

Friends and Romance Online: Techno-Interaction and Relationships Among College Students

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence of technologically integrated cultural practices among college students in one US University. There has been significant research and popular cultural discourse surrounding the possible consequences of technologically integrated cultural practices among young adults. This project contributes to our understanding of technological impacts on college student culture. Analyzing interviews with 38 participants, I explore how they construct establish and maintain cultural practices and social norms that shape peer interaction and intimate relationships. I discuss the emergence of techno-social, or integrated, cultural norms that impact friendship and dating behavior. I located several distinct practices that contribute to an overall set of social practices that establish a culture of techno-integration in personal relationships: 1) the establishment and maintenance of friendships using social networks; 2) the use of social network profiles as means to collect data on potential friends and romantic partners as part of process of relationship building; 3) technological tools that are utilized to both manage and represent the goals and status of intimate and sexual relationships. These findings help to highlight a technologically integrated social world, in which relationships are navigated using a variety of communication methods.

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In recent history, a proliferation of new communication technologies has begun to reshape the foundation of social interaction as cultural process. For young adults who were born in the midst of the current technological age, these “new” technologies and practices are in fact part of normal everyday social interaction. Yet, in many ways they still represent a departure from, or at least a transformation of, the social practices and cultural ideals of previous generations. The recent changes in the establishment and maintenance of friendships and romantic relationships among young adults have indeed been an area of interest to scholars.

Historically, much scholarly research on technological integration into social environments focused on it as a disruption of, or potential barrier to the establishment of real relationships (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004; Kraut et al., 1998). Yet more recent work has begun to suggest that the inter-textual and multi-model structure of the technology allows for specific social options such as near integration, instant access, centralization, continuous contact and shared imaginaries that foster sense of group solidarity young people (Thomas, 2007). In addition, the integration of technological communication practices into the daily life of young adults has been an area of substantial interest in popular culture (Birkets, 1994; Hampton, et.al., 2009).

To contribute to this work, I created this project in order to better understand the ways in which technology use and relationships are given meaning and how that meaning making shapes the experiences and behaviors of a specific population, those in early adulthood. College students age 18-22, sometimes called digital natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), are on the forefront of the

integration of technological communication into intimate interpersonal relationships. Having grown up with technology in their lives, this age group has a special insight into the impact of technology on relationships and their social constructions will surely shape the near future.

In the following work, I will review the relevant literatures on friendship, romance and peer relations among college students with a particular focus on implications of technological integration into social practices. I will then provide an analysis of the experiences and attitudes of young adults who are enmeshed in a techno-social world in which the use of technological communication tools is a normal and accepted part of peer relationships.

The Relevant Literature

Generally, the focus of research on friendships has emphasized its relevance to children and adolescents. Some research exists on specific groups, such as retirees or the elderly. However research and theorizing on friendship among adults, even adults entering college, has been limited in comparison to that on young children (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Yet many researchers agree that emotional support is one key aspect of establishing the intimacy of friendships. In contrast to earlier theoretical expectations (Moss & Schwebel, 1993) geographic distance isn't as relevant to the closeness or intimacy of friendships as it used to be (Johnson et.al., 2009). A second key aspect to friendships is the importance and relevance of practical support, which is sometimes shaped by geographic closeness.

Further, the context in which friendships are developed shapes the nature and meaning of friendship as a relationship. Further, friendships can also play a significant role in the formation of identity on the individual level (Allan, 1998). This has important implications for college students, since friendships and other interpersonal and intimate relationships that shape identity

are formed within the context of college culture. Thus the rituals and expectations of behavior that are found in college culture impact the formation of the self and can result in long-term changes in individual and community behavior. Such changes are by no means confined to the area of friendship, and dating and sexual relationships have been increasingly impacted by technological developments.

One recent transformation in social behavior and interpersonal relationships of interest to researchers occurs in the realm of sexual and dating behavior. Young single people, age 18-29, generally have fairly active sex lives, often with multiple partners. Taken together with research that claims that sexual relationships are central to college culture (Bogle, 2008), this information suggests that sex and sexuality is an important part of understanding college student culture. Understanding the variation in meaning attached to sexuality both by individuals and by couples (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000) demonstrates the limitations of attempting to universalize the cultural perceptions of love, sex, and relational intimacy. The complexity and diversity of meaning attached to this interdependent set of concepts helps to better understand the role of relationships, both sexual and otherwise, in contemporary culture.

