exchange: XV. Metabolic and cardiovascular correlates of trait expressed affection. *Communication Quarterly*, 54, 79-94.
- Gross, R. & Acquisti, A. (2005). Information revelation and privacy in online social networks. Paper presented at WPES’05. (pp. 71-80). Virginia, United States.
- Guerrero, L. K. (2000). Intimacy. In D. Levinson, J. Ponzetti, P. Jorgensen (Eds.), *The encyclopedia of human emotions* (pp. 403-409). New York: Macmillan Reference.
- Hays, R. B. (1989). The day-to-day functioning of close versus casual friendships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 6, 21-37.
- Johnson, A. J., Haigh, M. M., Becker, J. A., Craig, E. A., & Wigley, S. (2008). College students’ use of relational management strategies in email in long-distance and geographically close relationships. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 381-404.
- Kelley, H.H., Berscheid, E., Christensen, A., Harvey, J. H., Huston, T. L., Levinger, G., McClinton, E., Peplau, L.A. and Peterson, D.R. (1983). In H.H. Kelley; E. Berscheid; A. Christensen; J.H. Harvey; T.L. Huston; G. Levinger; E. McClintock; L.A. Peplau; and D.R. Peterson (Eds.), *Close Relationships* (pp. 20-67). New York: Freeman.
- Kirkpatrick, D. (2007, May 29). Facebook’s plan to hook up the world. *Fortune*. Retrieved from: <http://money.cnn.com/2007/05/24/technology/facebook.fortune/index.htm>

- Lampe, C. Ellison, N. & Steinfeld, C. (2006). A Face(book) in the crowd: Social searching vs. social browsing. Paper presented at ACM 2006, November 9-11 in Vancouver, Canada.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McKenna, K. Y. & Bargh, J. A. (2000). Plan 9 from cyberspace: The implications of the Internet for personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4), 57-75.
- Milardo, R., Johnson, M. P., & Huston, T. L. (1983). Developing close relationships: Changing patterns of interaction between pair members and social networks. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 964-976.
- Newcomb, A. F., & Bagwell, C. L. (1996). The developmental significance of children's friendship relations. In W. M. Bukowski, A. F., Newcomb, and W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *The company they keep* (pp. 289-321). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Oswald, D. L., & Clark, E. M. (2003). Best friends forever?: High school best friendships and the transition to college. *Personal Relationships*, 10, 187-196.
- Oswald, D. L., Clark, E. M., & Kelly, C. M. (2004). Friendship maintenance: An analysis of individual and dyad behaviors. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23, 413-441.
- Lenhart, A., Rainie, L., Lewis, O. (June 2001). *Teenage life online*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project.
- Rawlins, W. K. (1994). Being there and growing apart: Sustaining friendships during adulthood. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.) *Communication and relational maintenance* (pp. 275-294). San Diego: Academic Press, Inc.
- Rose, S. M. (1984). How friendships end: Patterns among young adults. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1, 267-277.
- Rose, S., & Serafica, F. (1986). Keeping and ending casual, close and best friendships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 3, 275-288.
- Ross, C., Orr, E., Sisic, M., Arseneault, J., Simmering, M., & Orr, R. (2009). Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25, 578-586.
- Schianno, D., Chen, C., Ginsberg, J., Gretarsdottir, U., Huddleston, M., & Issacs, E. (2002). Teen use of messaging media. In *Human Factors in Computing Systems: CHI 2002*, Extended Abstracts. Minneapolis, MN, 594-595.
- Sillars, A. L. & Scott, M. D. (1983). Interpersonal perception between intimates: An integrative review. *Human Communication Research*, 10, 153-176.

- Stafford, L., & Canary, D. J. (1991). Maintenance strategies and romantic relationship type, gender, and relational characteristics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8, 217-242.
- Stutzman, F. (2006). An evaluation of identity-sharing behavior in social network communities. Paper presented at the iDMAa and IMS Code Conference, Oxford, Ohio.
- Tracy, S. J., Lutgen-Sandvik, P., & Alberts, J. K. (2006). Nightmares, demons and slaves: Exploring the painful metaphors of workplace bullying. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 20, 148-185.
- Walther, J. B., & Ramirez, Jr., A. (2009). New technologies and new direction in online relating. In S. Smith, & S. Wilson (Eds.), *New directions in interpersonal communication* (pp. 264-284). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Westlake, E. J. (2008). Friend me if you Facebook: Generation Y and performative surveillance. *The Drama Review*, 52 (4), 21-40.
- Wright, P. H. (1984). Self-referent motivation and the intrinsic quality of friendship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 1, 115-130.
- Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2007). Preadolescents' and adolescents' online communication and their closeness to friends. *Developmental Psychology*, 2, 267-277.