The use of cell phones, texting and Facebook profiles as tools to organize and connect individuals for the purpose of sex is mentioned repeatedly in the research of sexual behavior scholars but has not been fully theorized. To me, one of the most interesting aspects of the “booty-call” model is its dependence on communication technologies to function. The use of cell phones, particularly texting, to arrange sexual encounters as well as engage in friendship work demonstrates the integration of technology into interpersonal relationships. Further, discussions surrounding casual sex and the symbolic legitimation of serious romantic relationships are common on Facebook. The body of literature that explores the idea of communication

technologies as both aids and challenges to the work of intimate friendships and sexual relationships will be the focus of my contributions.

Research Design and Methodology

I established contact with participants and conducted interviews primarily by making announcements of the project in classes from a variety of disciplines. I provided some basic information on the topic of the study and invited students to sign up with their email address for more information if they were interested. I then emailed the students relevant information, including a project description letter and a copy of the consent form. Potential participants were given about a week to consider, then I emailed them again and, if they agree to participate, set up an interview time and date. Further participants were recruited using the “snowball” method. I asked interviewees for recommendations of persons who might participate at the end of the interviews. Participants in the online observation portion of this research project were recruited from among interviewees.

Each of the 7 individuals I “followed” on Facebook gave permission after an interview. For those that agreed to participate in the online observation portion of the study, I sent them a friendship request via Facebook. Each participant had to accept the digital request in order for me to view his or her Facebook postings. Once I was given access to their online environment, I collected data in two ways. First, I kept a log of Facebook Wall postings for each individual, for about 4 months. I also maintained a set of field notes, in which I comment on and describe portions of the postings. The data used here is from the field notes, which does not use names or identifying information. I specifically *do not* use quotations from postings because they might be potentially searchable and thus compromise the privacy of participants. Thus the online

observation is similar to participant observation in a physical setting, in which description of events or actions from field notes is the source of data.

Interpretive analysis

The college students who participated in this study rely on complex techno-social communicative processes to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. Contemporary forms of technologically-mediated communication may include: text messages, Facebook profiles, IM chats, Tweets, wall posts, photo and message tagging, shared online photo albums, YouTube videos, gaming and other technologies. These technologies exist as more than mediums of communication; they function as an environment that rooted in the logic of that techno-social environment. Within this cultural environment participants experienced feelings of connection and intimacy, engaged in interactional social processes, conformed and resisted social norms, in short they participated in genuine and real social interaction and cultural production.

Friends and Friending: Friendship and Support in a Technological World

I want to begin this discussion with a young man I will call Alexander. Alexander is one of the most candid posters that I observed in my time online. He comfortably discussed his experience as a transgendered person undergoing both hormonal and surgical transition. Detailing his experiences with medical personal as well as his own feelings. He also went on to discuss in detail his feelings and experiences about the death of his father.

Today Alexander posted on his wall his feelings about the recent death of his father. There were many, many posts offering sympathy and support. His response might be summarized as a gentle thanks and an acknowledgement of his pain, followed by an “I couldn’t do it without you all.”

He discussed relationships with family members, romantic partners and close friendships. For me, the most extraordinary thing about being Alexander's Facebook friend is the degree to which he considers Facebook a place for intimate communication. The candidness of his Facebook posts is unlike what most of the participants demonstrated and what other researchers have observed (Walker, 2000; Raynes-Goldie, 2010). He regularly indicates his affection for individuals and for his Facebook community as a whole online, and in return, he is flooded with affection and support in turn. None of my other participants put so much of their lives on display, and no one else received the same level of positive reinforcement and support in return.

However, for many of my participants friends and social networks provided individuals with emotional, practical and even informational support. During the college years, which for many are a time of substantial social transformation, intimate friendships and romantic relationships can be both emotionally intense and socially desirable. Intimate relationships, particularly friendship, are important to the success of college students (Friedlander, 2007). Yet, the ability to make and keep friends in the midst of social changes and individual life upheaval is limited. Thus, for many users, Facebook is the primary way in which they keep track of extended social networks, with closer friends and family members contacted via text messaging. Facebook, despite its digital nature, is perceived by many participants as being more stable than other means of staying connected. As Olivia explains, Facebook supplies her with a consistent means to stay in touch.

...because some people... you never know... things happen... people move and, just, things like that. But, like, with Facebook, it's just, like... if you move, you still have your Facebook. You don't have to actually delete it and take it down, whereas, ... you may have to change your number or get a new phone... or you lose your contacts, like, anything can happen. But, like, with Facebook, I just feel like, it's just like one of those... it's like one of those set in stone, things.

For Olivia and others, Facebook is indeed set in stone, in the sense that they and their peers are not willing to disconnect themselves from it. This sense of permanence and consistency plays a role in how college students utilize Facebook. Lynn agrees, noting she keeps in contact with some people via Facebook because “There’re some people, like... with Facebook, that’s, like, one of the permanent things.” The ability to keep track of friends and to get stable and consistent information about them is very important to participants. In fact, the ability to “keep track” or “keep in touch” with extended friend networks was the most often cited reason for having a Facebook account. Keeping in touch is one way in which individuals can affirm and reaffirm their presence within, and connection to, social groups (Blumer, 1969). This is intensified within a techno-social environment due to the way in which Facebook and texting, which are both used by college students as part of the getting to know you process, have become central to making friends. Hallie explains the process by which a friendship functions in her social world.

You meet someone, at a party, in class, whatever... then you get their name... next I think you would ‘friend’ someone. And then, they either accept your request or don’t. I don’t see why they wouldn’t... accept. Usually people accept you as a friend request and then, you know, maybe they’ll, like, say, write on your wall or something. Then, maybe you tag them in pictures. Then, you know, maybe you have a status that they comment on. But then it kind of fizzles out, if you don’t really know them. But if you friend someone and you start hanging out with them outside of the online world, and you are... you become friends, then, you know – you write on each other’s walls all the time, you tag each other in pictures all the time. Then you have your little inside jokes, like, then you’re, sort of, like, more a part of each other’s online lives as you become more a part of each other’s, like... not online.

For Hallie building friendship is a deeply interactional process, which involves a complex series of events that take place both online and offline. The establishment of a new friendship almost always takes part at least partially on Facebook, through texting, meeting and hanging out all work together to lead to a friendship. The degree to which “Facebook friends” transition from social media networks into real, emotionally relevant friendships varies a great deal. Some of my

participants agree with Hallie, noting that while all Facebook friends are not necessarily offline “real” friends, virtually all “true” friends are also Facebook friends. Hallie goes on to explain that even for relationships that begin offline or predate social media, becoming Facebook friends is important because it allows close friends to be “kept updated” on life events. However, it’s even more important for new friendships.

The integration of offline and online communication in establishing a solid knowledge base about “what’s going on in their life” is essential for a relationship to progress among this peer group. This is due to a phenomenon that Hallie refers to in passing, looking up Facebook profiles. The multi-media dimension of Facebook profiles allows for a kind of intimate knowledge of the individual. Not only is a wide variety of information available, but images and photos are also frequently available as well. Yet, as William notes, there is also a taboo about how much information one acknowledges having. William claims “everybody does it,” however demonstrating too much knowledge about an individual from his or her Facebook page is taboo. The line between acceptable information and displaying too much knowledge is fine and something with which many students struggle.

At times referred to as “background checks” or, in the case of a slightly more comprehensive observational process, “creeping”, this involves doing research on people you meet via their Facebook. William shares his experience and the logic behind these kinds of background checks.

My friends are definitely looking at girls, trying to see, like, oh yeah, I met this one last night – let’s see what she looks like oh, wa wa wa wa. Oh, she looks good here. But the same time, that also works against your favor, like my friend was saying how people get to preview you before they actually get to meet you... you can’t hide anything, anymore. People see pictures now; things go up online, like that [snap]. People can get it fresh.

William explains that everyone involved expects that others will “preview” potential friends or romantic partners, as keeping updated and getting fresh information via Facebook is an important part of the establishment of relationships. Emma explains in more detail, this is a very common expectation and increasingly one that has become an unspoken assumption about social interactions.

’cause if you’re at a social event, and your best friend is like, “Oh, here... M, here’s my friend L.” I guarantee you every person goes back and checks Facebook five seconds later, so they can see what they’re all about. ...you can, you know, create a profile. You can say how old you are, you know, what’s going on... you can just put your name on there. But I think, it’s what has become a thing, where people... it’s how people define someone; like they don’t even look at them. It’s like... “Oh, you look so different than on Facebook.”

Yet, this is complicated by the expectations of techno-social interaction in which the background check takes on a strange quality. As Emma describes above, there is a presumption that every person is conducting Facebook background checks...and thus the presumption is that everyone has a shared base of knowledge. However, this knowledge is in some ways unspoken.

The logic behind this process is clear, as far as Emma is concerned, social interactions are easier if everyone has “done their homework” in preparation of either face-to-face interactions or in the process of establishing interpersonal relationships. William agrees, though suggests that it is possible to nuance this process a bit.

It... it’s almost like you’re coming in to a test and you’ve studied. Yet, you can’t come out... you can’t go straight out say that you studied. It’s like you’re coming in prepared. It’s like kind of knowing a little bit, and everything. Like, oh I’ve seen this. I have an idea about this, you know. That’s what some people seem to do. You can tell who people’s friends are, you know what I mean, based on Facebook. If you look at pictures, Like, oh yeah, I saw that you must be... blah, blah, blah. I mean, even conversations sometimes, people are like, “Oh yeah, I saw pictures of it,” like you know, like spring break, it seemed like fun. You kind of have a little bit of an idea about the person.

William agrees that doing background checks is important, like studying for a test. Not only does having such information demonstrate interest, but it is also increasing the individual's ability to make connections by discussing shared interests and attitudes with someone they want to impress and forge a relationship with (Raynes-Goldie 2010). Anthony explains:

You can find out how a person is... who this person is through posts and stuff – what they post up, what they talk to friends about, who they hang out with. You can get a little feel of who this person is. Even before you meet 'em , if you've never met 'em before, 'cause you can see, on people's profiles. So you can get a feel of who this person is – are they a good person, bad person. What they do. What their interests are, all that stuff.

Yet, according to William friendships with people who have shared interests are often intensified, with people who have “done their homework” strategically guiding conversations in the direction of shared interests during face-to-face interaction. This must be done subtly to avoid being accused of creeping.

Essentially, there is a social taboo against admitting you have spent too much time online doing background checks. This leads to a negative perception of the individual, often that he or she is a “creeper” or has been “creeping.” Creeping is a more intense form of background checking that involves silently following an individual on Facebook without posting or commenting, and doing expanded research on the person by following their Facebook friends and family members online. While gaining permission from participants to observe online, several referenced “creeping.” One participant even said, “Sure, creep on me if you want.” Creeping functions as a slightly taboo act, but is not necessarily forbidden. The line between the socially expected but unacknowledged background checks and the slightly taboo creeping is unclear. One self-defined creeper explained the process:

Grace- ...being a creeper... a lot of people talk about Facebook creeping, like, “Oh my God. I have a creeping, like obsession.” Creeping is where, I would define it, you have like a half hour – you just sit on Facebook and for no reason

you just stalk people, you look at everything...! And serious, I will admit it, I Facebook creep. And you see what people are doing. You read posts from other people. You see what party they went to. The pictures... you see... the biggest thing... like on Facebook it will say, "So and so likes this group." ...but then, the big thing is, relationship status, like, has a heart. And everyone wants to see they go from 'single' to 'in a relationship' to 'it's complicated' to so and so, so that's like the biggest thing people are looking for and the comments posted after that.

Having a grasp of an individual's relationship status is an important part of the process of background checks because it has the potential to shape ongoing relationships between newcomers. In background checks and in creeping, knowing about relationships can give people a sense of power or, as one participant noted, being "in the know" about intimate relationships. Forging a deeper connection in the minds of the watchers, some theorists suggest this form of connection allows for a deeper *perception* of intimacy, in which watchers feel like they have special or intimate knowledge of others (Bondebjerg, 2002). For some, the knowledge about the status of intimate romantic relationships make them feel "closer" to Facebook friends, as if that knowledge makes their relationships more intimate themselves (Bondebjerg, 2002).

For many participants the line between background checks, creeping and outright stalking is also a bit unclear. In fact, the possibility of stalking of individuals is commonly understood as being an acceptable risk for most of the participants, and creepers are often understood to be the fodder for jokes. During my time observing online, several references to creeping came up. One poster claimed that another was "creeping on" her because he never posted comments, only hit the "like¹" button. This expands the notion of creeping to include a slightly more interactive behavior. However, the notion of viewing a profile without active engagement remains.

¹ The "Like" button is a virtual "thumbs up" that can be given to post on someone's Wall. The politics of the like button are complex and at times unclear. Additionally, "liking" something is a single click activity, with no additional thought or interaction required. Generally, liking is an efficient and fast way to indicate presence and interaction without spending the time to write an actual comment.

Grace goes on to explain that for her creeping is about two things, entertainment and power. Watching the “dramas” of college life for others gives her both a sense of belonging and a sense of superiority. Beyond its entertainment value Grace explains that sometimes she uses this comprehensive knowledge gathering in a way similar to the background check, as a means to be prepared for social interaction. She considers herself to be a bit of an “insecure person” who needs the “extra help” in social situations. Grace is not alone; Jake also touches on the power inherent in having knowledge in social situations.

All this personal information, what they like and who they are, and the things that their friends have posted on their wall, which is pretty powerful...like the way you look at someone I feel like it's a powerful way to judge someone, you can see what their friends say and are like. And then you can click on their friends' profiles and see what they are into and what they like. What is their social group?

Even as Jake is explaining the “how to” of friendship he is also analyzing the meaning of his own behavior. He acknowledges the power and importance of having information about someone throughout the relationship. The power of having knowledge allows creepers to “judge someone” easily. Jake goes on to discuss how having this power, this special knowledge, helps guide him in social situations and even shapes choices he makes about who to associate with and who to avoid. All of this is possible without the “messiness” of face-to-face interaction. Another participant, Lisa, shares her creeping tendencies.

For college kids, the only way I can describe Facebook – it's a way to, I guess, creep on people, or see what people are doing without them knowing. So, people I haven't talked to, or people I don't like – I can view everything they're doing – every conversation, every photo, every party they went to, and they will never know. And I think that's the greatest aspect for teenagers is being able to see what people are doing, and not having them know.

There are a number of ways in which this practice impacts social interaction. First, for many participants there is an accelerated sense of intimacy with individuals who meet your prescreened requirements and an artificial rejection of those who don't. This results in a

narrowing of intimate relationships, as people are rejected out of hand based on profiles. Interests and opinions generally bind people closer or pull them apart in face-to-face interactions, yet the amount of effort that is necessary to identify such similarities or differences results in a median level of social intimacy (Boase & Wellman, 2006). For this group, individuals are often identified, analyzed, and decided upon after a single meeting, or in the case of people who are investigated via shared contacts, no meeting at all. Additionally, for those who do ‘make the cut’ the feeling of familiarity is intense. Having “studied” and having “come prepared,” individuals are able to move quickly past the “getting to know you” stage of interpersonal interaction and into the stage where decisions about relationships are made. Sometimes those decisions go beyond friendship and into the realm of romantic relationships.

“Facebook Official”: Technologies of Love and Romance

The degree to which techno-social communications are implicated in recent transformations in the social and romantic practices of college students is unclear. However, the process of establishing, maintaining and even ending romantic and sexual relationships are deeply techno-mediated among participants. This techno-mediation allows for an increased level of knowledge about intimate life that can further reinforce the sense of hyper-connectivity experienced by participants. However, this is complicated since interpersonal relationships and, on particular, sexual/romantic relationships have changed in recent decades. For example, researcher Kathleen Bogle notes the degree to which “hook-up culture” has become a central component of college social life and sexual processes (Bogle, 2008). One aspect of hook-up culture, as well as the ‘friends with benefits’ sexual model is the role that technology plays both in establishing the hook-up and in facilitating the practical aspects of such relationships (Grello et. al., 2006).

Chloe explains that for her, texting is about the pursuit of casual sex. She considers herself an independent woman for whom the traditional dating and romance aspects of college culture are uninteresting. Rejecting traditional gendered expectations of sexual behavior Chloe believes that technology allows her to be more sexually open and strategic about her pursuit of sex. As part of the growing number of women who consider casual sex during college as normal and desirable (Bogle, 2008), Chloe is a proponent and participant in hook-up culture and her phone is her most effective tool the pursuit of casual sex.

I like to think that I've perfected the art of the coy text message. It just makes everything so easy. Not to say that I still don't value talking on the phone to the people I'm getting with. It drives me fucking nuts when I'm hanging out with a guy and they won't call me, it's all text. Call me and ask me to hang out. But there's a lot of leading up to that stuff that I—I've used texting a lot. Actually, one of my go-to moves, was that when I was at a party, or wherever I was with someone, I would text the person from across the room and tell them that I wanted to make out with them (laughing.) It always worked!

Chloe goes on to explain that without her cell phone she would “never get laid.” The use of such technologies in the pursuit of casual sex among my participants is substantial, particularly with regard to text messaging. Several male participants also discussed using texting as a means to hook-up, however neither they, nor Chloe, suggested that hooking-up using texting was more common among men than women, and they agreed that for the many men and women who engage in college hook-up culture, the text message was the primary tool for organizing one's sex life. In rejecting the notion that sex itself should be limited to serious relationships, participants of both genders also felt that technology made casual sex easier. Among teenagers the use of “sexting” or sending erotic photos and texts to one another via cell phone has garnered media attention and a great deal of social disapproval (Lenhart, 2009). When asked, my participants largely found the idea of sexting amusing, and something you do in high school, because it is “not serious, just kidding around.” For the contemporary college student, cell

phones and sex are all about the hook-up, or making arrangements for meeting up. As one participant Rich explains, for him the text message is about planning and organization when it comes to the hook-up.

... it's important to look at the way people use it, to kind of interact with other people, obviously, but like, how do they, sort of, get what they want out of it. Like, it takes on many different uses. Like... for me I was using it to try... you know... I was using my phone to communicate to a female to try to get that shit going...

Rich and Chloe both use cell phones to make arrangements for hooking up, which may or may not include casual sex. However, for some of their peers, techno-mediation in intimate relationships is less about fun and/or sex and more about romance.

Technologies of texting and social networking also play a role in the establishment of a romantic relationship. Often the process of starting up a relationship plays out similarly to the establishment of a friendship. Utilizing both Facebook and texting to “get to know” an individual, the use of techno-mediated communication is central to the process. Misty walks us through the process, explaining step by step how you go from meeting someone to establishing a serious relationship.

Well, it first starts when you first meet someone, or even just like a friend in general, like you'll friend request so and so. Oh, uh... and, a big thing, too, you have to say, like, you know, send a friend request. And they don't always have to accept you, so you can say friend request are waiting or pending. So it makes you think, “OK, well they don't want to be friends with me,” or whatever, and people can reject you. But as far as the relationships end, it first starts off and you meet them, and they start commenting on pictures on Facebook. They start liking things; they write on your wall, they do things to get your attention. So, then, you'll do that back to them. Then you'll hang out or whatever, and then, I would say, typically, from what I've seen, it's 'Facebook Official' after three weeks.

Misty's description of the process by which she and her peers move into romantic relationships is interesting for several reasons. First, the speed at which the process moves from introduction to serious relationship is intense. Secondly, the potential for tensions or difficulties due to

technological issues are substantial. Finally, I touch on the use of Facebook Official, a term that denotes a serious romantic relationship among this group, is important as well.

The speed at which romantic relationships move is closely tied to the intensity of relationships that are made possible by technological devices. Erin agrees with Misty regarding speed; as she shares her own theory and experience

Relationships are sped up, a lot, because you're constantly in contact with people. You're always texting and you're always, you know, talking to somebody, so you get to know them a lot quicker; and so, things you would have learned over time, with people, you know so much sooner, kind of...and. I think I learned that a lot by [my] own experiences. I had a relationship with a guy that was long distance, for while, so we, like, relied on Skype and, like, AIMing; mainly like Skype, AIMing and video chatting to keep in touch and get to know each other; and we got to know each other pretty quickly that way.

The phenomena of background checks and creeping allow for relatively recent acquaintances to know a great deal about one another. After examining the Facebook profiles of my participants at the beginning of my digital observation I had the following basic information about most of my participants: hometown, high school, current major, age, birthday, sexual orientation, relationship status, religious affiliation, favorite books, movies, tv shows, sports teams, games, activities and hobbies, quotations and inspirational people and links to all of their Facebook friends' profiles. This information is available as soon as an individual is "friended" or is accepted as a friend.

Once this connection has been made between potential romantic couples, the "getting to know you" stage takes on new dimensions. Couples will post back and forth and text message one another to make arrangements to meet up or just to keep in touch. As Ruth explains, the need for regular contact via text is also an important component in the relationship process.

...if you are dating someone, you normally keep in contact over the phone. Like, say, like, "Oh, what time... are you out of class, now? OK, cool. I'm gonna go

eat. You want to come and eat? Like, you know, small things like that... and texting is literally, like, talking with someone, so they'll text throughout the day.

The expectation of this constant contact is something that is deeply familiar to respondents. Like other relationships, the need to be present and the perception of being always available for interaction, plays an important role in the techno-social world. Keeping connected and for that matter, keeping in regular contact with a romantic partner or friend is made possible by the structural aspects of technology.

The phone is, in some ways, a third party in many romantic relationships. As such it should come as no surprise that problems and tensions can arise, based on technological issues. One example which Anthony shares, is about not being sure if your friend request would be accepted. William outlines another for us.

...back in the day. A guy would call a girl or a girl call... it's like, "Should I call? Should I call her?" I don't know if [I should] call them... you know what I mean? It's changed now. I dropped her a text. You know, she didn't respond. She didn't read it or I see that she read it – she didn't respond. What did I say? Do I send her a text now? Or is that going to send the wrong message. You know what I mean? It's completely different. Yeah! Like, OK, how about this. You send somebody a text message at like, three o'clock – four o'clock; you know what I mean? A girl. Or a girl sends it to you. Most likely it's like you're trying to hook up. She's trying to hook up or... something like that. You're obviously trying.... You send it early in the day to try to see if they're going out, or whatever, like, I don't know, maybe it seems like you care too much...and you don't want to seem like you care to care too much, 'cause then you're losing control.

While not fundamentally new to interpersonal relationships, anxiety over social expectations for romance takes on new dimensions with the integration of technology into relationships. Part of that issue is about the visibility and permanence of such tensions. William explains how his Blackberry allows him to see if his recipient has read the text he sent her or not. He is also fully aware that if she has seen it and hasn't responded it may be because she has consulted her friends by showing them exactly what he said and getting advice on how to respond. Despite the

changes in how romance is conducted, the fears and tensions associated with the experience are just as relevant as ever, in part because texting and Facebook make messages more widely visible and more permanent than oral communication. Nowhere is that quite so evident as with the experience of becoming “Facebook Official.”

Facebook Official is a term participants use to refer to romantic relationships that are officially recorded on Facebook. When an individual changes his or her relationship status from “single” to “in a relationship” with a link connecting his/her Facebook page to another, a relationship is considered “Facebook Official.” The majority of my participants consider this THE primary sign that a couple is serious. As Grace explains,

...if it's not on Facebook, it doesn't exist, like... that's how you find out, like, oh, such and such is dating, this person. And I'm, like... it's really official... Facebook defines a relationship. Because people have these things... like, you'll hear, like, “Oh, did you hear so and so were ... M and L are going out?” Like, No, no, you can't say that because it hasn't been on Facebook, yet; and everything relates back to Facebook It's so weird, 'cause nothing is official – she's like, “Naaah, it's not true until it's on Facebook.”

Despite Grace's statement that “it's not true until it's on Facebook” the question here is not a matter of truth, but a matter of the legitimization. Rather than considering this a matter that is purely informational, it becomes an indicator of group legitimization. Facebook Official has become a ritual that provides group legitimization of an intimate relationship, or as Hallie clarifies “...if it's not on Facebook, and other people aren't seeing it, like, it doesn't exist.” This public announcement provides relationship partners with a *symbol* of their commitment to one another. According to Jake, his romantic life is, at its foundation, techno-social.

...when you are in the world at this point, at my particular age – twenty-two years old – what makes a dating relationship official? Your Facebook status. Your Facebook status makes it official. The day that you put yourself as in a relationship, that is the day that everyone else in the world recognizes you as dating someone else.

Jake claims that without the social sanctioning of their relationship, committed relationships among this group are less valid and less “official.” Only when a couple becomes Facebook Official does “everyone else in the world” or, more accurately, members of a couples social group, acknowledge and recognize a relationship. This, however, is not without its risks. As Owen points out, one consequence of a public announcement at the start of a relationship is that there is also a public announcement of the relationship ending.

You’re not really broken up until you break it up on Facebook, because that’s the day that everyone recognizes that you have broken up with someone. If someone’s relationship status goes from ‘in a relationship’ to ‘single’ – drama abound.

Just as a relationship isn’t official until it has a public announcement, a break-up is also a public event; as Owen goes on to explain,

Everyone’s gotta comment on that. Everyone. Everyone’s gotta say, “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe that person broke up with you,” or vice versa. You know, “What happened?” “I need to know.” “What happened in your life that all this happened? We should meet up. I need to make sure that you’re OK.” It goes on and on. Twenty-five, thirty, fifty comments, I’ve seen on a single relationship status change.

Romantic relationships have long been deeply embedded in and shaped by the public life. Since its inception, marriage has been a largely public event and one that was fundamentally focused on establishing one’s position within society (Coontz, 2006). The phenomena of Facebook Official romances are the latest in a long line of public displays of romantic intention between couples. Deeply symbolic, relationship status not only provides observers with information about an individual or couple, but also provides the couple with a tangible symbol of commitment.

Not everyone is convinced that the use of online tools in romantic relationships is such a good idea however. As Jessie explains, there is something missing for hir² in such relationships.

There's never been a way to make friendships and relationships easy, but it's like the EasyMac of relationship building. And that's creepy, because if you've ever had EasyMac, it's not the same as the box. It's not as yummy! In my opinion. It's just not as yummy. Put that in your book! It is the EasyMac of relationship building, and there's a lot left to be desired, there.

Jessie reminds us that relationships are indeed difficult, and require trust, effort and time to become meaningful (Berscheid, 1994). For hir, the ease of relationship building using technology robs relationships of some of their meaning. Modern technological integration into friendships and romances is indeed different from the past. The perception of “realness” in relationships based significantly on technology may leave some participants wanting more. Or perhaps, as Jessie suggests, the loss is about effort.. For Jessie, the experience is in some ways less satisfying and “there's a lot left to be desired there.” While not all participants agree with Jessie's assessment, many do find themselves struggling to engage with the fast moving and ever-changing techno-social practices of their world. When it comes to romance and friends as Jessie reminds us, it's never easy. Additionally, it is never static or universal. The logics and the techno-logics behind and within contemporary friendships and romances are complex and always subject to change.

Final thoughts

The emerging role of communication technology in college culture is one of integration and expansion. It is not the case, for most participants, that technology replaces other forms of interaction, but rather supplements and technologizes the social world. We are observing the

² Jessie is genderqueer and prefers to use gender-neutral pronouns. Thus ze is in place of he or she and hir in place of him or her.

emergence of a techno-social cultural world that is experienced by college students, and increasingly by the rest of the world as well. It is experienced through the proxy of knowledge, as participants “do homework” about one another so that they are knowledgeable about and thus connected to, others. It manifested in the desire for public recognition and validation of relationships that is the phenomenon of Facebook Official.

For those who engage deeply with the technologic of the techno-social world, it has become a means of maintaining intimacy, nurturing friendships and enriching relationships. For those who take a more critical view, it is a necessary but ambiguous space in which risks and benefits shape individual experiences. This ambivalence about the advantages and demands of the techno-social world may be linked to the nature of the technological architectures in which they exist. The nature of contemporary technology can lead to an ambiguity of experience, even as technological architectures, social forces and culture bring together the need to connect.

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